

AUTONOMY OR BARBARISM



REVISING CHAULIEU'S Workers' Councils and the Economics of a Self- Managed Society



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Revisiting Chaulieu's Workers' Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society in the 21st Century

By the AorB Group



The 1972 reprint of Chaulieu's text by London Solidarity contained a series of hedgehog cartoons produced by then Solidarity member Juan MacIver. The hedgehog was, at that period, the informal mascot of the Solidarity group, much like the black cat of the IWW or Marx's "old mole". Our modern revision of the hedgehog cartoons in this text are inspired by the originals, produced by DALL-E AI for this pamphlet.

Contemporary Perspectives on Self-Managed Societies and Technological Integration

In reflecting on the text “[Workers’ Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society](#)” by Pierre Chaulieu [1], pseudonym of Greek-French revolutionary and philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis, we are faced with the obvious fact that there have been major technological shifts since the text’s original publication in 1957. Our reflection on this text aspires to critically integrate these developments into the vision of a self-managed society, addressing the economic and political structures that could exist in such a society, particularly in light of the digital revolution and the emergence of decentralized technologies.



The original text questioned the feasibility of workers' self-management in a technologically advanced society, challenging the notion that such a vision was mere utopia. Prefacing this text for publication in a 1972 pamphlet, the London Solidarity group presciently called out the concerns about the role of technology in a post-capitalist society:

“Those alarmed at the monstrosities of modern science -- or those naturally suspicious of what they do not fully understand -- will shy away from the text's bold advocacy of subjugating the most modern techniques to the needs of democracy. They will remember the 'plan factory', the matrices and the coefficients, forget who will be determining them, and denounce the text as a 'technocratic' view of socialism.”

We believe first and foremost in the subjugation of technology to self-reflective and open-source collective processes. We must come clean that this is presently the opposite of the world we live in, where the trajectory is one of humans becoming subjected to machines as part of a dehumanizing, and ultimately anti-human, process. But, in the new context of a collectively self-reflective society like that outlined here, we believe these concerns will be mute.

Solidarity preempted concerns that the text would be criticized by anarchists for containing Marxist residues, such as placing the industrial proletariat at the center of social change. They counter this concern by pointing out that Castoriadis would probably gauge differently today than he did in his original text, a claim we believe is still valid today. This can be further seen as Castoriadis developed his works later in life, and he broadened his “social-historical” project beyond the centrality of the proletariat towards an all-society encompassing autonomous project more broadly. This can be seen in his works such as [*Crossroads in the Labyrinth*](#) and [*Imaginary Institution of Society*](#).

We will go even further than Solidarity did and argue today that the implication of this text, that the economic sphere is the dominant sphere of society, above the totality of all others combined, should be contested in any economic vision or strategy to get there. It might go without saying, yet it is worth noting, that we are certain that both Castoriadis and the Solidarity group that wrote the 1972 introduction would agree with us.

The original text envisaged the traditional socialist view that a “transitional” society between capitalism and communism, as Marx did in his Critique of the Gotha Programme, would be necessary. The Solidarity group anticipated counter-points such as “that the technical capacity of industry has increased so vastly in the last decades as

to invalidate the need for such a phase of history.” On this point, Solidarity hoped to “initiate a wide discussion”.

A lot has changed since both the original text was published and Solidarity’s republication. So, for the AorB group, the question is no longer if a transition is needed, but how we manage the present transition already underway.

Anyone experiencing life in the first decades of the 21st Century knows that a rapid societal shift toward increasing technological encroachment into our lives has long been underway. This transition offers both promising opportunities and significant risks. These “advancements” hold the potential to liberate humanity on the one hand, while on the other they pose grave existential threats.

When it comes to the role of technology in social change, a considerable portion of the left -- new left, old left, anarchists, marxists and others -- have assumed a defensive position, critiquing the exploitative power of major computing and data entities.

The crucial question today is not whether technology negates the need for a transitory phase in the move towards a post-capitalist era, but rather how we navigate the transition already underway and whether we propel ourselves towards liberation or risk self-destruction. Put simply, towards autonomy or barbarism.

