# Democracy: The Patriotic Temptation

**Uri Gordon on the Difference between Anarchy and Democracy**

Uri Gordon

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Like most political words, democracy is an "essentially contested" concept—its meaning is itself a political battleground. What political ideologies do, as mass patterns of political expression, is to "de-contest" or fix the meaning of such concepts and place them in particular relationships. The term "equality," for example, can mean equal access to advantage (liberalism), equal responsibility to the national community (fascism), or equal power in a classless society (anarchism). On such a reading, there is no way objectively to determine the meaning of such concepts—all that exists are distinct usages, each of them regularly grouped with other concepts in one or another ideological formation.

I would therefore like to suspend the discussion of the appropriate conceptual understanding of democracy, and instead ask about the *strategic* choice to employ the term. Is it worthwhile for anarchists to de-contest "democracy" in ways that point towards statelessness and non-domination? Two arguments follow. The first is that anarchist invocations of democracy are a relatively new and distinctly American phenomenon. The second is that the invocation is problematic, because its rhetorical structure and audience targeting almost inevitably end up appealing to patriotic sentiments and national origin myths.

## Even the Most Democratic of Democracies…

Historically, democracy was not a word that anarchists tended to use in reference to their own visions or practices. A survey of the writings of the prominent anarchist activists and theorists of the 19th and early 20th century reveals that, on the rare occasions on which they even employed the term, it was used in its conventional, statist sense to refer to actually-existing democratic institutions and entitlements within the bourgeois state. Democracy meant representative government, as opposed to monarchy or oligarchy.

Proudhon clearly viewed democracy in these terms. In chapter 1 of *What is Property* he wrote:

> The nation, so long a victim of monarchical selfishness, thought to deliver itself for ever by declaring that it alone was sovereign. But what was monarchy? The sovereignty of one man. What is democracy? The sovereignty of the nation, or, rather, of the national majority… in reality there is no revolution in the government, since the principle remains the same. Now, we have the proof to-day that, with the most perfect democracy, we cannot be free.

The issue for Proudhon is sovereignty as such, and not the question of who or what legitimates it. In chapter 7 of *The Philosophy of Poverty* he also objects to any "system of authority, whatever its origin, monarchical or democratic" (Proudhon 1847). At no point does Proudhon distinguish between "real" and "so-called" democracy; the term simply stands for government by representatives.

This approach persists through the anarchist tradition. Bakunin in *Statism and Anarchy* (1873:178) attacks Marxists who "by popular government… mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people… a lie behind which the despotism of a ruling minority is concealed, a lie all the more dangerous in that it represents itself

as the expression of a sham popular will." Alexander Berkman sounded a similar critique in the *Mother Earth Bulletin* of October 1917:

> The democratic authority of majority rule is the last pillar of tyranny. The last, but the strongest… the despotism that is invisible because not personified, shears Samson of his passion and leaves him will-less. Woe to the people where the citizen is a sovereign whose power is in the hands of his masters! It is a nation of willing slaves.

Finally, Malatesta (1924) also treats "democracy" only in terms of a system of government:

> Even in the most democratic of democracies it is always a small minority that rules and imposes its will and interests by force… Therefore, those who really want 'government of the people' in the sense that each can assert his or her own will, ideas and needs, must ensure that no one, majority or minority, can rule over others; in other words, they must abolish government, meaning any coercive organisation, and replace it with the free organisation of those with common interests and aims.

In all of these cases, there is no attempt to align anarchism with democracy, or to construe the latter on any terms other than those of conventional representative institutions. The association between anarchism and democracy makes its appearance only around the 1980s, through the writings of Murray Bookchin.

Bookchin's disavowal of anarchism towards the end of his life is irrelevant here, since his statements regarding democracy had remained consistent since the late 70s, when they were couched in terms of a strategy recommended to anarchists. Echoing Martin Buber's critique of the expansion of the "political principle" of top-down power and centralised authority at the expense of the "social principle" of horizontal and spontaneous relationships (Buber 1957), Bookchin sees the only promising avenue for resistance in "a recovery of community, autonomy, relative self-sufficiency, self reliance, and direct democracy" on the local level, fostering "social institutions that by their very logic, stand in sharp opposition to increasingly all pervasive political institutions" (Bookchin 1980). This vision is clearly one of an anarchistic localism, based on "free popular assemblies," "collectivization of resources," and strictly mandated delegation of administrative coordinators. The question remains, however: should this arrangement be promoted with the language of *democracy*—albeit direct and participatory? What is the appeal of such language in the first place?

## Selling Anarchism as Democracy

Essentially, the association of anarchism with democracy is a two-pronged rhetorical maneuver intended to increase the appeal of anarchism for mainstream publics. The first

component of the maneuver is to latch onto the existing positive connotations that democracy carries in established political language. Instead of the negative (and false) image of anarchism as mindless and chaotic, a positive image is fostered by riding on the coattails of "democracy" as a widely-endorsed term in the mass media, educational system, and everyday speech. The appeal here is not to any specific set of institutions or decision-making procedures, but to the association of democracy with freedom, equality, and solidarity—to the sentiments that go to work when democracy is placed in binary opposition to dictatorship, and celebrated as what distinguishes the "free countries" of the West from other regimes.

Yet the second component of the maneuver is subversive: it seeks to portray current capitalist societies as not, in fact, democratic, since they alienate decision-making power from the people and place it in the hands of elites. This amounts to an argument that the institutions and procedures that mainstream audiences associate with democracy—government by representatives—are not in fact democratic, or at least a very pale and limited fulfilment of the values they are said to embody. True democracy, in this account, can only be local, direct, participatory, and deliberative, and is ultimately achievable only in a stateless and classless society. The rhetorical aim of the maneuver as a whole is to generate in the audience a sense of indignation at having been deceived: while the emotional attachment to "democracy" is confirmed, the belief that it actually exists is denied.

