

Power and Democracy: More than a Reply to Michael Löwy

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Michael Löwy, in his review of my book, *Change the World without taking Power*, argues that “democracy should be a central aspect in all processes of social and political decision making, and particularly in a revolutionary process”. I do not disagree with this, but I think it makes little sense unless we distinguish clearly between two senses of democracy. In this note, I shall develop this point and then return to Michael’s specific criticisms. I thank Michael very much for his review. But the explicit purpose of both the book and his review is to carry discussion further and that is the aim of this “more than a reply”, written in the hope that he and others will take up the theme and develop it further.

1. Power

Our power is not like the power of the powerful. Just the opposite.

Our power is the power to do, creative power. Our power to do is the power to produce and reproduce life, but also the power to do things differently, the power to change the world. This is the power that we feel after a good demonstration: a collective confidence that we can do things differently.

Our power is a collective power, a social power. Doing is central to our power, and it is impossible to imagine a doing that is not social, a doing that does not depend on the doing of others, in the past or in the present. Our doing is always part of a social flow of doing. The development of our power to do involves the explicit recognition of the sociality of our doing, involves in other words a movement of bringing together, of asserting a social subjectivity, a creative We.

The power of the powerful is just the opposite. Behind their guns and their bombs is a movement of separation, of fragmentation. Capital is a movement of separation which fragments the sociality of doing. The capitalist takes that which the doers have done and says “this is mine!” The capitalist breaks doing, separates the done from the doing and the doer, and with that everything is broken, every aspect of life. Above all, we are broken. We are broken as a social subject, shattered into millions of atomised individuals. And we are broken as individuals, deprived of our social subjectivity. Capital is the breaking of social doing, and when doing is broken, being comes to prevail, that which is rules.

We see the horrors of the world, the children dying, the poverty and injustice, the bombs falling and

we scream “NO! That cannot be! We must change the world, make a different world” And they laugh: “you are just a handful of individuals. You cannot change the world because that is the way the world is, that is the way things are!”

They are wrong, of course. That which is is only because we have made it and continue to make it. That which is depends on our doing. Capital depends on us. Capitalism looks so stable, looks like something that is eternally. But capitalism is not. It exists only because we create it, not because we created it two hundred years ago, but because we created it today. The problem is not to destroy capitalism, the problem is to stop creating it.

The conflict between our power and theirs (our power-to-do and their power-over) is not just a conflict of power from below and power from above. Our power is the power of doing, of creation, of sociality. Their power is the power of separation, of individuality, of that which is. Our power dissolves, their power fixes. There are two quite different movements, two different logics, two different languages, two different ways of organising.

It is important to recognise this, because they (the powerful, the capitalists) are constantly trying to draw us into their logic, their language, their way of thinking and doing. They do this in many different ways. One of the most important is through democracy, by inviting us to play their game of democracy.

2. Democracy

Our democracy is not like the democracy of the powerful. Just the opposite.

Just as there are two types of power, so there are two types of democracy: their democracy, the democracy of the powerful and our democracy, the democracy of resistance.

Representation is the principle of their democracy. Let someone take your place.

We take part in the decisions of the state, they say, by choosing our representatives. There is no other way, they say, because modern states are not like the cities of Greece: it would be impossible to fit fifty million or a hundred million people into one assembly, so the only way that democracy can work is by choosing our representatives in elections. Therefore in modern society, they say, democracy means representation. In elections we choose freely who will speak for us, who will represent us in parliament and form the government. If we do not like them, we can remove them after four years. By voting we participate in the government of the country. Representation is obviously democracy and democracy is obviously good, so we are told.

But why, then, do we feel excluded? Why, then, do we feel that we have no control over government? Why is it that, under Bush and Blair, democracy has become a weapon of mass destruction?

It is because representation excludes us instead of including us. In elections we choose someone to speak on our behalf, to take our place. We exclude ourselves. We create a separation between those who represent and those who are represented and we freeze it in time, giving it a duration, excluding ourselves as subjects until we have an opportunity to confirm the separation in the next elections. A world of politics is created, separate from the daily life of society, a world of politics populated by a distinct caste of politicians who speak their own language and have their own logic, the logic of power. It is not that they are absolutely separated from society and its antagonisms, for they have to worry about the next elections and opinion polls and organised pressure groups, but they see and hear only that which is translated into their world, their language, their logic. At the

same time a parallel world is created, a theoretical, academic world which mirrors this separation between politics and society, the world of political science and political journalism which teaches us the peculiar language and logic of the politicians and helps us to see the world through their blind eyes.

Representation is part of the general process of separation which is capitalism. It is completely wrong to think of representative government as a challenge to capitalist rule or even as a potential challenge to capital. Representative democracy is not opposed to capital: rather it is an extension of capital, it projects the principle of capitalist domination into our opposition to capital.

Representation builds upon the atomisation of individuals (and the fetishisation of time and space) which capital imposes. Representation separates representatives from represented, leaders from led, and imposes hierarchical structures. The left always accuse the leaders, the representatives, of betrayal: but there is no betrayal, or rather betrayal is not the act of the leaders but built into the very process of representation. We betray ourselves when we say to someone "you take my place, you speak on my behalf". The cry of the French students in 1968, "élections-trahison", had a profound truth, as the recent Argentinian elections have reminded us: the betrayal is in the electoral form itself.

But there is another type of democracy, a democracy that flourishes in moments of intense social resistance. "¡Que se vayan todos!" "Let them all go away!" The cry of the Argentinians is a cry against all politicians, against all who claim to represent us, to take our place. "Que se vayan todos" is a cry that echoes through the world, because everywhere there is hostility against professional politicians, against those contemptible people who claim to represent us, who claim to speak on our behalf.

