08 2005

Anarchist Consensual Democracy

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Transcription of a video by O. Ressler, recorded in Bielefeld, Germany, 29 min., 2005

We are here in front of the civilian sentry in west Bielefeld. According to my grandfather, who was in the communist resistance movement, the sentry and the square in front of it were used for communist gatherings during the Weimar era and also shortly before Hitler took over power. These communist gatherings then fell victim to violent acts from both the police and the fascists.

I encountered the phenomena of dominance quite early on. One of these encounters was during my apprenticeship as a locksmith. I was confronted with hierarchies within the firm, the behavior of the journeymen, but also the entire atmosphere that went along with such an apprenticeship. I wasn't really inspired to adapt to this system of dominance. So I had my first confrontation with dominance and power, read books and asked myself if a "just" society were possible. At some point I stumbled across anarchist writings. I founded Edition Blackbox together with Michael Halfbrodt, a Bielefeld writer. It is a libertarian press publishing anarcho-poetry, libertarian and anarchist literature, and political texts.

In the more than 300 pages of *Anarchismus und Konsens* (2002), I answered the question of the anarchist principle of consensus based on "How?", "Why?" and "What can it achieve?" Anarchy and consensus is a very broad theme and as a whole does not touch upon the entire spectrum of anarchy. Those anarchists who feel more in line with the classics will only find themselves represented on the margins here. The "Freie ArbeiterInnen Union" (Free Worker's Union) works with a Soviet system that is presented as an alternative to the current representative system. The anarchists that I refer to in *Anarchismus und Konsens* are more from the neo-anarchist realm. Among them are: Jan Stehn, Burkhard Keimburg, Charlie Blackfield, and Gunar Seitz. That is the question: How can we imagine an alternative anarchist society that is able to exist without a soviet system, a society that forms at the grassroots, at the grassroots of everyday life, in daily mutual cooperation? The upper social classes are entirely done away with. The issues are, "How we can arrive at decisions free of political authority?" and "How we can survive without an 'above'?"

The term anarchy comes from the Greek, from *an-archia*, which means "without dominance." Anarchy is about a society without a ruling authority, a society that is not hierarchically arranged in the sense of upper and lower classes. And this is precisely what makes people uneasy; many people can't imagine a life or a society without an "above," without a government. The use of the term anarchy has always been plagued by misunderstandings. These misunderstandings are often based on a lack of knowledge about the anarchist movement, which has had various phases. Included in these was also an attempt to combat governments directly with violence in the nineteenth century. A prejudice stemming from this time, that anarchists are prone to violence, definitely still exists. That does not at all apply to neo-anarchy. The neo-anarchy that has developed in Germany since 1968 is mainly non-violent. Also in anarcho-syndicalist contexts and in non-violent contexts, the motto is that the goal of revolution, namely, freedom and equality, should be reflected in the means for achieving revolution. Accordingly, these means cannot rest on violence because violence is not a goal of an anarchist society.

Furthermore, anarchy is so difficult for people to understand because many people can't imagine life without control, the organs of the state, control from above. They haven't learned to develop self-administered, organizational structures; they haven't learned to realize dominance-free decision-making, beginning with their private affairs. Therefore, a certain blind spot exists in today's so-called democracy: people are taught about human rights, Paragraph 1 of the (German) constitution, "The dignity of man is inviolable," espouses concepts that approximate or correspond to democracy. Yet the everyday application of what is required of democratic systems, namely, the population's actual self-determination, self-administration, and self-organization, is neglected.

Consensus

If I want to describe the anarchist principle or model of consensus, perhaps it is helpful to first speak of this consensus model as a theory of independent decision-making or as a theory of direct democracy. The model refers to the intrinsic value of political decisions; that is, the way that a political decision is made is put at the center of focus. "Consensus" stems etymologically from the concept of "accordance," "agreement." Consensus, because it should be free of dominance and refers to an actual communication and decision-making process, is important in concrete decision-making. In a theory of direct democracy, concrete decision-making means, for example, that the agenda includes questions of how to produce something. For example: How can we build a center? How can we build a street? How can we build a collective? What should we do? Looking at representative democracy – a democratic form characterized by representative systems – it becomes clear that massive numbers of people who are directly affected by these systems are ignored. This is easily demonstrated by the German Federal Republic's Hartz IV law and by all of the Hartz laws, which simply ignore all recipients of unemployment assistance and gradually push them into poverty. Persons affected by such decisions are neglected at all times and in every respect.

In contrast, the anarchist principle of consensus democracy foresees a very different principle that can be understood in two ways. First, in an anarchist consensual democracy, affected persons would have the right to be consulted on decisions. Second, all persons who are disadvantaged by a decision – I'll call them dissenters – would have a veto-right in this decision-making process. This right allows them to nullify the decision so that discussion can begin again. Through their right to veto, dissenters would have great significance within the decision-making process, and the possibility to avert disadvantages. Waste transport, for example, as it takes place in a representative democracy, would never occur. With today's waste transport and radioactive waste dumping, the affected population living at the site has no veto rights whatsoever. It has no right of any kind to nullify these decisions by the government, although it is very strongly affected on site by the effects of radioactive contamination and accidents. In an anarchist consensual democracy, such decisions would be impossible because they could be nullified at any time by those affected, and, in these cases, the affected population would simply use their right to veto.

