

## **DIRECT DEMOCRACY**

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Direct democracy is a form of popular self-rule where citizens participate directly, continuously and without mediation in the tasks of government. It is a radical form of democracy that favours decentralisation and the widest possible dispersal of power, and eliminates the distinction between governors and those governed. It is premised upon the principle of political equality, understood as the requirement that all voices in society are equally loud. Deliberative assemblies are the key institution for implementing direct democracy. They involve meetings where citizens make decisions by deliberating, that is by listening and discussing different views on a matter, reflecting on each view, and trying to work out a common decision without coercion. Direct democracy allows citizens to control decisions over their own destinies, educates them in participatory decision-making instead of relying on self-serving politicians, and produces decisions of high legitimacy (Heywood, 2002). Direct democracy is distinguished from representative democracy, which involves electing representatives who decide on public policies. Nevertheless, elements of limited direct democracy, such as the referendum, are also present in existing representative democracies.

The practice of direct democracy is very old, indeed ancient. Classical, 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens is the most oft-quoted example of direct democracy where adult, male citizens participated directly in public decision-making. The exclusive character of Athenian democracy that barred slaves, women, and foreigners from participation in decision-making, suggests that it was a very limited form of democracy. Nevertheless, the example is relevant in terms of its direct democracy institutions and forms of participation for those who did enter the closed group of “citizens”. Along the same lines, the experience of direct self-rule has been far more common than usually assumed. Medieval Anglo-Saxon folkmoets and Germanic ‘things’ (free-men’s assemblies), the Alþingi assembly that ruled Iceland for more than two centuries in the absence of centralized government, self-managed worker collectives during the Spanish civil war and the Jura Federation described by Kropotkin in late 19<sup>th</sup> century comprise relevant historical experiences in Europe. Contemporary experiences can be

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found in the Swiss cantons of Glarus and Appenzell-Innerrhoden, in radical ecological democracy initiatives in India such as the Arvari-Sansad farmers' parliament in Rajasthan, and the governing of the Kurdish autonomous region of Rojava inspired by Bookchin's libertarian municipalism. In terms of intellectual origins, a key modern influence is Jeanne-Jacques Rousseau and his ideas on representation and government. Rousseau saw handing over to another person one's right of ruling oneself as a form of slavery, and rejected legislation on issues that citizens have not deliberated and which would bind them in terms they have not agreed upon.

Degrowth scholars have highlighted the importance of democracy. Latouche points out that the aim of reducing the scale of the economy is not only to produce and consume less but also to do so in a socially emancipatory and democratising way (Cattaneo et al., 2012). Also, Muraca (2012) sees democracy essential for stabilising any post-growth society because, as growth and consumption would disappear as embodiments of a "good life", citizens would need to democratically negotiate among them different visions of it. But the connection with direct democracy is more explicit when one considers Cornelius Castoriadis – a key influence for degrowth scholars – and his work on **autonomy**, the capacity of society to collectively and continuously question and change its norms and institutions and be conscious that it is itself the only legitimate source for doing so. Castoriadis criticised **growth** as a dogma that poses external rules which limit **autonomy**, and advocated direct democracy in the form of spontaneous popular processes that allow collectives to take matters in their own hands and self-determine their future.

Direct democracy connects to degrowth at two levels: when considering the type of democratic governance of a hypothetical future society that manages without growth; and, when considering the contribution of different forms of democratic politics in achieving a degrowth transformation. Four critical debates run through those two connections.

First, a key question is whether states are the best vehicle to implement degrowth. States, i.e. political associations with sovereign jurisdiction within territorial borders, a centralised government apparatus, and a monopoly in legitimate coercion, offer advantages for organising and co-ordinating policy and collective behaviour, which is

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important as some key governance challenges (e.g. energy generation, wealth redistribution) require committing resources and actors beyond localities. Moreover, the broad reach of state rule can be an efficient way to buffer societies from discriminative localisms that smaller communities and units of decision-making can produce. For example, the Appenzell-Innerrhoden Swiss canton, celebrated as a direct democracy example, conceded voting rights to women only in 1991 (when forced by the Swiss Federal Supreme Court) and has registered the highest canton vote in favour of banning minarets. This also points to the open-ended nature of democracy challenge, which means that by advocating democracy we leave open also the possibility that societies decide to follow non-degrowth paths. Direct democracy supporters counter-pose that minimum sets of basic rules, e.g. similarly to today's universal human rights rules, could be collectively established to avoid such transgressions. Such decisions that concern territorial levels broader than a locality can be taken in assemblies where local assembly decisions are represented by delegates whose mandate is unique for the occasion, revocable and rotational. This suggestion connects direct with delegative democracy and federalist alternatives to state political organisation similar to those advocated by late 19<sup>th</sup> century libertarian socialists.