It is not a cry against democracy, but a call for a different type of democracy, a democracy without representatives. The other side of the Argentinian Que se vayan todos is the creation of neighbourhood councils, assemblies in which everyone can participate. These assemblies break with the logic of representation, for their aim is not the exercise or pursuit of power-over but the articulation of our power, power-to-do. This means that they are organised differently, with horizontality rather than verticality as a central principle, that they do not have the state as their point of reference, that they do not accept the boundaries of private property, that they do not accept the usual distinction between politics and society, that they have no space for professional politicians or parties.

The neighbourhood councils of Argentina are of course part of a long tradition of council democracy that includes the Paris Commune, the soviets of 1905 and 1917, the councils in the Spanish Civil War, the village councils of the zapatistas. There is no model to apply, for each wave of council democracy is an experiment, an attempt to develop adequate forms for the social self-determination of our social doing. Doing is central, which is why this form of democracy conflicts with private property and the idea of a capitalist economy, based as it is on the determination of our doing not by ourselves but by others. Democracy, our democracy, council democracy is necessarily anti-capitalist, revolutionary, communist, just as revolution is necessarily democratic, council-democratic, or it is nothing.

Council democracy is simply making explicit the sociality of doing, weaving the many doings together, knitting the We in the We-Do. Representative democracy, as part of the movement of capitalism, attacks the We-Do (our common, creative doing), fragments the We in a multiplicity of I's, negates doing and puts being in its place: citizens do not do, they are.

3. So?

What does all this mean in practice? It does not necessarily mean to avoid all contact with representative democracy. We cannot avoid all contact with capitalist forms and there may be circumstances in which it makes sense to vote in elections. But we must not confuse the forms of domination with the forms of resistance: even if we decide for some reason to vote in elections, the elections do not cease to be a form of exclusion, of separation and fragmentation. One representative may perhaps be better than another, but there can be no radical change through representation.

The two forms of democracy are irreconcilable, just as the two forms of power are incompatible. This is important, because it is not a question of mixing the two forms, it is not a question of some sort of "participatory democracy" in which we participate in the functioning of the state, it is not a reclaiming the state or making the state democratic or more democratic. Why not? Because the state is part of the network of capitalist domination, because the state is always an attempt to reconcile us with capitalism, that is, with the negation of self-determination. Our democracy can not be understood as part of the state, because it is the dissolution of the state.

It is not a question of purity. It may be difficult to separate the two forms of power or the two forms of democracy completely. The zapatistas are a case in point, as Michael points out. The hierarchical structure of an army sits uneasily with a system of communal council democracy, reconciled though they are by the principle of mandar obedeciendo (command while obeying). But one of the merits of the zapatistas is that they have never sought to conceal or blur this tension, making it clear from the beginning that the aim of the army is to disappear.

To develop forms of democratic (council-democratic) organisation that articulate individualised victims as collective social subjects, forms that articulate "poor me's" as a We with confidence in the power of our own doing - that must be the aim, but that aim is always experimental, always a guiding star rather than a programme, for there is no model.

Their power against ours, their democracy against ours. But they are stronger. Are we condemned to eternal opposition? Is there no hope that we can change the world, that we can create a different world?

There is hope. Capital depends upon us: if we do not create it, it will cease to exist. But that means that capital exists in constant flight from its dependence upon us: it flees, faster and faster - that is the essence of globalisation. But it is a hopeless flight, for capital is a parasite and depends upon our doing and its conversion into alienated labour for its existence. As a result the constant flight of capital means a constant tendency to crisis. There is hope because crisis is at the heart of capital and we are that crisis.

One aspect of crisis at the moment is the existence of two huge cracks in capitalist domination. One of these cracks is the crisis of work. The other is the crisis of representation.

Representation always involves a distance between representatives and represented. In that sense, crisis is built in to the very nature of representation. But there is also a mechanism for resolving that crisis: in elections, the failure of representation is presented as the failure of one set of representatives. People vote for the other set of representatives and so the system is maintained.

Increasingly, however, representation is being rejected in many parts of the world. Globalisation makes the distance between representatives and represented much more obvious, and this tendency is greatly intensified by the US government's present policies of subordinating all governments

directly to its will. There is a crisis of representative democracy, manifested in rising rates of abstention, in widespread cynicism and in the refusal of people to channel their protests through the traditional mechanisms of political parties. The distance between representatives and represented was nowhere more clear than in the movement against the invasion of Iraq.

In the face of this crisis, what do we do, what do we say? Do we try to get our representatives to be truly representative, to be truly responsive to the wishes of the electorate? Or do we say “que se vayan todos”, let them all go away, all representatives, all who want to take our place and speak on our behalf. The answer is obvious: que se vayan todos!

But this does not mean just abstentionism. It means trying to establish and extend oppositional spaces of real democracy, fissures of collective self-determination which accept no limits, no boundaries. Democracy, our democracy, is the struggle to create a self-determining society, a society, in other words, in which capital no longer exists. Democracy, our democracy, means revolution, not (or not just) revolution as a great event, but revolution as daily self-determination, daily rejection of capitalism, daily refusal to create capitalist domination.

4. On Michael's comments

Michael Löwy and I have many loves in common: Bloch, Benjamin, the young Lukács, Adorno and more. And yet we disagree. Part of my argument is that to breathe life into the lungs of our dead loves, we must take them further politically than perhaps they wanted to go when alive. Our loves were revolutionary poets, both in their language but above all in their concepts. But the heart of revolutionary poetry, as Vaneigem points out, is council communism. And council communism is the ever painful movement from the many I Ams towards the We Do. If we paint over our loves with the broad brush of an undifferentiated “democracy”, as though all democracy meant simply the rule of the majority over the minority, then we are in danger of painting over the source of their poetry, we are in danger of painting them dead.