Now there are two problems with this maneuver, one conceptual and one more substantive. The conceptual problem is that it introduces a truly idiosyncratic notion of democracy, so ambitious as to disqualify almost all political experiences that fall under the common understanding of the term—including all electoral systems in which representatives do not have a strict mandate and are not immediately recallable. By claiming that current "democratic" regimes are in fact not democratic at all and that the only democracy worthy of the name is actually some version of an anarchist society, anarchists are asking people to reconfigure their understanding of democracy in a rather extreme way. While it is possible to maintain this new usage with logical coherence, it is nevertheless so rarefied and contrary to the common usage that its potential as a pivot for mainstream opinion is highly questionable.

The second problem is graver. While the association with democracy may seek to appeal only to its egalitarian and libertarian connotations, it also entangles anarchism with the *patriotic* nature of the pride in democracy which it seeks to subvert. The appeal is not simply to an abstract design for participatory institutions, but to participatory institutions recovered from the American revolutionary tradition. Bookchin (1985) is quite explicit about this, when he calls on anarchists to "start speaking in the vocabulary of the democratic revolutions" while unearthing and enlarging their libertarian content:

> That [American] bourgeois past has libertarian features about it: the town meetings of New England. Municipal and local control, the American mythology that the less government the better, the American belief in independence and individualism. All these things are antithetical to a cybernetic economy, a highly centralized corporative economy and a highly centralized political system… I'm for democratizing the republic and radicalizing the democracy, and doing that on

> the grass roots level: that will involve establishing libertarian institutions which are totally consistent with the American tradition. We can't go back to the Russian Revolution or the Spanish revolution any more. Those revolutions are alien to people in North America.

Cindy Milstein's formulation in her article "Democracy is Direct" (Milstein 2000) works directly to fulfill this program by seeking to build on American origin myths:

> Given that the United States is held up as the pinnacle of democracy, it seems particularly appropriate to hark back to those strains of a radicalized democracy that fought so valiantly and lost so crushingly in the American Revolution. We need to take up that unfinished project… Like all the great modern revolutions, the American Revolution spawned a politics based on face-to-face assemblies confederated within and between cities… Those of us living in the United States have inherited this self-schooling in direct democracy, even if only in vague echoes… deep-seated values that many still hold dear: independence, initiative, liberty, equality. They continue to create a very real tension between grassroots self-governance and top-down representation.

The appeal to the consensus view of the American polity as founded in a popular and democratic revolution, genuinely animated by freedom and equality, is precisely intended to target existing patriotic sentiments, even as it emphasises their subversive consequences. Milstein even invokes Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address when she criticises reformist agendas which "work with a circumscribed and neutralized notion of democracy, where democracy is neither of the people, by the people, nor for the people, but rather, only in the supposed name of the people." Yet this is a dangerous move, since it relies on a self-limiting critique of the patriotic sentiment itself, and allows the foundation myths to which it appeals to remain untouched by critiques of manufactured collective identity and colonial exclusion. While noting the need not to whitewash the racial, gendered, and other injustices that were part of "the historic event that created this country," Milstein can only offer an unspecific exhortation to "grapple with the relation between this oppression and the liberatory moments of the American Revolution."

Yet given that the appeal is targeted at non-anarchist participants, there is little if any guarantee that such a grappling would actually take place. The patriotic sentiment appealed to here is more often than not a component of a larger nationalist narrative, one that hardly partakes of a decolonial critique (which by itself would have many questions about the Western enlightenment roots of notions of citizenship and the public sphere). The celebration of democracy in terms that directly invoke the early days of the American polity may end up reinforcing rather than questioning loyalties to the nation-state that claims, however falsely, to be the carrier of the democratic inheritance of the colonial period. This is especially poignant in the context of the recent wave of mobilization, which displays precisely this mix of quintessentially anarchist-influenced means of organization and action, and distinctly patriotic and nationalist discourses—from the Egyptian revolution's embrace of the

military, through the Jeffersonian sentiments pervading the Occupy movement, and on to the outright nationalism of the Ukrainian revolution.

There is, indeed, one reason to question this concern—namely, the democratic and nationalist sentiments that have been expressed by movements with which anarchists have good reasons to sense an affinity. The most prominent of these are the struggles of communities in Chiapas linked to the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in southeast Mexico and the revolutionary movement in Rojava or Syrian Kurdistan. Both have not only employed the language of democracy to signify a decentralised and egalitarian form of society, but also an explicit agenda of national liberation. The Kurdish movement has publicly endorsed Bookchin as a source of inspiration. Does this mean that anarchists are wrong to maintain active solidarity with these movements? My answer is "No"—but due to a crucial difference that also vindicates the general argument above. It is not the same thing for stateless minorities in the global South to use the language of democracy and national liberation as it is for citizens of advanced capitalist countries in which national independence is already an accomplished fact. The former do not appeal to patriotic founding myths engendered by an existing nation state, with their associated privileges and injustices, but to the possibility of a different and untested form of radically decentralised and potentially stateless "national liberation." To be sure, this carries its own risks, but anarchists in the global North are hardly in a position to preach on these matters.

Thus we return to the main point: for anarchists in the USA and Western Europe, at least, the choice to use the language of democracy is based on the desire to mobilize and subvert a form of patriotism that is ultimately establishment-friendly; it risks cementing the nationalist sentiments it seeks to undermine. Anarchists have always had a public image problem. Trying to undo it through the connection to mainstream democratic and nationalist sentiments is not worth this risk.

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