Indeed, this is one of the reasons why we are reconsidering the original insights of Castoriadis’ pamphlet, building on the issues that Solidarity raises, and considering it in the increasingly technologically immersed lives that we live today.

This is not the “techno-optimistic” accelerationist view founded on the belief that [“societies, like sharks, grow or die”](#) nor do we argue that unleashed innovation is good because “growth is progress – leading to vitality, expansion of life, increasing knowledge, higher well being.” No, technology will not deliver the “promised land”. But, we are also not willing to bury our heads in the sand and let the innovations occurring in broader society overtake us. Growth for growth’s sake, and the use of technology to increasingly refine the process of calculation, accumulation, rational-mastery, and the domination of nature must be overcome.

We are concerned that much of the left have adopted defensive positions when it comes to engaging technology, rather than offensive positions and, consequently, may be forfeiting their own right to help shape the direction of these changes.

Our revisiting Castoriadis' text, and Solidarity's later introduction, is to come full circle to the orientation of the autonomous project that Castoriadis promoted, based on the proposed subjugation of technology to directly-democratic and self-reflective collective processes, an orientation that we find inspiration in.

In the context of a self-managed society, direct-democracy and technological empowerment go hand in hand. Far beyond the conceptions of liberal democracy in modern capitalism, the technological opportunities we have in mind can enhance decision-making by providing platforms for widespread participation and engagement in the decision-making process.

Yes, it is true that digital tools and social media have been weaponized to promote social, cultural and class warfare at home and to subvert democracies at home and abroad, to overthrow governments and perpetrate intra- and inter-nation state espionage against allies and enemies. This occurs because this technology is both in the wrong hands and is designed with centralized platforms, data storage and servers that incentivize bad actors, including states, to exploit their power.

But technology, in the right hands and with better design, can facilitate more inclusive and informed discussions. The advent of distributed ledger technology, decentralized consensus protocols, distributed computing, artificial intelligence, and advanced data analytics has not only opened unprecedented possibilities for decentralized and directly-democratic management of society, but it counters the myth that complexity necessitates centralized control, self-interest or market driven competition.



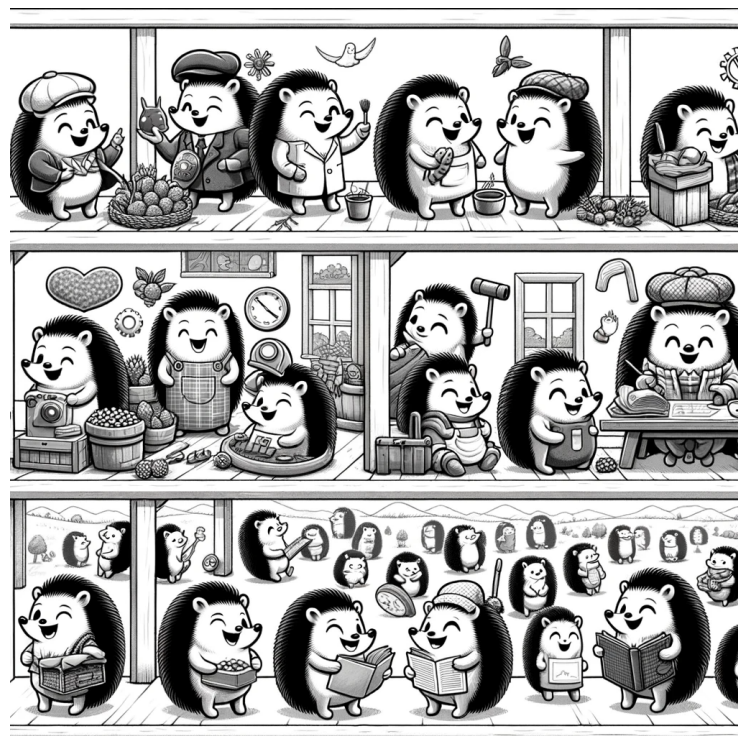
Addressing Contemporary Challenges

Today's self-managed society faces challenges distinct from those of the past, including existential environmental concerns, global interconnectedness, and the ethical use of technology.

