

From 15M to Podemos

The Regeneration of Spanish Democracy, and the Maligned Promise of Chaos

by Peter Gelderloos

I. Emergence

Spring 2011.

“This is our revolution! No barricades, nothing romantic like that, but what do we expect? It's a piece of shit, but we already knew this is the world we live in.”

I was shoulder to shoulder with a friend, pushing through the swarming crowds, the tens of thousands that had coalesced out of the democratic desolation to fill Plaça Catalunya, Barcelona's central plaza. We were on our way back from a copy shop whose employees, also taken up in the fervor, let us print another five hundred copies of the latest open letter with a huge discount, easily paid for with all the change people were leaving in the donations jar at the info table we anarchists had set up.

In less than an hour, all the pamphlets had been snatched up, we'd met more people who shared some of our ideas, had another couple engaging debates, another brief argument. Decades of social isolation had suddenly been drowned in a sudden, unexpected outpouring of social angst, anger, hope, a desire to relate. A million individual needs for the expression of collective needs: *Yes, I need that, too*. A million solitary voices recognizing themselves in a cry they all took up together: *Yes, I am here, too*. A million stories of loneliness finding themselves in a shared alienation: *Yes, I feel that, too*. It was hard not to get carried away. We felt it too.

But in that commune of alienation we also felt a certain cynicism. It was more than just arrogance, not merely looking down our noses at these people as they shouted every evening, “*aquí comença la Revolució!*”, *the Revolution begins here*. The truth is, we doubted the popular understanding of what a revolution would actually entail.

And our doubts were not without reason. Being out alone in the streets for years, trying to spread critical ideas, trying to open small spaces of freedom, getting handcuffed or beaten, when no one else gives a crap, when everyone else seems content to stare into their TV screens while the world dies around them, can certainly make you arrogant. It can make you bitter, and cynical, and superior, and completely oblivious to unexpected changes that rock the system you've spent your whole life fighting. But it can also give you perspective. It can make you ask, *why are these people in the streets now, only when their own social benefits are threatened, while they didn't lift a finger when it was other people on the chopping block?* It can provoke the question, *why is the media giving so much attention to this phenomenon,*

even if it's often negative attention, when they've been ignoring our struggles for years?

When the plaza occupation movement broke out on the 15th of May (15M), 2011, throughout the Spanish state, we threw ourselves into it. A few anarchists dismissed it outright, unable to find traction in that chaotic, unseemly jumble of a movement, and others uncritically gave their stamp of approval to anything that appeared to have the support of a mass. But we refused to surrender the perspectives and experiences won through years of lonely struggle when few others were insisting that the system we lived in was unacceptable.

We didn't all interpret those experiences the same way, just as we did not develop the same strategies in the midst of the plaza occupation movement. I can only give one account of this story; nonetheless it is a story we helped build collectively, struggling side by side and also disputing one another's positions. There is no consensus history of the movement, and not even of anarchist participation in it, but at the same time, no one arrived at their particular version of events alone.

One element we all shared was a critique of democracy. There was a history to our position. In 1975, Francisco Franco died. A fascist dictator who was supported by Hitler and Mussolini, and more discreetly by the British, US, and French governments, his open acceptance by the West in 1949 revealed yet again the tolerance a democratic world system can have for dictatorships that succeed in preventing revolutions. In 1976, the Basque independence group ETA blew up Franco's handpicked successor. The country was awash in wildcat strikes and protests. Armed actions were multiplying, but there was no vanguardist group with the hope of controlling or representing the whole movement. No figurehead that could be co-opted or destroyed. It was the beginning of the Transition.

Perceiving the inevitability of democratic government, the fascists turned into conservatives, constituting the Popular Party, and in exchange for legalization and a chance at power, they enticed the communists and the socialists into negotiations, giving birth to a new legalized, institutionalized labor union, CCOO, and a new political party, the Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE). The PSOE ruled the country from 1982 to 1996, and in 2010 they were again in power when European Union bureaucrats and bank financiers demanded austerity measures. They quickly complied.

But back in the mid-70s, not everyone jumped on the bandwagon. Many people rejected negotiations with fascists, or rejected any kind of government and any form of capitalism altogether. As the years turned into decades, these holdouts became ever more isolated, until they had been consigned by institutional, judicial, and media marginalization into a reduced political ghetto. By this point, the "irreducibles" could mostly be found within an anarchist movement that was much weaker and more infirm than it had been before the Civil War that put Franco in power.

These anarchists kept fighting, largely developing an antisocial character as a tool to help them resist the psychosocial effects of extreme marginalization, and to facilitate a critique of democratic society as a majoritarian, mediatic control structure. But as revolts started breaking out in neighboring countries, several years *before* the onset of

the economic crisis, some of them started becoming attentive to the possibilities of a widespread social revolt, and they began changing their methods and analyses to be able to encourage and participate in such revolts, in the seemingly unlikely chance that one should break out here. But in a few short years, coinciding with the beginning of the crisis, the revolts multiplied, coming closer—if not geographically, then ideologically.

