PUBLIC PRESS
P.O. BOX 71
ARLINGTON HEIGHTS, ILLINOIS 60006

THE CASE FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Edited by GEORGE BENELLO and DIMITRIOS ROUSSOPOULOS

As for adopting the ways which the state has provided for remedying the evil, I know of no such ways. - Henry David Thoreau

This book is a compilation of articles by many authors, discussing the need for personal participation in decision making, in government, in business, and in one's environment. They describe, with examples of past and recent thought and history, different types of what is called participatory democracy. Reform is usually considered a valuable reshaping of something, but others use the word to describe only a slight amelioration of a basic wrong. Socialism, to most, means autocratic centralized control of production and everything else, which, originally, at least, was supposed to wither away when it was no longer needed, after everything had been set right. This is Marxist socialism. Anarchists, to most, are those favoring no government at all, but anarchistic socialists favor the organization of society into groups small enough so that each individual can participate in decision making, with the groups cooperating freely with other groups, and arriving at mutually advantageous decisions, free of the coercive power of the state.

What we call democracy is the delegation of power to officials, who are usually elected with financial support from the power elite, and who therefore owe allegiance to them, and who often continue to receive such support, in various ways, while in office, and are sometimes rewarded after leaving office, as described in "The Higher Circles:The Governing Class In America," and in "America, Inc." In addition to the conflict of interests among officials, people suffer from the absence of personal influence in the productive process, which not only deprives them of the equivalent of their production but alienates them psychologically, often resulting in mental illness. "the machine can and must be altered to conform to the dictates of humanistic social organization." Anarchists have always argued that the rule of the majority over the minority was a special form of tyranny. Agreeing with them, we should eliminate sumptuary laws, and bring about Herbert Spencer's "complete freedom, limited only by the equal freedom of others." Family tyranny over other members, and school tyranny over students should be stopped.

The test of participatory democracy is its workability. At the time of the French Revolution,"Paris was divided into sixty sections, in each of which citizens could meet in general assemblies to regulate and administer their affairs directly. Where delegation was necessary, it was done by appointing special commisioners subject to close scrutiny and recall." The sixty sections were reorganized into forty-eight, who became "the very soul of the Great Revolution." They eliminated the Bourbon monarchy, blocked the Girondins, and provided leftward momentum to the revolution. They administered the entire city, policed their neighborhoods, elected judges, purchased and transported food from the countryside, distributed it at fair prices, maintained the National Guard, enrolled volunteers for the revolutionary army, cared for their families and for the poor, equipped and provisioned battalions, prevented inflation. This was mostly done by tradesmen, after work.

After little more than a year, the Jacobins began to centralize power, and eventually destroyed the sections. The soviets delegated power to successively smaller groups, where it was more readily concentrated, eventually into the Political Bureau of the Communist Party. The Spanish anarcho-syndicalists limited the tendency toward centralization, with local assemblies of workers checking both local committees and national congresses. In Barcelona, during the Spanish Revolution of 1936, the workers seized the factories, transportation facilities and utilities, and operated them with remarkable success and efficiency, in the face of sabotage by both Republicans and Communists, until May, 1937, when central government troops took the city. In ancient Athens, ten times a year, an open air assembly, called the Ecclesia, met to decide all domestic and foreign matters. A combination of rosters, elected by tribes annually, from whom Council members were selected by lot, with a subcommittee of one-tenth of the Council each serving one-tenth of the year, and a Council president selected by lot allowed to serve only one day in his life, assured democracy. About one-sixth of the men, at any one time, mainly chosen by lot, administered the government. Jurymen were chosen by lot, and trials were remarkably fair. It was a government of amateurs. "The Ecclesia and the Parisian sections...developed methods of functioning so successfully libertarian in character that even the most imaginative utopias have failed to match in speculation what they achieved in practice."

Bakunin: "We want the same triumph of economic and social equality through the abolition of the state and of all that passes by the name of law (which, in our view, is the permenent negation of human rights). We want the reconstruction of society and the unification of mankind to be achieved, not from above downwards by any sort of authority, nor by socialist officials, engineers, and other accredited men of learning-but from below upwards, by the free federation of all kinds of workers' associations liberated from the yoke of the State." Proudhon and Kropotkin also warned against concentrated power, and stated the need for more self-government, rather than representative government (which, as we have seen, is likely to represent others, and is not subject to close popular checks). According to Martin Buber, in "Society and the State:" "the fact that every people feels itself threatened by the others gives the state its definite unifying power; ...the latent external crisis enables it to get the upper hand in internal crises." "Simone Weil declared, 'The great error of nearly all studies of war, an error into which all socialists have fallen, has been to consider war as an episode in foreign politics, when it is especially an act of interior politics, and the most atrocious act of all.' ...it does look like this if you are part of the expendable population-unless you identify your own unimportant carcass with the state apparatus, as millions do." Randolph Bourne, during World War I, said, "war is the health of the state." Cato the Elder hoped that Rome would always have enemies, to keep the state strong.

Enrico Malatesta wrote: Revolution is the destruction of all coercive ties; it is the autonomy of groups, of communes, or regions;...revolution is the forming and disbanding of thousands of representative, district, communal, regional, national bodies which, without having any legislative power, serve to make known and to coordinate the desires and interests of people near and far and which act through information, advice and example." There may be an infinite variety of organizations and theories, many of which are discussed in this book, but if there is no prohibition of them their adoption is not a reform but a matter of efficiency, determined by experiment. The real revolution is the absence of coercion, through injury, imprisonment or death. If punishment were determined by the actual harm done, as determined by representative groups, and checked with polygraph tests, if requested, and limited to fines within the reasonable capacity of the guilty to pay, without serious injury to himself, we should very quickly have an equitable society. Detention would be only for the helpless and emotionally unsafe. Few would volunteer for aggressive war or pay assessments except for value received. It would be impossible to hold idle land out of use, for speculation, or collect taxes to pay speculators and grafters. It would avert an economic breakdown, and lawlessness, as in ancient Rome, when terroristic repression drove people from the cities into caves and forests.