In revisiting "Workers' Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society" we are faced with the transformative potential of modern technology in realizing the vision of a directly-democratic and self-managed society. It calls for a re-examination of the original concepts in light of contemporary technological possibilities, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that harnesses technology for democratic empowerment while remaining vigilant against its potential to reinforce new forms of social control and inequality.

The journey towards a self-managed society is not only a political and economic endeavor, but also a technological and ethical one, interacting with wider social and cultural dimensions, requiring a harmonious integration of human values with the capabilities of modern technology.

Addressing these issues requires a commitment to values such as ecological sustainability, global solidarity, digital ethics, self-governance and classlessness.



Revisiting the “Content of Socialism” in the Digital Age

Over the past century, the evolution of society and technology has necessitated a reevaluation of socialism, anarchism and the horizons we perceive as possible through the radical imagination. This is particularly true where there are new possibilities that can render bureaucratic systems obsolete and can reinvent direct-democracy.

The Russian Revolution of 1917, rather than birthing socialism, resulted in a new form of exploitative society where bureaucracy supplanted private capital. In contrast -- if not left to be captured by the state or capitalism -- modern technological innovations present an opportunity to realize an autonomous society that is diametrically opposed to the bureaucracies of the past and present. We can easily move beyond the socialism that Castoriadis originally wrote about to envision the autonomous project he later advanced, where self-governance and direct-democracy are the methods, enabled by modern innovations, used by people to create their own self-limiting laws and institutions.



The Crisis of Capitalism and the Role of Direct-Democracy

Capitalism, both in its Eastern and Western forms, perpetually creates crises across all aspects of human life, from production to politics. Its inherent contradiction lies, as Casatoriadis observed, in imposing an external structure on individuals' lives, often against their wishes and interests, even as capitalism relies on their creativity and initiative. This system divides society into a ruling minority of order givers and a majority relegated to executing orders, "order-takers", leading to alienation and conflict with the society which they find themselves in.

The irrational organization of capitalism results in waste and perpetual conflict. The managerial apparatus is steeped in the consequences of its own incompetence as well as resistance from people executing actual productive organization. This scenario highlights the need for a new approach where direct-democracy and decentralized technology can play a pivotal role, leveraging social struggle to render the managerial apparatus obsolete. The solution to this problem is direct-democracy, which ensures that decision-making is truly in the hands of the people.



The Bureaucratization of The Plan Factory, Corruption of the Plan

While we agree with Solidarity's introduction to Castoriadis' pamphlet, that there will be those who "remember the 'plan factory' (sic), the matrices and the coefficients, forget who will be determining them, and denounce the text as a 'technocratic' view of socialism", we also need to admit that the Plan Factory does raise certain risks around bureaucracy and corruption. We do not want to be alarmists, but we do want to help make constructive improvements.

The technological innovations we have raised above, and review in detail below, can address these concerns:

1. the risk of the Plan Factory devolving into a bureaucratic entity, detached from the directly-democratic planning process it was meant to serve,
2. and corrupting the planning process

On the role of the Plan Factory, Castoriadis asserts that "Once the 'initial conditions' are known and the 'ultimate targets' have been consciously and democratically determined, the whole content of planning ... can be reduced to a purely technical task of execution, capable of being mechanized and automated to a very high degree."

In this vision, these tasks are meant to be mechanized and automated, probably through a "computer whose 'memory' would store the technical coefficients and the initial productive capacity of each sector. If 'fed' a number of hypothetical targets, the computer could spell out the productive implication of each target for each sector (including the amount of work to be provided, in each instance, by the 'man-power' sector)."