Three basic elements provide a rough picture of how the principle of consensus functions: there is a meeting of the affected persons, or of those who bear any consequences of a decision. It is possible to react to a decision by either rejecting it through a veto or accepting the decision. The latter means that this issue affects me now, but I can accept the consequences because the impact is not significant, or because I don't want to hold up the process and I see a rationale in it. Ideally, there is consensus, or unanimous agreement and adherence to a decision or a perspective on the decision. Unanimous agreement represents the ideal of consensual democracy. In practice, however, there are often compromises for which all sides are able to notch up half or three-quarter advantages. Consensus is, however, the intended goal in an anarchist consensual democracy. The aim is to eliminate overriding majority-based decisions.

The anarchist consensus model, like anarchy as a whole, represents a view of society that focuses especially on the micro-level of society. Concern is not with relations between the government and the governed, but solely with the governed that dispose of the government. The idea is for people to come together at a grassroots level, independently and autonomously, and in cooperation with others, make decisions on the so-called micro-level of society. Anarchist theory actually has two fundamental critiques of the state: First, the state constantly produces governments, regardless of whether they can be voted out of office after a certain amount of time, and, second, this creates a hierarchically structured upper and an affected lower class. This is unjust and runs counter to any concept of egalitarianism and also to a demand aired in democratic theory – that ultimately, the main concern is the people's interests. From the moment that governments are created, these interests cannot be upheld.

Thus, we are concerned with a critique of the state that requires, as democracy does, that the main focus of politics is the interests of the people. Since this does not in fact occur, anarchists accordingly criticize the state. Moreover, this state that constantly produces governments also holds a monopoly on violence. This is manifest in that it permits itself to use violence against its enemies or against people who do not correspond to normative ideas, while prohibiting others from using violence. The population is ultimately exposed without possessing viable defense. Exercising violence is the sole privilege of the state, and this is unjust.

Anarchy aspires to a non-governmental and non-capitalist, grassroots organizational form of society and is concerned only with the base level of the population. Every population makes decisions based on needs and these decisions should be made solely by the people, by those affected. Thus, if it is necessary to make a decision, then it is made on the micro level, and this is organized by the affected persons themselves. The characteristics of such a non-hierarchical democracy would be: A self-supporting, synthesized, anti-hierarchic organization of the people from the bottom up, coming from the personal interests of the federated individual groups, and a fractional and decentralized development of cooperation and collectives. The different types of cooperation can form at any time, but can also dissolve in accordance with the needs of those affected. A further characteristic is the procedural development of decisions. Decisions can be made only if they are made by individuals. These decisions correspond to the needs of individuals and not to the needs of rulers who control or want to control these individuals for some reason. A further characteristic – and this relates to the principle of consensus – is decentralized organization. A consensual democracy cannot function with a population of millions. Decentralized organization of anarchist society is necessary, the return of politics and decisions concerning regional and communal conditions back to the grassroots decision-making collectives. This assures that decisions are controlled at all times by the population and individuals, and it assures that decisions are accessible at all times. Decisions can be changed if the needs of the individuals change; they are revocable at all times.

It should be kept in mind that interregional decisions are also possible. Processes of consensual decision-making are not limited to regions or to interregional dimensions, although they are not applicable to a population of millions, as in Germany. In order to regulate public affairs, for example, the building of a street or the construction of a school (if there are schools and we are able to come to an agreement about them), or the regulation of electricity, it is necessary that communities and regions can communicate inter-regionally and consider the demand and needs of the individuals and groups who live in the community. In order to regulate public interests, they can introduce intermediary committees to mediate between the various communities and regions. These intermediary committees attempt to develop recommendations for the resolution of a problem. From here, the recommendations are directed back to the grassroots groups and the collective.

In this, it is important that only those recommendations are implemented that are agreed upon by all participants and persons involved. It should therefore not occur that a dissenting group is simply ignored. Gunar Seitz described this beautifully in an article: If a person or a group see themselves as negatively affected

because they suffer a material loss – for example, because a street should be built on the same lot as a house in which people live – then this type of decision is a dominating one, since it is made in favor of the needs of a majority over a minority. This is not allowed in an anarchist society. The intermediary committees would not have any kind of decision-making capacity; they are discussion committees or circles in which all affected persons can come together and participate in discussion. The objective in this is to arrive at a recommendation that is accepted by all sides and to give this recommendation back to the grassroots groups. This enables interregional cooperation to take place. In order to imagine that this is indeed also feasible and realizable, one need only notice that postal delivery functions at the national level, and also between nations, without the necessity for a world post office. People are thus very much able to organize inter-regionally with the help of committees. In an anarchist society, it is important that nobody is neglected, that nobody feels disadvantaged by decisions. This means, in the case of the street that leads through the lot where a house is standing and where affected persons are living, that one offers to move the people to another house. This house would ideally be larger than the one before, so that they also have an advantage from the decision. If the people however want to continue to live in the house, they cannot be ignored.

