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# “This is What Democracy Looks Like”: Is Representation Under Siege?

Jose Pedro Zuquete

## **Abstract**

Since the end of the 20th century loud calls for reinstating the rule of the people in liberal democracies have been heard, particularly in but not limited to alter-globalization circles devoted to creating another world. This trend has been strengthened in the passage to the 21st century and this article traces the influences behind it, as well as the motivations and ways in which representative democracy is rejected by activists in favor of a new system that fulfills what is perceived as the original promise of democracy to bring power to all the people. The article concludes with a discussion on the consequences of a re-energized notion and practice of “rule by the demos” to liberal democracy.

**KEYWORDS:** antiglobalization, occupy movements, anarchism

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“When the Reverence of Government is lost, it is better than when it is found.”

- William Blake

## INTRODUCTION

“This is what democracy looks like!” was chanted during the anti-WTO protests that rocked the Pacific Northwest— forever known in activist circles as “the Battle of Seattle”—as the 20th century was drawing to a close. Such slogan is also the title of a widely circulated documentary that, to sympathizers, paints a “passionate portrait of a week that changed the world” (2000). Whether or not actually did so, it certainly helped to jump start, at least in the eyes of public opinion, the anti-globalization movement that became a permanent feature of the political, economic, and social landscape of the young 21st century.

Admittedly, this movement of protest, often defined against “free-market, corporate-driven or neoliberal globalization,” has not remained unchanged in its short history; its own designation has gone from *anti-* to *alter-*globalization, or Global Justice Movement. If at the outset the “movement of movements” (as it is also known) was still, to a certain degree, dependent on calls for mobilization from different organizations, it has steadily evolved into a decidedly more diffuse, fluid, and relatively unpredictable net of rebellion that has redefined activism and popular mobilization at a transnational level (Bringel and Muñoz, 2010).

If the terrain of contestation is marked by a multiplicity of struggles, functioning without a center or adhering to a single blueprinted future, it is impossible to ignore that all this resistance (or, more accurately, offensive) against the global order is made in the name of one single entity: the people. The overriding theme is one of “giving back to the people” the power, sovereignty, rule, or rights that since the dawn of liberal-democratic societies were (according to one variant of this theme) taken away by oligarchies or (according to another variant) never even fulfilled. The staying power of this theme in counter-global networks clashes with Alain Touraine’s assertion that the alter-globalization movement has not succeeded in defining “in whose name” it is fighting (2007, 27). The alternative world may not be clearly defined but, in order to achieve it, the dynamic solidarity of the powerless people against the powerful elite is felt by alter-globalization movement faithful as a decisive factor in achieving success. Only then the rise of a new people-powered age will be more than just a possibility, a desire, or an exercise in wishful thinking. It is not a coincidence that the “global imaginary” (Steger 2009) of alter-globalization circles is full of narratives and images of popular revolt, rebellion, or uprising. The exact meaning of such calls may vary among activists, but they are, nevertheless, essential to an understanding of their struggle for “another world.”

This loose coalition of militants advocating a paradigm shift in politics, both at national and at global levels, often equates the re-establishment of people-power with the advent of a “true democracy” that rejects *and* transcends the dominant as-of-yet representative democracy. With this challenge in mind, this study traces the influences, concepts, practices, and ultimate consequences of this appeal to “the people” for contemporary liberal-democratic societies.

#### THAT ANARCHIST FEELING

Owing to the variety and heterogeneity of the struggles that characterize the 21st century rejection of the political and economic status quo, it is logical that not all involved define themselves primarily as alter-globalization activists. Moreover, the grievances and motivations behind such struggles naturally vary, and there is no comprehensive ideology or clear-cut plan of action to overturn the global capitalist order. The left may have indeed “three faces” in contemporary transnational activism--social-democratic, Marxist and anarchist-autonomist--that conflict but also coordinate together (Reitan 2011). With these caveats in mind, it is possible, nevertheless, to identify an anarchist bent in the ethos, strategies, and mental map of this diffuse network of rebellion.