Before the 15M movement started, Barcelona had already been host to a one-day general strike with majority participation, in which anticapitalist discourses were frequent if not predominant, and which resulted in large scale occupations, rioting, looting, and clashes with police, constituting an important step in the reappropriation of street tactics that would make other victories possible in the following years. A combative May Day protest had abandoned the typical route through the center to snake through several rich neighborhoods, sowing destruction and a small measure of economic revenge.

Just two weeks later, the 15M movement broke out, and its official discourses called for total pacifism and symbolic, citizen protests to achieve a better, healthier democracy through constitutional reform. Almost no mention was made, within this official discourse, of the conditions of daily life, of collective self-defense against austerity and the direct self-organization of our survival. But where did this official discourse come from, and how was it produced in such a huge, heterogeneous crowd?

15M wasn't huge from the beginning. In fact, the first assembly in Barcelona, the first night on Plaça Catalunya, there were just a hundred people present. Some of these were adherents of “Real Democracy Now,” a new group based in Madrid that had produced the original call-out for the countrywide protests and occupations. Their discourse was extremely reformist and made no mention of the growing waves of real protest and social conflict that had been growing in Spain, building off a tradition of struggle that contained a great deal of collective knowledge. This history was absent from their perspective, which was perhaps the only way they could feasibly call for a movement based on pacifism and legal reform. They did, however, make mention of the “Arab Spring,” above all the uprising in Egypt, but only in the most condescending, manipulative way. They described it as a nonviolent movement, and they portrayed it as having already won its objectives, when, as is clear now and was clear then for anyone with a radical perspective, the struggle had only begun.

In that first assembly, they took up an old Trotskyist tactic. Distributing themselves throughout the circle, they tried to push the group to adopt a pre-ordained consensus that matched the directives that had come down from Madrid. But it was clear that these activists were not experienced in such tactics, for they were all wearing identical “Real Democracy Now” t-shirts. The minute someone from the leftwing Catalan independence movement said that the Barcelona occupation should set out on its own path rather than following Madrid, the crowd agreed. There were very few anarchists that first night, but those present also made sure that the reformist activists were not able to limit the movement from the outset.

"Who is in favor?" asks the person with the microphone, her voice booming out from concert-quality speakers. A few thousand people raise their hands.

"Who is against?" Some fifty people raise their hands. Pro forma, a few people make a rapid count. It's doubtful their numbers match up, but it doesn't matter. It is clear that the 'no' votes aren't enough to be considered important. It takes a hundred to block a measure.

"Who wants more debate?" A dozen hands go up. Again, short of minimum necessary to send the proposal back for more debate.

"The proposal passes." The moderators pause a moment before moving on to the next item. The crowd, perhaps ten thousand strong, awaits, sitting with a tolerant but bored patience.

"What did we just vote on?" I hear one young student ask another. Without exaggerating, I think it is one of the most common questions in that month of occupation.

Just a week into this grand experiment in direct democracy, abstention had already carried the day. In most votes, abstention reached proportions that equaled or surpassed the percentage who opt out of voting in the elections and referendums of a typical representative democracy.

It's no surprise. Empowerment was little more than a slogan in the plaza. With even a hundred people in an assembly, not everyone can participate. Once the number of participants grew from the hundreds to the thousands, commissions and subcommissions started popping up like mushrooms after a rain. Experienced moderators began directing the assemblies, putting in practice techniques for a modified consensus process that had been developed during the antiglobalization movement. Proposals were developed and consensed on in commissions, then they had to be clearly read out to be ratified by the general assembly. A hundred people, if I recall correctly, could block a decision, and a smaller number could send it back to the commission for more debate.

To truly have any meaningful influence on a decision, someone would have to spend two to four hours during the day at a commission meeting to draft the proposal, in addition to the several hours that the nighttime general assembly lasted. More difficult proposals were in commission for days or a whole week, and in any case you had to go to the commission meetings every day if you wanted to make sure that the old proposal wasn't erased by a new one. It is clear that only a small number of people with a certain level of economic independence could participate fully in these directly democratic structures. And even if everyone enjoyed economic independence, the structures themselves necessarily function as funnels, limiting and concentrating participation so that a large, heterogeneous mass can produce unified, enumerated, homogeneous decisions. In any given assembly or commission, certain styles of communication and decision-making are favored, while others are disadvantaged.

Direct democracy is just representative democracy on a smaller scale. It inevitably recreates the specialization, centralization, and exclusion we associate with existing

democracies. Within four days, once the crowds exceeded 5,000, the experiment in direct democracy was already rife with false and manipulated consensus, silenced minorities, increasing abstention from voting, and domination by specialists and internal politicians.

In one example, anarchists in the Self-Organization and Direct Democracy Sub-Commission wanted to organize a simple debate about nonviolence. The initiative almost failed because the Sub-Commission needed days to debate and consense on exactly how they wanted to do it. In the end, two people decided to ignore the commission, and joining with another anarchist who was not participating in Self-Organization, the three of them organized a successful talk and debate in just a day, accomplishing what a group of fifty people had failed at over the course of a week.

