

What Is Democracy?*

An Oliver Ressler interview with Nikos Panagos

(1) •What is your opinion about the current condition of the democratic system, the representative democracy, we are living in? •What would you consider as the main problems, and are these problems that can be solved within the existing system, or are they related to the problem of representative democracy in general?

Well, what we have to make clear at the outset is that representation and democracy are incompatible terms. Therefore, under no circumstances the present system could be called a democracy. It is just a sophisticated form of oligarchy. The representative system can only represent interests, not wills, and this is why it is not strange at all that it is perfectly compatible with the present institutional framework in which, effectively, there are no citizens or society but only individuals and interest groups. This is because the will of people cannot be represented. Nobody can represent my will and I can only delegate someone to vote on my behalf in a particular way with respect to a particular matter but, nobody can represent in general my will. In other words, nobody can take decisions on our behalf.

So, we can say that representative “democracy” has been problematic since the day it was born that is, about 200 years ago, when the Founding Fathers of the US Constitution introduced this contradictory concept in political life, which, since then, has spread and has now been established all over the world. Until then, democracy had only one meaning; it meant direct democracy where all the people directly and collectively, decided by themselves for every aspect of their social life. Contrary to this system of direct decision taking, in the representative system, the citizens (i.e. the subjects) are called to vote on political parties and representatives on the basis of very general and abstract programs. Even when the political campaigns are based on more concrete propositions what we see, as from the first day following the elections, is that politicians move on to the implementation of secret agendas that express the interests of the political and economical elites –i.e. of agendas which are in full conflict with their pre-election promises and also with the real needs and desires of the people. We can mention many examples of this. In Britain, millions of people came out on the streets to express their opposition against the Iraq war and yet this did not prevent the launching of this war. Another example is the EU Constitution, on which European citizens either were not asked to express their opinion at all –nobody asked our opinion on this in Greece– or when their opinion was asked and they voted against it, as it happened in the French and Dutch plebiscites, their opinion was simply ignored and today the Constitution is being adopted by the political elites through the back door of the Euro Treaty. This means that even the outcomes of supposedly democratic procedures, like those of referendums, are not respected by the elites (which introduced them in the first instance) unless they are compatible with their own decisions

taken in advance!

What we have just described is the crisis of the political system only, but the problem is that what we are facing today is not just a crisis in politics but a multidimensional crisis which transcends the political realm and extends into the economic, the broader social and ecologic realms. It is, in other words, a multidimensional crisis which concerns what we could describe as the public space defined in a broad sense to include all these spheres we have already mentioned, apart from the narrow political one. The cause of this multidimensional crisis is the unequal distribution of power among citizens to all these spheres: i.e., the political, economic, social and ecological realms. And the only way to overcome the crisis is through the creation of another system which could ensure the equal distribution of power among all citizens in all these realms.

Some characteristic symptoms of this multidimensional crisis are the following ones. On the political sphere we can see the apathy and the alienation of people from what passes as politics today, the collapse of mass parties and the growing abstention rates in countries in which voting is not compulsory. In the economic sphere we can see an accelerating concentration of wealth at the hands of a few people while the great majority of the population gets deeper into poverty. This concentration has recently led peoples in many poor countries to revolt against hunger while in rich countries, like the USA, there are many repossessions of houses from people who cannot afford to pay their mortgages and all signs point towards a great economic crisis. In the social realm, we can see the rise of delinquency, drug abuse, etc. to which problems the elites neither try nor can give any solution and, instead, they just build more and bigger prisons. In the cultural realm, we can see the complete homogenization of culture which has been degraded to the production of cultural sub-products. Finally, there is an uncontrollable and unprecedented ecological destruction, expressed for instance by the rise of the planet's temperature with incalculable consequences threatening our future.

It is therefore obvious that we face too many and very important problems which are not just due to the functioning of the institutions. What we need is another system, which could ensure the equal distribution of power among all citizens because the present system, that is, the system of market economy and its complement in the political realm, representative democracy, have their own dynamic which leads to ever greater concentration of power in the hands of the few, in other words it leads to today's crisis. So, what we need is a system that ensures the equal distribution of power among all citizens.