It is not uncommon to find references, both in academia and in activist circles, to the influence of anarchism on the alter-globalization movement. The “sensibility” of the movement has been described as anarchist (Epstein 2001), while anarchism itself has been “revived” by the movement of movements (Williams 2007). Even though anarchism is a notoriously amorphous school of thought or political philosophy, and many activists do not profess to dance to the anarchist drum, alter-globalization narratives emphasize a view that has been at the very heart of anarchist anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian thinking for centuries. In order to reach a more humane society, the state and capitalism must be confronted through free association, mutual aid, and direct democracy. This is the driving engine of any potential emancipation from an inhuman neoliberal globalization; from this theoretical insight derives the appeal that direct action (which can be expressed in myriad ways but always reveals to participants the liberating feeling of taking control of one’s existence) has in alter-globalization circles.

Anarchism has always been uncompromising and, ultimately, oriented toward revolution rather than reform (Milstein, 2010). Further, even though there is a cacophony of voices within alter-globalization movements, it is hard to ignore the allure that revolution has in the hearts and minds of many activists; they may demand reforms to the system, but all too often these demands develop and widen to outright calls for turning the world upside down. Hence, the all-pervading sense among activists is that they are demanding, and helping to create, the new, the

not-yet: a new society, a new way of living, and even a new relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds. At the very center of this search for a new paradigm is the rejection of the principle of representation as a *basic condition* for the coming of a liberatory society, free of hierarchy, domination and oppression.

#### MISTAKEN FOR DEMOCRACY

The insistence within alter-globalization networks on the need to reestablish the lost link between people-power and democracy has even led to a suggested renaming of the whole alter-globalization enterprise as a “demoglobalization” (Tavares 2011). In fact, at the core of the increasing rejection of the current political status quo is the notion that democracy, in its original essence, means the rule by the Demos: “The term carries a simple and purely political claim that the people rule themselves, that the whole rather than the part or an Other is politically sovereign” (Brown 2011, 45). In Albert Camus’s philosophy of politics, “the rebel far from making an absolute of history, rejects and disputes it, in the name of a concept that he has of his own nature.” Accordingly, “he refuses his condition, rejects and disputes it, and his condition to a large extent is historical” (1956, 289-90). For the rebellious alter-globalization activists the sin of democracy is historical, meaning that it was caused by historical factors and contingencies that ended up corrupting the original nature, and expanding the power, of democracy itself.

The most major of all such historical mistakes was the association between liberalism and democracy. In fact, particularly since the last quarter of the 20th century left-wing advocates of what came to be known as “radical democracy” identified the hybrid nature of liberal democracy as the reason of many of its deficiencies and shortcomings. The main argument refers to the age-old tension between the liberal tradition’s emphasis on legalism, political values, and individual rights *and* the democratic tradition’s (and, according to some, the democratic promise) that has at its core the notion of popular sovereignty. The various proponents of this school aim, in one way or another, at deepening the democratic side of the equation, i.e., democratizing liberalism (making it more inclusive of the people in political action), without advocating the abandonment of political representation or a new political form of society (Little and Lloyd 2000).

Within the alter-globalization network a pervasive view is that from this original sin (the linking of liberalism and democracy) derives the gradual deterioration of the sovereignty of a demos that has been progressively overcome by an ever-expanding liberalist philosophy in the organization of human affairs. This historical process culminates, in the minds of activists, in a “democracy” that it is only an empty shell that has been mutilated and removed as far away from its

original meaning as humanly possible: a “democratic” regime that is a *de facto* political, financial, and media-driven oligarchy. In this regime of, by, and for elites, electoral politics and political representation are mere tools of the powerful to sustain, legitimize, and manufacture its own rule and “democratic” take-over of the sovereignty of the people. Hence, when a writer describes democracy as a “class ideology” that justifies systems that allow a tiny minority to govern, “and to govern without the people,” she is evoking a widespread view within critics of contemporary “oligarchic” democracies (Ross 2011, 97). The belief that in actual existing democracies the people is absent, nowhere to be seen, far away from the centers of decision, and is not taken into account – except when its vote is needed (so that, at least nominally, the oligarchic system of governance can still call itself “democratic”) – fuels the vision of representational politics as a farce that needs to be indicted, defeated, and surpassed.