It was not that easy, however, because of the many obstacles that the democracy activists put in the way of any direct action that did not have their stamp of approval. Twice, we reserved the sound system and the central space in the plaza in order to debate the nonviolence policy that had been forcibly imposed on the whole movement. Each time, our reservation mysteriously disappeared, and after the second time, the sound system was reserved for another event at the same time we had scheduled our debate. Defeated, we decided to hold the debate with just a megaphone on the edge of the plaza. It would be smaller, effectively marginalized, but we were insistent on registering our disagreement with a position that really only a small minority of activists had successfully imposed.

We went to the Activity Commission tent to again inform them of our plans. In a story worthy of Kafka, the kid at the table looked down at his form, a crappy little piece of paper written up in ballpoint pen, and told us we couldn't have our event in the spot where we wanted. "Why?" I asked, getting ready to go ballistic. Was this yet another trick by the new specialists of direct democracy to protect their false consensus around nonviolence?

The response was far more pathetic than I had expected.

"Because our forms are divided into different columns, see, one column for each space in the plaza, but that space over by the staircase, well that's not an official space."

"That's okay, we don't mind, just write it down."

"But, but, I can't. There isn't a column for it."

"Well, make a column."

"Um, I can't."

"Oh Christ, look, which one's open—look, here, 'Pink Space,' just write our event down for the 'Pink Space' and when the time comes we'll just move it."

Within two weeks, without any prior training, the Spanish Revolution had created perfect bureaucrats!

Examples of the manipulation of process abound. In the very beginning, the assembly made the very anarchist decision to not release unitary manifestos speaking for everyone. Subsequently, people spoke their own minds in the assemblies and in informal spaces throughout the day. We anarchists set up a literature table where we distributed open letters and pamphlets, publishing new texts every day. We were content to express ourselves in dialogue with the rest, rather than trying to represent the whole movement. But the grassroots politicians in the mix craved some unitary manifesto, some list of demands with which they could pressure the politicians in power. They only saw the huge crowds as numbers, means to an end.

Subsequently, they formed a Contents Commission in order to formulate the “contents” or the ideas of the movement, as though the whole plaza occupation was just an empty vessel, a mindless beast waiting for the assembly to ratify a list of common beliefs and positions. At the anarchist tent, we debated whether or not to participate in the commissions. Some of us were staunchly against, but as anarchists, we didn't seek consensus. Those who wanted to participate did not need our permission. And at least one good thing came out of their participation: many more examples of the intrinsic corruption and authoritarianism of democracy *at every level*.

When the anarchist participation prevented the Trotskyists, Real Democracy activists, and other grassroots politicians from producing the sort of unitary demands and manifestos that the general assembly had earlier vetoed, the Commission was broken up into a dozen sub-commissions. Every single day, in multiple sub-commissions, the grassroots politicians made the same proposals that had been defeated the day before, until one meeting when none of their opponents were present. The demands were passed through the commission and subsequently ratified by the general assembly, which ratified nearly every proposal passed before it.

On the other hand, after a week of debate, anarchists in the Self-Organization and Direct Democracy Sub-Commission reached a hard-won consensus with the proponents of direct democracy for a proposal to decentralize the assembly, meaning that heterogeneity and differences would be respected, and the assembly would be turned into a space for sharing proposals and initiatives, but not for ratifying them, because, in the new system, everyone would be free to take whatever actions they saw fit, and wouldn't need some bureaucratic permission. The proposal would have meant the utter defeat of the grassroots politicians, because the assembly would no longer be a mass they could control for their own ends. Everyone would be free to organize their own initiatives and make their own decisions. The funnel would be turned into an open field.

The anarchist proposal to decentralize the assembly was voted on twice, and each time achieved overwhelming support, but curiously was defeated on technicalities both times. The moderators hemmed and hawed, delayed and threw up obstacles. When they could no longer prevent a vote, the proposal received a greater majority than perhaps any other item in those weeks. Their tactic of trying to scare people away from the proposal, insisting that it be read several times, that everyone made sure they understand its implications, and that an extra day be granted to reflect on it backfired. In the end, this was one of the few proposals that everyone in the assembly paid attention to, discussed, and voted on with total awareness.

Only about fifty people voted against. The same fifty people voted for more debate, even though they had absolutely no intention of participating in the debate, and the proposal was effectively shelved. It has already achieved a consistent consensus in the Sub-Commission. More debate would change nothing. It would only come back before the general assembly where it would be blocked again. Thanks to direct democracy, fifty people could control twenty thousand.

This action demonstrated that we were right, we had lots of support, and the assembly was a sham—that, in itself, was a victory. But direct democracy cannot be reformed from within. It has to be destroyed.