(2) •How could a better, more democratic system look in your opinion •On which principles could it be organized and what forms could it take? •Do you think forms of direct or participatory democracy could work?

There's no such thing as a more democratic or a less democratic system. A system is either democratic, that is to say it is a direct democracy as we have already described it, extending not just to the political realm, but also to the economic and the social realms or it is not democratic at all.

If we agree with the description of the multidimensional crisis that we gave before, it is obvious that we need a definition of democracy which will not confine itself to the narrowly defined political realm, but will also extend to the economic realm, and the broader social

realm. That is, what we need is a broad conception of democracy. We call this broad conception of democracy, Inclusive Democracy.

If freedom is –as we believe it is– the highest human objective and we give a definition of freedom on the basis of individual and collective autonomy, then, the connection between autonomy and freedom is inevitable. This is because autonomous is the individual who gives the ‘laws’ to itself, i.e. who, in a society, takes an equal part in the decision taking process. But autonomous individuals can only exist within an autonomous society. And a society is autonomous when it is fully aware that the institutions are its own creation and has created the democratic institutions which ensure the equal distribution of power among citizens.

Therefore, the only organisational form that an Inclusive Democracy can take is the “demotic assembly”, i.e. face-to-face citizens’ assemblies. For such an arrangement to be feasible the “demos” should consist of a relatively small community of people, say, 30,000 to 40,000 people. However, as Inclusive Democracy does not confine itself to the political realm but also extends to the economic and the broader social realm, it is obvious that in the economic realm, for instance, where self-sufficiency is not possible, a confederate organisation of the demoi is required so that all those significant decisions that cannot be taken at the local (demotic) level could be taken instead at the confederal level. This is the case for example of decisions concerning the equal allocation of natural resources, so that the basic needs of all citizens in the confederation could be met. Consequently, the form that a social organisation based on Inclusive Democracy could take is the confederal organization of demoi at the national, continental and, eventually, at the planetary level. The confederal organization of demoi is based upon a network of executive councils, whose members are recallable delegates, who are accountable to the demotic assemblies which select them –and which take all policy decisions. In other words, the role of delegates is simply practical and executive, which means that their role has nothing to do with that of today’s politicians as they do not take policy decisions. This, as has been said, is the form a confederal organisation may take.

As far as values are concerned, as it is obvious from what I said before, there are two basic organisational principles in an Inclusive Democracy: the principle of autonomy and the principle of community. Out of these two organisational principles, we may derive the ethical values which would govern such a society. For example, out of the autonomy principle we may derive the values of democracy and equality and of respect for the “other”, i.e. respect of life as well as of the quality of life –i.e. environmental values. And out of the principle of community we may derive the values of solidarity, altruism, caring and sharing.

It is therefore clear that any forms of so-called participatory democracy short of direct democracy are just injections of democracy and could never solve the problems created by the multidimensional crisis. For example, forms of direct democracy like referendums –the results of which, as we have already pointed out, are taken into account only when the elites could take benefit from them– or forms of participatory democracy like the one proposed by “civil society” movements, or the recently discussed, in Greece, blogger’s democracies are not in fact real democracies but rather pseudo-democracies which are used as alibis by the system. So, in order to overcome the multidimensional crisis, a different institutional framework is needed, which will ensure the equal distribution of

power among all citizens. Although people have a real need to effectively participate in decision-taking, the present system converted them into consumers of politics, commodities, or culture. Therefore, only a system that guarantees the equal distribution of power among all citizens can solve their problems. So, the suggestions by social-liberal or reformist parties for “direct” or participatory forms of democracy could only perhaps give such parties a higher percentage of the vote, whereas giving people a false impression of participation at the very moment when what they really need is forms of direct democracy which would secure an equal distribution of power among all citizens.

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- Transcription of a video interview Oliver Ressler carried out with Nikos Panagos in Thessaloniki in May 2008 for Ressler's upcoming film project "What Is Democracy?," which will be launched in 2009. For details please check out www.ressler.at