Unlike theorists of radical democracy, alter-globalization militants are committed to the idea and to putting into effect the remedy for healing a corrupted, fraudulent democracy: wholly associated, in good anarchist (unconscious or not,<sup>1</sup>) fashion, with direct democracy. This pro-direct democracy outlook can be seen across the movement, both in self-professed anarchists of many stripes and in writers who do not carry, or even associate with, the red-and-black flag. There is a widespread demand – often conveyed in vivid terms – for a new politics, of which direct democracy is a centerpiece.

But the consolidation of such a politics entails, as a necessary requisite, an ideological confrontation with representative democracy. And this is done in various ways. Above all, the liberal-democratic principle that equates democracy with regular and competing elections is viewed as insufficient and, ultimately, a source of the evil that affects contemporary societies, because it perpetuates the domination of elites over the people. It is often argued that this form of democracy is “misrepresentative” (Solnit 2006), a “formal democracy, based on periodically electing politicians and letting them make the decisions, [and is] woefully shallow ... a con even” (Baird 2010). That is why, “no matter how enlightened leaders may be, they are governing as tyrants nonetheless, since we – ‘the people’ – are servile to their decisions” (Milstein 2010, 100). Parliament (or Congress), as *the* institution of representative politics, is the symbol of what democracy is not, a mechanism for the powerful to neutralize the demands made by the powerless. Hence, “parliament is a means of diffusing democracy, of channeling real struggles into a safe dead-end” (Doyle 2011).

The belief that the utter failure of representative democracy is becoming self-evident to the general public is pervasive: “Hopefully, the era of representative government is drawing to a close. There seems to be a massive

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<sup>1</sup> In *Anarchism: A Beginner's Guide*, Oxford: One World, Ruth Kinna mentions the “apparent ‘unconscious’” anarchism of the anti-globalization movement, (2005, 155).

recognition emerging that governments and electoral politics don't do anything for us, but are just institutions for the ruling class" (Herod 2011). Or, as the manifesto of the French Invisible Committee puts it, "The sphere of political representation has come to a close. From left to right, it's the same nothingness striking the pose of an emperor or a savior, the same sales assistants adjusting their discourse according to the findings of the latest surveys" (2009, 23). Such recognition is the first step to pump up the long-overdue empowerment of the people. As the insurrectionary anarchist collective CrimethInc states, "Those who are totally disenchanted with representative democracy ... can rest assured that if we all learn how to apply deliberately the power that each of us has, the question of which politician is elected to office will become a moot point" (CrimethInc Ex-Workers' Collective. 2005). The reenchantment of the public mind requires a new way of doing politics.

If there is a dominant theme in the alter-globalization quest for such a new politics, it is the return to the original spirit of democracy.<sup>2</sup> Democratic theorist Robert Dahl once wrote, "Accustomed as we are to accepting the legitimacy of representative democracy we may find it difficult to understand why the Greeks were so passionately attached to assembly democracy" (Dahl 1998, 103). Many activists not only do not believe in the legitimacy of indirect democracy but also devote themselves to proving, with words and actions, that direct democracy is the only possible hope for liberating human beings from a politics of oppression. The "democratic renewal of the system ... one that we build from the ground up," involves, in the words of an activist, "devising systems through which communities can organize themselves. These involve direct democracy, decentralization and radical participation" (Ainger 2003, 12).

But this rebirth of the political system is not an *Ex Nihilo* creation; it is anchored in historical experience. "Is there buried in the history of democracy a more radical model in which citizens rule themselves?" inquires a dissident voice (Swift 2011). An anarchist writer is adamant that "it is not a matter of reinventing democracy," owing to the fact that "direct democracy has been around forever. Whenever oppressed peoples manage to get a little free from their rulers, they start practicing direct democracy (Herod 2011). Activists adhere to an interpretation of history that emphasizes those episodes in which direct democracy has been tried and experienced, which gives them an alternative understanding of reality than the one promoted by the still dominant liberal-democratic paradigm. In alter-globalization narratives it is common to find acclaim, for example, for the Ancient Greek practice of direct democracy, medieval communes, the American Revolution of 1774-1776, the activities of the

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<sup>2</sup> This pro-direct democracy disposition can also be seen in the still incipient movement that sees in Wikidocracy, or Web 2.0 democracy, a way to radically increase popular participation and input in the procedures, mechanisms and content of laws and policies.