Many people took the commissions and the general assembly more seriously than they warranted. True, fruitful debates in groups of fifty or a hundred people took place in the commissions, and the assembly partially served as a platform for strangers to air their grievances and construct a sense of collectivity. But the only worthwhile position was to subvert those structures of bureaucracy and centralization, to criticize the power dynamics they created and create something more vibrant and free in the shadow of the general assembly.

The plaza occupation consisted of much more than frustratingly bureaucratic structures. The official center, in fact, was tiny compared to the chaotic margins. These margins were all the spaces in the plaza outside of the commission tents and the couple hours of general assembly every evening. All throughout the day, the plaza was an extensive, chaotic space of self-organization, where people met their logistical needs, sometimes going through the official channels, sometimes not. There was a library, a garden, an international translation center, a kitchen with big stoves and solar cookers, and at any time there were a couple concerts, workshops, debates, and massage parlors going on, along with innumerable smaller conversations, debates, and encounters. People drank, argued, celebrated, slept, made out, made friends.

It was chaos, in the literal sense that patterns emerged and faded, and there was no central space from which everything could be perceived, much less controlled. Consider the officially recognized program: one only had to go to the Activities Commission tent to see the whole schedule. From that one point, a police detective could register all the events taking place, what was being talked about, what was being organized. A new person wishing to take part could come and learn where to get involved, their introduction taking the form of a piece of paper, a schedule, rather than a new friend. A grassroots politician could monopolize the more important spaces and times, giving priority to certain meetings or events and marginalizing others (or they could even make undesired events disappear, as happened with our nonviolence debate). It is absolutely no coincidence that the interests of state control from without, the interests of hierarchical control from within, and the interests of impersonal or rational efficiency all converge in the structures of direct democracy.

In contrast, the unofficial margins were much livelier and more dynamic. Most new friendships and complicities, most meaningful, face-to-face conversations, and most of the satisfying communal experiences that kept people coming back occurred in the chaotic margins. A handful of people could organize a debate or a small concert without having to exhaust themselves going through commissions and subcommissions. Saving their energies for what really mattered, the actual activity, a

few individuals could prepare a quality event on their own initiative, and a crowd of a hundred or even five hundred people might spontaneously gather and take part.

Even during the general assemblies, the chaotic margins could not be extinguished. Many thousands of people boycotted the votes. Some of us refused on principal, as anarchists, to legitimate such farcical exercises of authority in the name of the people, a collective whole that was only effaced by the artificial imposition of unity. Many others didn't vote because they found the assembly boring (much like the child in the classroom who daydreams, not because she is unintelligent, but because she is, in fact, more intelligent, because she is not engaged by the authoritarian, pacifying method of education). Others because, once the crowds had surpassed fifty thousand, they couldn't get close enough to hear. The margins of the plaza became an unruly country of whispered conversations, criticisms, and occasional heckling.

Weren't all these other spaces also decision-making spaces? Don't we make decisions in every moment of our lives? Why is the formalized, masculine space of an assembly more legitimate than the common kitchen, where many decisions and conversations also take place? Why is it more legitimate than the hundred clusters of small conversations and debates that take place during the day, on a small scale, allowing people to express themselves more intimately and more fully?

Even if we participate in every formal decision, are these the same decisions we would arrive at in spaces of comfort, spaces of life rather than of politics? Is it possible that our formal selves become a mere representation, a manipulation produced during a few boring hours of meetings that is used to control us during all the other moments of our lives?

“Don't do that,” says the self-appointed leader to the person who has started to spraypaint a bank, “this is a peaceful protest.” The former speaks with all the legitimacy of a popular mandate. Supposedly, there is consensus on the question of nonviolence, for this protest was organized by the plaza assembly. Yet, what kind of consensus needs to be continually reinforced? Why is it that people who took part in the assembly so frequently rebelled against the decisions that supposedly represented them?

Needless to say, the proponents of direct democracy and its official structures did whatever they could to suppress the chaotic zones in the plaza. The anarchist tent, for example, never had official permission, and on the first day we set up, they tried to kick us out. We made it clear that they would have to use force to get us out, and then everyone would see what their democracy consisted of. They would have done it, if we hadn't been numerous, and fierce, and honed by the years of streetfighting behind us. Instead, they set up some commission tents on our spot early the next morning, but we just found another spot.

The “Convivencia” Commission (“Living Together,” a classist, often racist term that is systematically used by the city's administrators) busied itself trying to eject people who were drinking in the plaza—but not the young white students, only the older, typically immigrant homeless men who were sleeping in the plaza. They also repeatedly tried kicking out the undocumented immigrants who had to work selling beers or purses in the streets, and who often had to run from the police. The

Commission members tried to deny these immigrants access to the safe space we all had created in the plaza, until some of us got up in their faces, called them racists, and threatened them with physical violence.

Calling the 15M movement imperfect doesn't cut it. All the oppressive dynamics, all the habits of passivity and authoritarianism in our society followed us into the plaza. But there, in that collective space, we had the opportunity to confront them. The structures of direct democracy only masked or exacerbated those dynamics. But those structures were a feeble attempt to control the underlying chaos. Even some anarchists failed to see this. Like many others, they got distracted by the aura of officiality, the titles and processes, commissions, schedules, and diagrams. But all that was a farce. The aura of formal democracy sought to control our attentions just the same as it sought to control our participation. Next time, hopefully, we will know not to take it seriously.