This key debate about the State and democracy translates to a debate concerning the limits of direct and the relevance of representative democracy or possible ways of combining these, which has been reflected also within degrowth, e.g. in the Barcelona (2010) and Leipzig (2014) conferences' democracy working groups. Can parliaments and governments be mechanisms for channelling popular pressures in ways that transform systems and help marginalised groups to articulate their priorities as some adherents of a Gramscian "integral State" akin to the projects of Latin American left-populist governments (e.g. Bolivia), and Syriza (Greece) and Podemos (Spain) in Europe suggest? Or should the capacity to make public decisions be dispersed as much as possible instead of being monopolised by representatives and governments, because the State has always confiscated and privatised collective power?

Second, direct democracy idealises consent and downplays the role of conflict in generating radical social change and democratic transformations. However, conflict is

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also an expression of plurality. Conflict can energise community participation, counterbalance the influence of corporations, and push the state to expand citizen rights: far from being undesirable, social conflicts are essential to truly democratic societies. The drive for a final resolution of conflict puts democracy at risk as it propagates the un-democratic idea that we could reach a stage beyond politics where antagonism and conflict will be eliminated and a perfect democracy realised. Moreover, as power-free communication is probably impossible, the idea of perfect deliberation and consensus can mask voice inequality and power asymmetries. Still, the celebration of conflict as a *civic attitude* in decision-making can end up with maintaining conflict at the expense of weaker groups. Conflict may privilege actors who are better positioned to engage into it given that not everyone is equally endowed materially and psychologically to operate within conflict. From a direct democracy viewpoint, one can strategise with the use of either consensus or conflict and so create voice inequality and democratic deficits.

Third, deliberative assemblies and direct democracy emphasise horizontality in decision-making. However, good leadership may be a much more needed element than radical decentralization and democratic conversations for taking urgent action and pursuing socio-ecological transformation. Although deliberation can generate support for collective action, strong governance signals and leadership are still essential for taking up crucial challenges. Good leadership that helps pursue degrowth transformations can make sense if it does not imply domination by those who lead and if it does not create authority and power imbalances or marginalise certain values, priorities and worldviews. Rotation of leadership, e.g. in the form of who spearheads projects, and short periods of leadership duration can help avoid such imbalances. Indeed, Classical Athenian democracy included elements such as choice of public officials on the basis of lot or rota and holding high offices only for a single day and once in a lifetime, which not only ensured broad participation and a remarkable level of political activity and citizen engagement but also tried to prevent such imbalances.

Fourth, feminist perspectives question the emphasis of direct democracy assemblies on deliberation and reason as means for achieving radical social transformation. They instead emphasise the role played by passions, emotions and acts of collective

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identification. Neuropsychology tells us that human action is based less on reasoning where principles and deliberation are important, and more on motivation where emotions, imagination, narrative, socialization, and bodily activity are crucial. Making decisions after conducting cool, detached investigation and deliberation to thoughtfully consider our next, progress-making interventions corresponds to a reality of simple, safe and slow environments (Nelson, 2013), which is far from the reality of socio-ecological urgency that sits at the basis of calls for degrowth. Still, emotions can be manipulated and used to convey simplistic, sensualist and populist narratives that serve reactionary objectives seeking to avoid transforming current realities. This suggests that a total abandonment of reason is not a solution either. Establishing channels for expressing and making the best out of the transformational potential of emotion side-by-side with deliberative assemblies is a key challenge also for degrowth.

Although not a panacea on its own, there is little doubt that direct democracy is relevant for pursuing social transformation towards degrowth futures. Also, active citizenship in the form of citizens allocating a certain amount of their time for regular participation in politics and decision-making of a future degrowth society would be an ideal way of bringing direct democracy into degrowth. At the same time, the recent proliferation of popular, self-organised initiatives, such as the **Indignados (Occupy)**, that seek to achieve more meaningful and democratic life outside capitalism as well as closer citizen control and participation in politics, suggests that direct democracy is highly relevant for current quests of political and ecological transformation. Engaging with the above-mentioned debates both intellectually and through political activism would help degrowthers to further realise the potential of direct democracy.

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