Sans-Culottes during the French Revolution, the Paris Commune of 1871, the Spanish Revolution of 1936, and, more recently, the creation of Zapatista communities, the 2001 popular rebellion in Argentina, and the experiments in direct democracy in the city of El Alto in Bolivia. These experiments in self-governance, no matter how flawed or fleeting, or in some cases ultimately unsuccessful, serve as proof nonetheless that another democracy is possible; “they supply messages in bottles to future generations that directly democratic, confederated ways of making social, economic, political, and cultural decisions are a tangible scenario” (Milstein 2010, 121). These episodes show that “it is realistic to demand what others find impossible” (Marshall 2010, 705). This alternative history gives not only inspiration but also, more importantly, legitimacy to activists’ struggles in the present. No wonder that when an editor of the anarchist cultural subversive magazine *Adbusters* called for a new revolution in America to overturn the “plutocracy” that robbed the people’s sovereignty, he made it appealing to the example of the first American Revolution: “America’s founding fathers were in the same situation as we are today,” combating an illegitimate government, while defending the “rule of the people” – which needs, then as now, to be reinstated (White 2011).

#### “DOING” DEMOCRACY

The politics of alter-globalization does not limit itself to theory, no matter how insightful, or to past experiences, no matter how inspiring: they are focused on experiencing today such visions of a people-powered age. This argument is reiterated within the narratives that emerge from the movement of movements as when the Collective Turbulence stresses the need to create “forms and practices” of the world they wish to see, with a larger emphasis put “on *becoming* over being” (2010, 143-4). The “revolt of doing,” and the politics of “living now the world we want to create,” as it is described by John Holloway’s political philosophy, has gained ground as the *modus operandi* of the movements of global protest: “We ask no permission of anyone and we do not wait for the future, but simply break time and assert now another type of doing, another form of social relations ... It is doing that is at the center, not a new discourse, not a new way of thinking, not a new form of organizing, not a new-ism: doing” (Holloway 2010, 141, 148). The centrality given to prefigurative politics, or to planting the seeds of the new society “within the shell of the old” (Reinsborough 2004), is a driven-force of many contemporary experiments of alternative, directly democratic ways of life. The ambitions and expectations are often high, and viewed as fulfilling the redemptive potential of democracy itself: “Democracy today consists in the invention or reinvention of spaces, movements, ways of life, economic exchanges and political practices that resist the imprint of the state and which foster relations



of equal liberty” (Newman 2011). Hence, these multiple searches and creations of autonomy are viewed as struggles for democracy.

A major form in which this autonomist ethos translates into practice is the growing popularity and legitimacy that the tactic of direct action has acquired within the web of struggles against the dominant “neoliberal” and “authoritarian” global powers. Workshops on direct action, which can take many forms but is basically encapsulated in the motto “do-it-ourselves,” are pervasive within the rebellious network.<sup>3</sup> In this case, this action without intermediaries is constructive, in the sense that activists create autonomous spaces in which freedom from domination, as well as non-hierarchical and directly democratic social relations, are lived and experienced by participants. These temporary autonomous zones<sup>4</sup> of conviviality and celebration can come to life during effervescent moments caused by protests, festivals, revolts, occupations – and may eventually be expanded in time and space in order to provide a lasting model of a horizontal, decentralized and free society. The decision-making is done in popular assemblies, and the goal is to reach decisions in a consensual and participatory manner, showing what “democracy looks like” in contrast to the putative unjust and oppressive representative system that currently dominates. As stated by the CrimethInc Collective, through direct action people stop abdicating power to “so-called representatives”; direct action “puts power back where it belongs, in the hands of the people from who it originates” (CrimethInc Ex-Workers’ Collective 2004). At the very least, because these communities are viewed as fissures in the dominant structure of society, “spaces or moments of otherness” (Holloway 2010, 261), they are felt by activists as disruptive, subversive, and life-enhancing, as “setting new terms based on how everyone would like to see everything done, cooperatively and through directly democratic means, voluntarily and in solidarity. It’s about moving away from an instrumental worldview toward one based on each person’s intrinsic worth (Milstein 2010, 44). “Doing” democracy, in the minds of activists, becomes an experience in authenticity – a direct, participatory and consensus-based experience – that sets them apart from the mundane, low and spurious democracy of the elites, and, in the process, opens the path to individual and collective rejuvenation.