In time, the 15M movement subsided, blending back into the social conflicts that gave birth to it, and that continued unabated. For a time, many anarchists in Barcelona participated with thousands of other people in the neighborhood assemblies that replaced the Plaça Catalunya occupation. Home defense protests against foreclosures gained pace. There were occupations of schools and hospitals, against austerity measures. General strikes and riots. Protests against new repressive laws. Waves of arrests and counterprotests. The struggle continued.

The rise of these movements taught us a number of things. Their origins confirmed certain anarchist theories about social conflict. They were not mechanically triggered by material conditions, as they tended to precede the crisis or the worst economic effects of austerity. I would say that material conditions do not exist, only people's interpretations of their conditions. (In fact, the whole category of the "material" seems more like a crude attempt to appear scientific, though it really just falls back on a dichotomy that stems from the origins of Western, Christian civilization.) The true triggers of the movements and revolts were a collective empathy for or seduction by revolts happening in other countries, a collective sense of insecurity or evaluation that the State had become weak, a collective outrage in response to government measures seen as insulting to people's dignity and threatening to their wellbeing, and a collective interpretation or prediction of worsening conditions.

Institutional responses showed us that governments often react clumsily to emerging movements, provoking growth and radicalization, whereas reformist or power-hungry participants are the most effective and astute in establishing statist organization within the movements and preventing them from developing revolutionary perspectives.

Additionally, a number of hypotheses regarding pacifism were confirmed: our society trains people to uncritically favor pacifism in social movements, and the predominant current of pacifism moves progressively away from a practice of social change to a practice of total pacification; that media, police, and would-be movement leaders conspire to enforce pacifism; and that the natural evolution of movements leads them

to break with nonviolence and develop more forceful tactics. But events also gave us the opportunity to see how would-be leaders of social movements, if the crowd leaves them too far behind, will abandon their commitment to nonviolence and support or at least passively condone certain illegal or destructive tactics.

In contrast, the leaders' commitment to democracy runs deeper, and it was a shared esteem, a blind support for the values of democracy that best allowed them to assert their leadership over what had been an anarchic movement.

Real Democracy Now did an excellent job of formulating a mediocre politics defined by its populism, victimism, reformism, and moralism. By using common, value-laden terms such as “democracy” (good) and “corruption” (bad), they created a discursive trap that garnered overwhelming support for all their proposals while deflecting or falsely including proposals that went further. Their stated minimums included revolutionary language and the highly popular sentiment that “we're going to change everything,” while offering a ladder of demands that basically signaled the prices, from cheap to expensive, at which they would sell out. It started with reform of the electoral law, passed through laws for increased oversight of the bankers, and reached, at its most radical extreme, a refusal to pay back the bailout loans. Everything was structured around demands communicated to the existing government, but prettied up in populist language. Thus, the popular, anarchist slogan *Ningú ens representa*, “No one represents us,” was distorted within their program to mean, “None of the politicians currently in power represent us: we want better ones who will.”

However, to carry out this balancing act, they did have to adopt vaguely antiauthoritarian organizing principles inherited from the antiglobalization movement, such as a commitment to open assemblies and a rejection of spokespersons and political parties. Proposals centered on direct action or sentiments containing a rejection of government and capitalism were easily neutralized within this ideological framework. The former would be paternalistically tolerated as cute little side projects eclipsed by the major projects of reformist demands, and the latter would be applauded, linked back to the popular rhetoric already in use, and corrupted to mean an opposition to current politicians or specific bankers.

The only way to challenge this co-optation of popular rage was to focus critique on democracy itself. We quickly discovered that the idea of direct democracy was the major theoretical barrier that protected the existing representative democracy, and direct democracy activists, including anarchists, were the critical bridge between the parasitic grassroots politicians and their social host body.

The experience in the plaza taught us in practice what we had already argued in theory: that direct democracy recreates representative democracy; that it is not the features that can be reformed (campaign finance, term limits, popular referendums), but the most central ideals of democracy that are inherently authoritarian. The beautiful thing about the encampment in the plaza was that it had multiple centers for creation and initiative-taking. The central assembly functioned to suppress this; had it succeeded, the occupation would have died much sooner. It did not succeed, thanks in part to anarchist intervention.