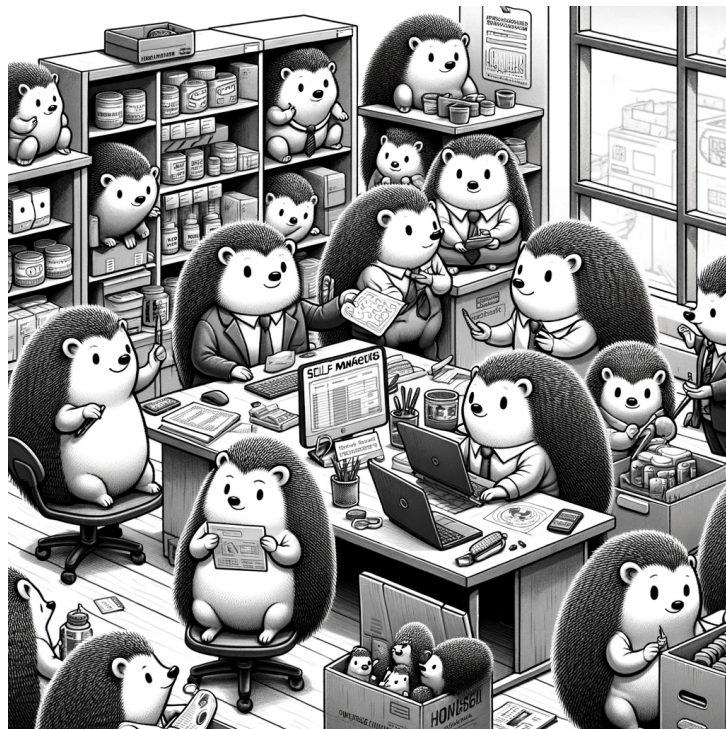
We do not want to mince Castoriadis' own words or muddy his intentions, so we will let him speak for himself:

"Let us not be misunderstood; the role of the 'plan factory' won't be to decide on the plan. It won't impose anything on others. The targets of the plan will be determined by society as a whole ... Before any proposals are voted upon, however, the plan factory will work out and present to society as a whole the implications and consequences (for various groups of the population) of the plan (or plans) suggested. This will result in a vast increase in the area of real democracy (i.e., of deciding in full knowledge of the relevant facts). After a plan has been adopted, the task of the plan factory will be to constantly bring up-to-date the facts on which the plan was based, to draw the necessary conclusions from possibilities of change and to inform both the Central Assembly of Councils

and the relevant sectors of any alterations in intermediate targets (and therefore, of production tasks) that might be worth considering. In none of these instances would those actually working in the plan factory decide or impose anything -- except the organization of their own work.”

Aside from Castoriadis’ assertion of how mechanized this process is and that it is so mechanized so as to minimize the risk of new technocrats emerging, there is the obvious other risk of bureaucracies beyond the jurisdiction of the self-managed/ autonomous society engaging in high-tech espionage and cyber warfare to dismantle the threat of such an emancipatory example. This risk alone necessitates equally or even higher-tech defense strategies and shields. But there are also less obvious risks.

A more subtle problem is that those with access to Plan Factory data may see an occasion to arbitrage, frontrun, backrun or sandwich attack economic opportunities at a low level so as to obfuscate their malicious behavior or espionage. As this behavior snowballs and a wider number of people and groups with access to the data deploy increasingly sophisticated strategies, the gini is out of the bottle and the planning process becomes an obscure zone where highly technical individuals and bots carry out sophisticated sniping strategies to get the goods they want and manipulate the process, extracting value, at the expense of wider society. Informal markets emerge and something would need to be done to reign it all in.



We would hope that the federated councils in wider society would be honest enough and hold enough decentralized power to contain and limit the malicious behavior that corrupted the Plan Factory's process and the wider economic plan. But we see essentially three options to deal with this problem:

1. Replace the bad actors with new honest actors
2. Surround the problem with more people for oversight, to essentially police the problem
3. Throw more technology at the problem, specifically technology that can shield the plan from bad actors, for example integrating the use of [Zero Knowledge technology](#) into the planning process.