## OCCUPY DEMOCRACY

The damning diagnosis of the nature of liberal-democracy is clear in the narratives put forth by activists: a decrepit system beholden to the interests of a

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the website of the anarchist collective Ruckus Society, whose motto is “actions speak louder than words,” at <http://www.ruckus.org/index.php>

<sup>4</sup> The concept of Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ) originates from the work of anarchist philosopher and CrimethInc Collective mentor Hakim Bey (AKA Peter L. Wilson)

venal, profit-seeking, and self-interested minority. The near-collapse of economies at the end of the first decade of the 21st century only accelerated the perception that a change of paradigm was the only remedy for the human misery caused by a corrupt political system that was increasingly estranged from the majority of people. It is in such a context that the popular overthrowing in 2011 of authoritarian regimes in the Arab World was met with enthusiasm, bordering on exhilaration, by activists for a radical change in global affairs. Such revolts etched in minds the original people-power, the sheer force of democracy, giving activists an example of what it means to win; an example of the victory of popular uprisings over usurper minorities in the contemporary world. If in liberal-democratic societies democracy had reached a dead-end, the Arab example opened the potential of and new possibilities for democracy itself. For a detached observer the analogy may sound preposterous, owing to the fact that Arab protesters fought (and died fighting) non-democratic, authoritarian, and brutal regimes. But in activists' minds such analogy is just a logical step, for they too perceive in their own contexts the works of an illegitimate and oppressive regime that took over democracies in the West. Fuelled by Arabic democratic vistas, the "revolt of doing" and "living real democracy" were reenergized all over again. It gave activists a dazzling image of what is to be done.

The potential of the Arab uprisings – especially in the example they set for how to deal with liberal democratic regimes – was given full support by various left-wing theorists, social critics and activists at-large. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri hope for a "cycle of struggles" initiated by the Arab Revolts, noting that the insurgents aim at a new form of democracy that is "adequate to the new forms of expression and needs of the multitude" (2011). The same enthusiasm is shared by Walden Bello, who says that Arabs liberated the democratic imagination, spreading "the sense that people were truly determining their destiny ... the primordial democratic moment, the pristine moment of self-rule that is so inadequately conveyed by theoretical treatises on democracy" (2011). Alain Badiou celebrates the "universal significance" of the revolts, stating that westerners should learn from them, because they have given a new impetus to "the principle that Marat never stopped reminding us of: when it comes to freedom, equality, emancipation, we owe everything to popular uprisings" (2011). The inspiration taken from the Arab uprising – hailed as "rolling rebellions" (Democracy Now! 2011) – was widespread. The anarchist collective Ruckus Society sees the lesson of Egypt as the vindication of the spirit and practice of direct action: "We can learn so much from what is undeniably a mass, strategic, nonviolent expression of people's power" (2011). Meanwhile CrimethInc anarchists blog, under the heading "Egypt today, tomorrow the world," assured comrades and other readers that "what is happening in Egypt is not part of another world, but very much part of our own ... there are no exotic overseas revolutions

in the 21st century.” For that reason, “for these uprisings to offer any hope, we have to understand ourselves as part of them, and think and act accordingly” (CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective 2011). Popular unrest may then spread and catch like wild fire.

The Indignant movement that erupted in Spain in the spring of 2011 – in the midst of economic turmoil and joblessness, especially among the young – and that led to the occupation of city squares across the nation added more fuel to such a fire. Its principles and organization only reinforced the impression that the overall movement aims at purifying the political system in the name of a democracy that puts the people at its center. The manifesto of *Democracia Real Ya!* (Real Democracy Now!), one of the collectives behind the popular mobilization, is written in the name of “ordinary people” committed to building a “better society together.” In it a by now familiar theme emerges: Because “Democracy belongs to the people (demos = people, *krátos* = government) which means that government is made of every one of us,” the people have risen up against a system in which “Citizens are the gears of a machine designed to enrich a minority which does not regard our needs.”<sup>5</sup> The camps were self-organized by committees, and the decision-making was done by assemblies that, in the words of a sympathetic observer, were “reminiscent of the Agoras from Ancient Greek city states” (Marty 2011). Sociologist Manuel Castells praised the “transformative” potential of the Indignant experiences in self-governance, as a “new politics for exiting the crisis toward a new way of life build collectively” (2011). Whether or not it helped to burst the traditional channels of representative democracy, the Indignant example was transformed into yet another symbol of defiance in the already energized global web of rebellion. The example that it set carried across the Atlantic.