The central assembly did not give birth to a single initiative. What it did, rather, was to grant legitimacy to initiatives worked out in the commissions; but this process must not be portrayed in positive terms. This granting of legitimacy was in fact a robbing of the legitimacy of all the decisions made in the multiple spaces throughout the plaza not incorporated into an official commission. Multiple times, self-appointed representatives of this or that commission tried to suppress spontaneous initiatives that did not bear their stamp of legitimacy. At other times, commissions, moderators, and internal politicians specifically contravened decisions made in the central assembly, when doing so would favor further centralization. This is not a question of corruption or bad form; *democracy always subverts its own mechanisms in the interests of power.*

Again and again in the plaza, we saw a correlation between democracy and the paranoia of control: the need for all decisions and initiatives to pass through a central point, the need to make the chaotic activity of a multitudinous occupation legible from a single vantage point—the control room, as it were. This is a statist impulse. The need to impose legibility on a social situation—and social situations are always chaotic—is shared by the democracy activist, who wishes to impose a brilliant new organizational structure; the tax collector, who needs all economic activity to be visible so it can be reappropriated; and the policeman, who desires a panopticon in order to control and punish. I also found that numerous anarchists of various ideological stripes were unable to see the crucial theoretical difference between the oppositions *representational democracy vs. direct democracy/consensus* and *centralization vs. decentralization*, because the first and second terms of both pairs have been turned into synonyms through misuse. For this reason, I have decided to rehabilitate the term “chaos” in my personal usage, as it is a frightening term no populist in the current context would use and abuse, and it relates directly to mathematical theories that express the kind of shifting, conflictual, constantly regenerating, acephalous organization anarchists are calling for.

II. Ossification

Fall 2015.

Junts pel Sí, the pro-independence coalition that combines the major rightwing and leftwing political parties in Catalunya, has won the regional elections. Together with the CUP—a grassroots activist platform that makes decisions in assemblies, and which emerged from the social movements to seize over 10% of the vote—they have a majority in the Catalan parliament, and they have announced that they will make a unilateral declaration of independence, turning the parliament into a constituent assembly for a new constitution, breaking away from Spain. Meanwhile, the Popular Party and Socialist Party, which until four years ago ruled the country in an unshakeable two-party system, threaten legal action from Madrid. Podemos, an activist political party modeled on Syriza, promises a referendum on the question of

independence for Catalunya, the Basque country, Galicia, if only they are voted into power. They hint at the possibility of a new constitution, transforming Spain into a nation of nations. The newspapers and the TV are full of it every day. Everyone waits, expectantly.

In the spring, activist platforms, some of them barely a year old, won the elections in Madrid, Valencia, and Barcelona. In Donostia, the newly legalized Basque independence party, Bildu, was already in power. These constitute four of Spain's most important cities, including the two largest.

The new mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, had been a housing activist who once got arrested in a highly publicized act of civil disobedience to stop an eviction. People everywhere talk about whether she will deliver her promises and protect all the families who can no longer pay mortgages from getting kicked out their houses. Will she create dignified employment? Will she halt the ravages of tourism that are remaking the city? Everyone waits, expectantly.

A new anarchist text from Barcelona, “A Wager on the Future,” argues that these new political parties are the result of the death of the 15M movement. The would-be leaders did not succeed in directly turning the movement into a new political party, although they certainly tried. Across the country, hundreds of thousands of people gave self-organization in assemblies a chance. And on the face of it, they achieved exactly nothing. A couple years later, in a climate of general disappointment, passivity, and demobilization, Podemos and the other new political parties, like Barcelona en Comú, were formed. Preexisting activist platforms-turned-political-parties, like the CUP or Compromís in Valencia, geared up to seize a bigger slice of pie. The few remaining neighborhood assemblies or 15M assemblies, bare skeletons, became recruiting tools for one party or another.

Spanish democracy has been regenerated. People, having failed themselves, are once again ready to place their trust in politicians, as long as they are new faces making new promises. Direct democracy has revealed how fully it transforms back into representative democracy as it scales up.

At this juncture, we can see how direct democracy protected and revitalized representative democracy. Coherent with its emphasis on formal, superficial, and regulated participation in an alienated space of politics—the central assembly as the arbiter of all social decision-making—the direct democracy movement pushed for a set of demands based on institutional reform and social consensus.

What does this mean in the details of everyday life and struggle? Like all other forms of government, direct democracy preserves and even celebrates politics as an alienated sphere of life; in fact, politics—the management of the *polis*—is in its origins directly democratic. In one of the original alienations, people are made spectators to the decisions that determine how they live.

Assemblies are a great way to make certain decisions in specific situations, but direct democracy gives precedence to the general assembly over the affinity group, over the

kitchen, over the study circle, over the workshop, and over a thousand other spaces in which we organize ourselves. This is an exact parallel to how all governments bestow an exclusive legitimacy on whatever form of decision-making they control within institutional channels. A government run by charismatic statesmen will give precedence to a congress or parliament, a government run by technocrats will give precedence to central banks and state commissions... and a government run by grassroots activists on their way to professionalization will give precedence to the assembly.

In one of the genre-setting revolutions of the modern era, the Bolsheviks made use of the soviets—which functioned as democratic assemblies and which contemporary anarchists like Voline pointed out were ripe for co-optation—until they had consolidated their bureaucratic state enough to no longer need the earlier structure. The compatibility between what was a direct or at least a federated democracy and the “democratic centralism” that latched onto the former and took it over should not escape us. It's not ancient history, but a pattern that keeps repeating.