Installing participation as a self-evident social principle in an anarchist society requires an unbelievably high degree of motivation by the affected and by people who are willing to take part in the processes of political participation and decision-making. I can imagine a level of motivation such as that among today's soccer fans. While soccer fans traverse Germany in order to shout out their club's interests, such trips could also occur in an anarchist society – not just on the weekend, but, in principle, at any time. They could go to those decision-making locations where one can take part in inter-regional discussions and decisions. The intrinsic value of the democratic decision would stand in the foreground. The classic theory of participation (from Habermas and many others) already in the 1970s emphasized that participation and partaking in democratic decisions has an intrinsic value. This is also the case in anarchy, perhaps even much, much stronger than any bourgeois theory has tried to formulate or think. What counts in anarchy is the primacy of participation, of political participation. Whoever does not share this primacy, or does not want to participate in democratic processes and decision-making, is naturally not forced to do so. But anarchy and anarchist society offer an immense opportunity to become involved and to create reality together with others, to organize and effectuate change on all levels.

In an anarchist society, there probably would not be anything comparable in any way with today's legal institutions, courts, police and governmental organizations. They would not be necessary because, according to the idea of consensual democracy and the implementation of consensual processes, there would be no need for the affected persons to have to take their cases to court in order to represent their interests, but rather, concerns would already be a part of the process of consensual democracy. All affected persons would be allowed to defer decisions and negatively affected persons would have a veto right.

The simple idea of the principle of anarchist consensus and its effects can perhaps be made plausible through an example. The communities A, B, and C lie at a distance to a river and since they each want to benefit from the river, for example, to irrigate their fields, they would like to divert the river and bring it closer. However, just 200 kilometers south of the three communities A, B, and C is the community D, which would suffer if this river were diverted because then the river would dry up. This community lies directly along the river and has been able to profit from it until now. If the river dries up as a result of the diversion to the communities A, B, and C, then community D must have an immediate right to veto this decision and, as a negatively affected community, must be brought into any decisions. This right to veto would make it impossible for communities A, B, and C to divert the river. The only possibility that corresponds to the principle of anarchic consensus is to take the matter into one's own hands; not to create disadvantages for someone else; the communities A, B, and C would have to move to the river. Through this measure, community D would hopefully not suffer and such a process would be legitimate. Therefore, the principle of anarchist consensus aims especially at avoiding inter-regional problems, at preventing material losses to others, and, whenever

possible, making decisions that have consequences only for oneself and not negative consequences for others.

Critique

Naturally there are numerous critiques of the model of anarchist consensus and these are also addressed in detail in the book. Perhaps one of the strongest arguments is that, to establish the anarchist consensus model, to establish anarchist direct democracy along with the principle of consensus, a radical break in the sense of a system transformation would have to occur, which is not attainable with either today's political or economic elite. This transition to an anarchist consensual democracy would mean the complete abolishment of their power.

Another point of criticism is that, under the model of anarchist consensus, certain technical conditions would no longer prevail as they do today. Technologies for electrical supply such as nuclear power cannot be subject to consensus, because in the case of an accident it would cause suffering on both the regional and inter-regional levels. For this reason, there can be no consensus on nuclear energy. An anarchist consensual democracy would have to introduce alternative technologies that do not have negative impacts. This demands a lot of imagination, to come up with alternative technological solutions for which there can be a consensus.

Transition

There would have to be self-organization from below in the form of self-administered projects. Anarchist society is not a distant goal; rather, the aim towards it begins in the here and now with the development of federated contexts, the development of self-administered projects, self-organized houses, self-managed printing presses, etc. The idea is that the people organize themselves at the grassroots and in the here and now, actually right now – yesterday even – and in the end make the state superfluous. Ultimately, it concerns a re-thinking for us as individuals, as subjects. It is important to understand that we must emancipate ourselves rather than make ourselves dependent on outer conditions or state regulations in order to arrive at a free and autonomous life. It is about re-creating the world for ourselves. The concluding statement in my book reads: Democracy has not reached its conceivable conclusion, but rather, has just begun.

Poem (excerpt): 1999, by Ralf Burnicki

Filtered over the ramp into the inner lining of the emergency ward, the patient shows no misgivings; just a strict discipline that he copies from the white coat of the doctor, his thoughts orbited by the narrowing orbit of the staff, advancing with selectively chosen words to the crisis case...

The text has been edited by Harald Otto in the course of the project transform *(http://transform.eipcp.net).*