It is not surprising then that when the Occupy Wall Street movement broke out in the fall of 2011, it was defined by its supporters as a “people powered movement for democracy,” “inspired by the Egyptian Tahrir Square uprising and the Spanish *acampadas*,”<sup>6</sup> and “using the revolutionary Arab spring tactic to achieve [its] ends.”<sup>7</sup> Even though the grievances driving this collective mobilization varied, as well as the diversity of people that comprised it, the fulfillment of a true democracy was a mobilizing focal point to those either directly involved or who applauded from the sidelines. But this goal was not limited to demands (for a halt to money-driven politics, corruption, or disenfranchisement) but went beyond them; once again the focus was on “doing,” experiencing, and living the reality of what constitutes a real democracy. The

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<sup>5</sup> Manifesto *Democracia Real Ya!*

<http://www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifiesto-english/>

<sup>6</sup> Adbusters #OCCUPYWALLSTREET, [www.adbusters.org/campaigns/occupywallstreet](http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/occupywallstreet)

<sup>7</sup> [www.occupywallst.org/](http://www.occupywallst.org/)

effort was to build an autonomous space, a community based on mutual aid, solidarity, and non-hierarchical decision-making processes (in this case in general assemblies that seek consensus). Hence, the self-professed goal of the protesters: “Occupy Wall Street is an exercise in Direct Democracy. Since we can no longer trust our elected representatives to represent us rather than their large donors, we are creating a microcosm of what democracy really looks like. We do this to inspire one another to speak up. It is a reminder to our representatives and the moneyed interests that direct them: We the people still know our power.” To the question of what should people expect when they get down to the occupied territory an answer is given that epitomizes the entire spirit of the movement: “Something you’ve never experienced before in this way – a real democratic space.”<sup>8</sup> Though demands are real, even if diffuse, one should not lose sight the fact that indeed “encampment itself has become the point” (Kimmelman 2011). In this way the Occupy movement constitutes an example of what Benjamin Arditi calls “political performatives ... actions and statements that anticipate something to come as participants begin to experience – as they begin to live – what they are fighting for *while* they fight for it” (Arditi 2012, 5). Yet again, as one more demonstration of the “revolt of doing.”

#### THE SKY’S THE LIMIT?

“Dreaming of democracy” was the caption for a two-page section in an issue of *Adbusters*, showing images of riots, protests, and mass gatherings (Adbusters 2011). The link between images and practices of popular uprising and the search for a real or true democracy through the creation of autonomous communities and the fashioning of alternative spaces, already present at the very beginning of the anti-globalization movement, has developed into the dominant narrative and method of action of the web of struggles that characterize left-wing activism in the 21st century. Such recognition, which can be deduced from a look at the storyline and practices emerging from these movements, has given a new impetus to anarchism’s role as a rival to liberal democratic institutions and interpretations of the role of politics.

Because the emphasis is put on creating autonomous spaces in which the directly democratic “world to come” is envisioned and experienced, there is no blueprint, ideological guide, or single manifesto in which the strategy to seize power is delineated. Nevertheless, the issue of power is present. But it is not associated with electoral politics, or with the overthrow of the state with any sort

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<sup>8</sup> NYC General Assembly# Occupy Wall Street, <http://www.nycga.net/resources/faq/>

of army; change; radical change, will come, as stated by the Collective Turbulence, through the “power of self-management and autonomous self-constitution” (2010, 128). The creation of new and autonomous communities is even viewed as “revolutionary acts” in which people act as though they are already free from the oppressive status quo (Graeber 2009). That is why the motto “changing the world without taking power” is pervasive in alter-globalization circles, even if it does not mean that the question of power (and how to obtain it) is absent. But power cannot be attained without the participation, support, and empowerment of the population at large. Even revolutionary anarchists are aware of this necessity: as argued by the CrimethInc Collective, “The outcome of revolutionary struggle is not decided by revolutionaries or autocrats so much as by those who sit on the fence between them” (CrimethInc. Ex-Workers’ Collective 2009). Periods of crisis and widespread distrust of the political system and representative institutions provide the political opportunity to increase that popular support and to gain new converts both to the cause and to experiments in “authentic” democracy. At least, such is the hope.