Direct democracy differentiates itself from other forms of government through its emphasis on the principle of “self-government.” Anti-authoritarians who advocate direct democracy might avoid this term, but in fact it is quite accurate. Direct democracy involves people in their own government, which is to say their alienation from social decision-making. We can see this in how people in Plaça Catalunya ended up abstaining or going through the motions in the nightly assemblies. By being given an opportunity for self-government, they were being reeducated, in a very direct, accurate, and hands-on way, as to exactly what government means. It is no coincidence that in the aftermath, a huge proportion of these masses were once again ready to support a political party and reproduce all the same problems of disempowerment and alienation that had brought them out into the plazas in the first place.

When we anarchists direct our anger and criticism at the proponents of direct democracy, it is not because we are so dogmatic, so infatuated with navel-gazing or with purifying our tiny spaces of dissidence that we would rather attack an ally than go up against the real bad guys in the banks, board rooms, and parliaments. On the contrary, it is because the movement for direct democracy constitutes the most effective appendage of the State within our struggles for liberation. After all, we are not victims. We live in an oppressive society because every day we help to reproduce that oppression. It is for this reason we criticize. Just as a limited “self-management” in the workplace turns you into your own boss, self-government turns you into your own ruler, and there is nothing sadder than being the active agent in your own alienation. In sum, self-government means being your own worst enemy.

That is why it was logical for a direct democracy movement to advocate demands based on institutional reform and social consensus: because the movement's sights were already fixed on seizing centralized power—the power that stems from our alienation and powerlessness—rather than destroying it. Rather than proposing an end to the ruling institutions, direct democracy activists proposed ways to fix them. Rather than seeking the abolition of hierarchical society, rather than choosing sides in the antagonisms of class, colonialism, and patriarchy, they sought social unity. After all,

society is the machine that politicians wish to drive, so it makes no sense for would-be politicians to try to dismantle it.

This reformist bent diverted the movement from a collision course with authority. The values of direct democracy prevented a more radical conflict that had been brewing, as seen in the riots during May Day, the general strikes, and so on. And it is that conflict which serves as a laboratory, as a cauldron for revolution. By limiting the conflict, the movement for democracy put a handicap on our collective learning process and robbed us of the experiences that might have offered a glimpse of a revolutionary horizon, one without rulers, without exploitation, without domination.

The reformist promises of the would-be leaders achieved something else. By redirecting attention to the question of the bail-outs, public funds, government corruption, and so on, they distracted people from the vital possibility of responding to austerity on the terrain of daily life, with the collective self-organization of our needs. And because no reform was achieved through the assemblies, most people experienced them as failures. Interesting and inspiring, but failures nonetheless. Surely the pragmatists were right in saying that self-organization on the social scale is an idealistic utopia.

This bait-and-switch blinded many people to the advances that the assemblies *did* achieve. They constituted an important first step—meeting one another, starting the great social conversation—towards the self-organization of life. And they served as a tool to increase our power, our ability to take over public space and transform it into communal space. In the struggle for our lives, this is a huge victory. But the thinking behind direct democracy does not propose putting power back in our hands on any more than a symbolic, formalistic level, because for self-government to work, power must remain centralized, alienated.

We can blame democracy and its naïve proponents for selling out this stillborn revolution, for failing to realize, after so many similar failures before them, that revolution is never pragmatic or cautious, that it must carried beyond our horizons into the country of the unpredictable, the uncertain, the furthest bounds of our imagination, or it will die.

But we were not passive spectators to this failure. I think that on the whole, we—here I simply refer to myself and the friends I was in closest contact with in those days—quickly learned how to keep would-be politicians from taking over or centralizing the new assemblies. Or in the case of the Plaça Catalunya assembly, which quickly became too massive to function in an empowering way, we learned how to make its failings evident and how to draw out the potential of other spaces of organization and encounter. Often, this meant opposing the model of the centralized assembly based on unitary decision-making with our own model based on difference, on plurality, on multiple pathways of decision-making, and on total freedom of action, meaning that anyone could do what they wanted without permission from an assembly, as long as we cultivated mutual respect so that the inevitable conflicts between the different currents of activity were constructive rather than fatal.

What we did not learn how to do, I now see in hindsight, was to launch proposals that a large part of the assembly could get excited by and participate in; proposals arising from a radical analysis; proposals for solutions to austerity based in direct action and the immediate self-organization of our needs, outside and against the impositions of capitalism.

As the aforementioned text argues, true, it is not our responsibility as anarchists to come up with solutions for the rest of society, but if we ourselves are not capable of figuring out how to use heterogeneous assemblies to advance anti-authoritarian projects based on mutual aid in response to people's real needs, how can we expect anyone else to do so?

It is in this sense that the assemblies ended up being useless. No one dared take the step of using them to fulfill our collective needs. Capitalism and democratic government were waiting, as always, to step in and offer their own solutions.

