Overcoming the State by Reinventing the Polis

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The rhetoric of Thatcher and of Reagan has changed nothing of importance (the change in formal ownership of a few large enterprises does not essentially alter their relation to the State), … the bureaucratic structure of the large firm remains intact [and] half of the national product transits the public sector in one way or another (State, local governmental organizations, Social Security); … between half and two-thirds of the price of goods and services entering into the final national expenditure are in one way or another fixed, regulated, controlled, or influenced by State policy, and … the situation is irreversible (ten years of Thatcher and Reagan made no essential changes therein).[1]
Cornelius Castoriadis

Authoritarian Globalization and the State

For some time now, but especially with the eruption of the global financial crisis in 2008, the globalized neoliberal system have managed, in some aspects, to stabilize and entrench itself more firmly by taking explicitly anti-democratic and essentially authoritarian forms. In contrast to the narrative offered by its supporters on the Right and chimed by most of its opponents on the Left, neoliberalism's synthesis with representative democracy hasn't led us towards dismantlement of the state bureaucracies, but instead towards their replication on global, international level (transgressing however the national political discourse). The widely propagated nowadays idea of raging individual freedom is being accompanied by the reality of aggressive erosion of personal rights and supplementation of individuality with uniformed consumerist atomization.

This state of things was clearly exemplified by the brutal power which the international financial institutions and the European technocrats exercised in the case of Greece. The naked force with which the global elites responded to the anti-austerity resistance waged by the Greeks was simultaneously a demonstration and warning that national-sovereignty is a thing of the past. It was made clear that no country will be allowed to step out of line. This new reality leads large segments of the Left even today to disorientation since the sphere of national politics, viewed by them as main front for anti-capitalist struggle, has been completely dismantled, giving birth to contradictory left-wing projects like Varoufakis's Diem25[2].

Despite all the talks of state "amputation", neoliberalism instead proceeds in its reconceptualization. In fact, the state apparatus is reduced to central enforcer of capitalist dogmas and producer of anthropological types that are necessary to keep the current system going. Narratives of "raging freedom" are invoked to mask the authoritarian nature of the contemporary oligarchy. But the state's role as guardian of the neoliberal doctrine and its main pillars, like unlimited economic growth, deepens even further its conflict with society, often resorting to brute force, and thus becoming increasingly delegitimized entity.

In the face of this global authoritarian system, in which states seek to submit local populations to the will of international technocratic elites and transnational agreements (like TTIP), the far-Right and large part of the far-Left seem to agree on the need to revive the independent nation-state. But their essentially bureaucratic and predisposed to racism proposal seems to not find significant popular support, except for some sporadic electoral successes, provoked mainly by fear and insecurity, rather than political agreement. And the examples of the age of national-politics bear enough reasons for us to reject the retreat to the all powerful and equally

authoritarian nation-state sovereignty.

On the other hand, the proposal of the so-called political Center, both Right and Left, to stick to the current discourse seems to be completely bankrupted. The dominant institutions of governance seems to be completely delegitimized, with record levels of electoral abstention and rising social cynicism, thus forced to constantly resort to sheer violence when facing popular disagreement and resistance. This reality has made many social movements and segments of society to engage in exploring new modes of organizing everyday life beyond the bureaucratic fragmentation enforced by the state.

The City as Locus for Politics beyond Statecraft

During last years the city has emerged as potential contender to the nation-state. The radical geographer David Harvey has even argued that 'rebel cities' will become a preferred site for revolutionary movements[3]. Great theoretical influence in this field is the work of libertarian thinker Murray Bookchin who, like the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis[4], returned to the forgotten ancient Athenian concept of the *Polis*[5]. He attempted with great success at revealing the revolutionary essence of this notion and its potentialities for our times. To parliamentary oligarchy, tribal nationalism and capitalist relations Bookchin proposed direct-democratic confederations of libertarian municipalities where citizens participate directly in local assemblies and elect revocable delegates to regional councils[6]. In the city and its historic rivalry with the State, he saw a possible **public space** where civic culture can break domination in all its forms.

While large cities worldwide are increasingly following their own agendas that often go against State policies, like the city of London and its resistance to Britain's leave of the EU (the so-called 'Brexit')[7], a new generation of municipal

platforms is emerging, boosted by the deepening of the crisis of representation. Most of them are partially influenced by the above-mentioned theoretical framework, and have sprung in different parts of the world, but mainly in Europe. In Spain such projects govern most major cities like Barcelona and Madrid[8]. These platforms are trying to reverse the austerity measures that are being enforced by the State, international technocratic institutions and transnational agreements, remunicipalize basic services, introduce participatory decision-making bodies on local level, challenge governmental anti-migrant policies etc. Some of these 'rebel cities' have began connecting with each other, thus multiplying and strengthening their voices.

In the US also local municipalities have reached to conflict with the central government's policies. Close to 250 cities across the country have pledged to adopt, honor and uphold the commitments to the goals set by the Paris Agreements after the announcement of president Trump's plans to break up with the latter[9]. But while the motivations of some of these local administrations remain questionable due to their possible connections with the main electoral opponents to the contemporary government, municipal platforms are emerging in the US as well, like the initiative *Olympia for All*[10] that tries to give more participatory and ecological characteristics to the municipality of Olympia, Washington (USA).