But if political opportunities motivated by crisis may well be cyclical, there is a more structural dimension at the very heart of contemporary liberal-democratic societies, that helps to explain the allure of such movements invested with the mission of bringing forth, here and now, the compelling powers of a true democracy. At a basic yet profound level it deals with the disenchantment of politics or its “gradual elimination as an instrument of this-worldly salvation” (van Kersbergen 2010, 41); it ceased being, at least potentially, a comprehensive and holistic tool to inaugurate change, and it was transformed into a technocratic activity and management-like affair, losing its appeal and mobilizing power in the process. This trend been noted before, particularly from the mid-20th century onward, in regard to the diminishing role of political parties. Instead of organizations devoted to provide “spiritual shelter” and a “vision of things to come” the new type of parties would be committed to efficient, narrow, short-term goals suited to a time of “de-ideologization” (Kirchheimer 1966). This historical trend was only intensified, at a later stage, by the rise of “governance,” or the progressive fragmentation of politics into a constraining and complex administrative, legal, and regulatory network of multiple actors and decision-makers (such as market forces) that acts within and beyond nations. The increasing levels of political apathy, disaffection, and decline in party membership and activism in liberal-democratic countries (Whiteley 2011), as well as the popularity of new ways of participation outside of the traditional modes of representation, are a natural consequence of a political system that appears aloof and whose centers of decision are out of popular control or reach (transforming democracy into a spectator sport). Bereft of its enchanting power (lacking far-reaching and visionary projects), caught in a web that diminishes its own

capabilities and independence, politics in liberal-democratic countries is reduced to instrumental ways that are incapable of generating collective enthusiasm. It has been argued that because of this evolution and the widespread lack of faith in democracy, and its representative institutions, we are at the dawn of a “New Regime,” still without a name, but already under way (Hermet 2008).

The network of struggles against the political and economic status quo taps this undercurrent of popular alienation. But if liberal-democracy cannot provide such enchanting visions, democracy, in its original, assembly form, is perceived as containing the conditions to spawn the longed-for embrace of a collective, enchanting project. In alter-globalization circles this is done by defending a politics centered on the concept of “the people,” of “us,” and in continuing antagonism with a ravenous, power-grabbing minority, or “them.” The constant articulation of this binary opposition, as well as the appeals to the redemptive side of democracy, aimed at reasserting “popular sovereignty as the essence of democracy,” and committed to showing what democracy “looks like,” makes the challenge of the alter-globalization movement a case-study in left-wing populism.<sup>9</sup> Such dreams of direct democracy, in which the people as a mythic and monolithic entity rise up and chart its own destiny can indeed have a “tremendous emotive appeal” (Resnick 1997), and such enthusiasm, optimism, and restlessness runs through the theory and the praxis of alter-globalization transnational activism. The sky is, indeed, the limit.

## CONCLUSION

The ideology of alter-globalization, even though it comprises a variety of sources and influences, conceptualizes the political world as an ongoing, and often dramatic, power-contest between popular and elitist rule. Representative democracy, as a tool of domination and self-perpetuation of the minority, is increasingly rejected in favor of a more direct form of democracy that is perceived as more authentic. In practice this means a conception of politics not oriented toward piecemeal changes but that rather serves as a redeeming tool that addresses the individual and collective needs for community at a time in which the philosophy of individualism, in all areas of life, is accused of reigning supreme. Hence, activists conceive and experience direct democracy as a different and more rewarding model of society, one that is demotic and separate from the hegemonic liberal-democratic paradigm. If “‘inspirational’ ideologies” seem to be on decline (Freedon 2006), the appeal to so many activists of the aforementioned ideology constitutes evidence to the contrary. Whether representation is *really* under siege is still too early to tell, and attempts to rehabilitate the principle of

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<sup>9</sup> On the discussion of populism and its redemptive side see Canovan (1999), Mouffe (2005) Arditì (2005).

direct democracy have failed in the past. Moreover, the role of wishful thinking in any ideology is historically known. But regardless of whether the theater of the siege is expanding or not, there seems to be little doubt, in the light of what has been written, that many alter-globalization activists are already busy building their own citadels.

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