This failure could be the subject for an entire book, or more appropriately, for a collective learning process involving thousands of dreamers and revolutionaries and spanning generations. In conclusion, as a simple gesture to point out other ways forward from this impasse, I will mention two components I found lacking: imagination and skills.

Imagination. It is no coincidence that today's revolutionary movements lack imaginaries of other worlds, nor that a great part of capitalist production supplants imagination among its consumers, offering imaginaries that become more elaborate every day, more visually stimulating, more interactive, so that people no longer have to imagine anything for themselves because a thousand worlds and fantasies already come prepackaged. All the old fantasies that used to set us dreaming have now been fixed in Hollywood productions, with convincing actors, fully depicted terrains, and emotive soundtracks. Nothing is left for us to recreate, only to consume.

In capitalism's marketplace of ideas, the only imaginaries that describe our future are apocalypses or the science fiction colonization of outer space. Incidentally, the latter is the final frontier for capitalist expansion, now that this planet is rapidly getting used up, and the former is the only alternative capitalism is willing to concede us outside of its dominion. We are being encouraged to imagine ourselves in the only worlds capitalism itself can conceive.

The revolutionaries of a hundred years ago continuously dreamed and schemed of a world without the State and without capitalism. Some of them made the mistake of turning their dreams into blueprints, dogmatic guidelines that in practice functioned as yardsticks by which to measure deviance. But today we face a much greater problem: the absence of revolutionary imaginaries and the near total atrophy of the imagination in ourselves and in the rest of society. And the imagination is the most revolutionary organ in our body, because it is the only one capable of creating new worlds, of

travelling outside capitalism and state authority, of enabling us to surpass the limits of insurrection that have become so evident in these last years.

Today, I know extremely few people who can imagine what anarchy might look like. The uncertainty is not the problem. As I hinted earlier, uncertainty is one of the fundamentals of chaotic organization, and it is only the authoritarian neurosis of states that oblige us to impose certainty on an ever shifting reality. The problem is that this lack of imagination constitutes an absence from the world. A vital part of ourselves is no longer there, as it used to be, on the cusp of the horizon, on the threshold between dark and light, discerning, modulating, and greeting each new character that comes into our lives. The world of domination no longer has to fend with our Worlds Turned Upside Down, the various forms of heaven and reward promised by the authorities no longer have to bear the ridicule of our Big Rock Candy Mountains, and the great shadows cast by the structures of control no longer cloak a thousand possibilities of all the things we could build upon their ruins; now they are only shadows, empty and obscure.

Our prospects, however, are not irremediably bleak. Imagination can always be renewed and reinvigorated, but we must emphasize the radical importance of this work if people are again to create, share, and discuss new possible worlds or profound transformations to this one. I would argue that this task is even more important than counter-information. Someone who desires revolution can always educate themselves, but someone who cannot even conceive a transformation will be impervious to the best documented arguments.

Skills. Complementary to our lack of imagination is a lack of skills, though not so complete as the former. Since World War II, deskilling has been an essential feature of capitalism. The skills we need to survive in the capitalist marketplace are completely redundant, utterly useless for survival in any other mode. Without the skills to build, to heal, to fix, to transform, to feed, mutual aid and self-organization cannot be anything more than superficial, hollow slogans. What are we organizing? Just another meeting, another protest? What sort of aid are we mutualizing? Sharing our misery, sharing the garbage that capitalism hasn't yet figured out how to commercialize?

Fortunately, some people still know how to heal, how to tend, how to feed, how to build, and more people are starting to learn, but on the whole, these are not treated as revolutionary activities. Nor, for the most part, are they deployed in a revolutionary way. After all, anyone can learn natural therapies or gardening and turn it into a business, and capitalism will happily oblige such a limited reskilling, as long as there are enough wealthy consumers to serve as patrons.

It is only when these skills are put at the service of a revolutionary imagination and a collective antagonism towards the dominant institutions that the possibility of creating a new world arises. Simultaneously, we must let our imaginaries change and grow as they come in contact with our constructive skills and the antagonism we cultivate. And the practices of negation, sabotage, and collective self-defense that have been learned in that space of antagonism must be put at the service of our constructive

projects and our imaginaries, rather than masquerading as the frontline, or the only serious element of struggle.

The regeneration of democracy, here and elsewhere, has given a new lease on life to the structures of domination that so many people were losing faith in. Grim futures loom, and if anything we are only getting farther away from any possibility of revolution. But the chaotic reality of the universe offers us a promise: nothing is predictable, no future is written, and the most rigid structures are broken, ridiculed, and forgotten in the wild, rushing river of time.

Seemingly impervious orders crumble, and new forms of life emerge. We have every reason to learn from our mistakes, renew our conviction in the theories that events have confirmed, and once again offer an invitation to any who would partake in this dreamer's quest for total freedom. The easy solutions and false promises offered by the self-styled pragmatists, some of them sincere, others hungering for power, lead us into a defeat that we have suffered too many times before. People will learn to recognize this, if we don't let the memory fade.