Of course there are problems with these practices. Most of these municipal projects attempt at trying to radicalize cities through the mechanisms of local bureaucracies that resemble to a large degree the state apparatus. This fact rises the question of how far this "radicalization" can go. It also underlines the difficulty of balancing between city bureaucracy and social movements. These problematics should not make us abandon the city as potential locus for making politics outside statecraft, but provoke us to rethink it as

truly public space that is constantly being recreated by its citizens and that goes beyond narrow electoralism.

One contemporary case that goes in this direction is the democratic autonomy being built in Rojava. The base of the confederal system that nowadays functions in this part of the war-torn Middle East was set through strategy that resembles to a large degree the principles of libertarian municipalism. Activists began organizing grassroots decision-making bodies – communes and councils – in neighborhoods and villages, mostly situated in North Kurdistan and Rojava, that functioned in parallel to the official state institutions, trying to gain legitimacy through providing space that allows people to directly self-organize their everyday lives. Their work proved successful when during the Arab spring a power vacuum was created and most of the involved communities were able to self-manage themselves sustainably without the involvement of statist apparatuses.

Beyond Bureaucracy and Domination

The authoritarian nature of the contemporary system requires anti-authoritarian alternative paradigm if it is to be successfully challenged. While many have argued that the current rise in authoritarianism and technocracy is nothing but a temporary phase in the liberal oligarchic rule, others, like Walter Benjamin, have argued that the "state of exception" in which we live is in fact not the exception but the rule[11]. Electoral victories by far-right candidates and fascist parties are not some sort of systemic breakdown but continuation of traditional hierarchical rule by other means. Thus it is up to all of us, of those "below", to bring about a real exception in the tradition of heteronomy and radically break up with domination of human over human and of humanity over nature.

The way through which this could be achieved, logically cannot pass through the ballot box, either on national or local

level, but through the self-organization and self-institution of society itself. This would imply communities organizing independently from established bureaucracies and determining themselves their agendas. Something similar to the demonstrations against the **Dakota Access Pipeline** where indigenous people and social movements managed to achieve significant victory, against both big capital and an alliance of state governments, in the preservation of their commons, building “from below” a movement that spread to more than 300 cities across the US and received solidarity from all over the world, including Thailand, Japan and Europe[12].

We saw that in the last decade the popular resistances in urban areas have adopted an anti-authoritarian approach with democratic characteristics. Vanguardist structures like parties and syndicates, once dominant among social movements, have nowadays been abandoned and replaced by open participatory institutions. Demonstrations are increasingly turning into reclamation of public spaces and buildings. Thus we can speak of general social attempts at redefining what democracy is.

The role of social movements in these processes would be not to lead but to nurture these direct-democratic traits that stem from our very societies. Among the main questions for them should be how to manage to successfully locate and maintain the grassroots institutions that are emerging in public squares and city neighborhoods in the short eruptions of civil disagreement with enforced “from above” policies. And how their character could be transformed from purely symbolic to effective and decision-making. This also puts forward the need of regional and even transnational connectednes between such dispersed local grassroots institutions for them to be able to function sustainably in the face of state and capitalist hostility. For such germs of genuine direct democracy we could also look beyond the contemporary Western world, in places like Chiapas, Rojava and other indigenous

communities and cultures but also in historical political traditions that go as far as the ancient Athenian *Polis.*

Conclusion

As Castoriadis have suggested, we are at a crossroad in the roads of history[13]. Some of the more visible paths will keep us within heteronomy, in worlds dominated by the barbarism of international agreements and technocratic institutions, State apparatuses and nationalist cannibalism. Although the characteristics of each one of them may differ, their base remains essentially the same: elites and predetermined truths dominating society and nature. Humanity have been living within this framework during most of its recent history and the symptoms are painfully familiar to us all: loss of meaning, conformism, apathy, irresponsibility, the tightening grip of unlimited economic growth, pseudorational pseudomastery, consumption for the sake of consumption, technoscience that strengthens the domination of capitalist imaginary etc.

There is however another road that is not that visible, but always existent. Unlike the above mentioned directions that are being determined by extra-social sources, this one has to be opened and laid through the political practice of all citizens and their will for freedom. It requires the abolition of bureaucratic fragmentation of everyday life, which is the essence of the State, reclamation of the public space and the *Polis*, reawakening of the creative imaginary and re-articulation of the project of Autonomy. But it is a matter of social and individual political choice which road our societies will take.

Notes:

[1] Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Castoriadis Reader,* Blackwell Publishers 1997, pp 406-410

[2]https://greece.greekreporter.com/2016/02/10/why-varoufakis-diem25-will-fail-to-produce-change-in-europe/

[3] David Harvey: *Rebel Cities,* Verso Books 2012, p.117
[4] Cornelius Castoriadis: *The Castoriadis Reader,* Blackwell Publishers 1997, pp 267-289
[5] Murray Bookchin: *From Urbanization to Cities,* Cassel 1995, p. 62-81
[6] https://new-compass.net/articles/communalist-project
[7] https://www.qmul.ac.uk/media/news/items/hss/178917.html
[8] https://www.redpepper.org.uk/rebel-cities-the-citizen-platforms-in-power/
[9]https://www.buzzfeed.com/jimdalrympleii/us-states-and-cities-react-to-paris-withdrawal?utm_term=.xmlReY3O3#.lgnX98G2G
[10] https://new-compass.net/articles/olympia-all
[11] Walter Benjamin: *Selected Writings, Volume 4 1938-40,* The Belknap Press of Harvard University 2003, p.392
[12] https://www.colorlines.com/articles/people-300-cities-are-taking-part-nodapl-day-action
[13] Cornelius Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable,* unauthorized translation 2005, p.146

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