Let's take these problems in order:

1. We do not believe that replacing the bad actors with new actors would go far enough towards minimizing these risks from reappearing in the future. The entire incentive mechanism and structure of the Plan Factory would need to be reconsidered and future proofed. Unfortunately, we do not believe that any amount of refactoring of the Plan Factory could address this problem for good and the broader council system will be playing a futile game of "whack-a-mole" (no marxist pun intended!) as the problem appears in new ways.
2. The option of adding an additional human layer of oversight of the problem carries two risks. One is the bureaucratization of the Plan Factory and the other is the policing of the planning process. We find neither of these options desirable.
3. Our preferred solution, integrate modern forms of cryptography, distributed computing and AI to render the traditional Plan Factory component obsolete. By utilizing blockchain for transparent and decentralized decision-making, AI for efficient data processing and analysis, and Internet of Things (IoT) technologies for real-time feedback from production units, a self-managed/autonomous society can ensure that planning and decision-making remain democratic, transparent and responsive to the needs of broader society.

In today's context, the dynamic aspects of workers' management must integrate modern technology, particularly in the realm of information and communication technologies. This integration will enhance the capacity for self-management, rendering the static aspects of management more fluid and adaptable. It can significantly broaden the scope and efficiency of workers' management, making the original conception of the Plan Factory increasingly obsolete.



Critique in Context

We want to remain level-headed in our criticism of Castoriadis' text. For instance, concern about the Plan Factory becoming a bureaucratic risk is probably less when compared to projects that would emerge decades after Castoriadis wrote, even though they had more technical capabilities.

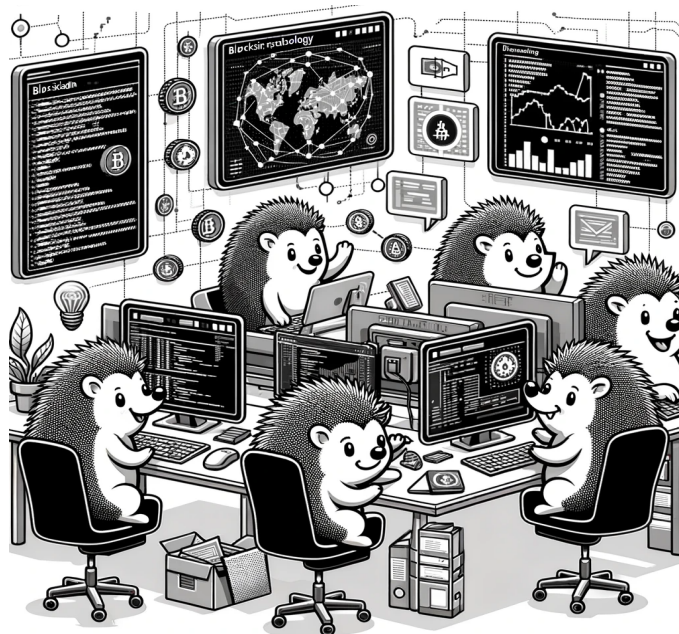
For instance, Chile's "Project Cybersyn" in the early 70's had an "Operations Room", a kind of war room, which Cybersyn architect and expert in management cybernetics Stafford Beer [explained](#) "should be thought of NOT as a room containing interesting bits of equipment BUT as a control machine comprising men and artifacts in symbiotic relationship."

Similarly, the Participatory Economics vision developed by Michael Albert and Robin Hahel, which has many positive attributes for promoting a self-managed and classless economy, includes an institution, the [Iteration Facilitation Board](#), which they assigned the critical responsibility of iterating on worker and consumer council plans to be voted on by the economy's participants.

Like these and other more recent proposals, Castoriadis' Plan Factory carries risks that we think are too dangerous and today are unnecessary components of a society operating on a post-capitalist economy. To counteract these risks, as we have argued, technology can play a pivotal role in dispersing such critical functions directly to workers' and consumers' themselves, disaggregating such central institutions and making them completely unnecessary.

Blockchain technology, for example, can enable a transparent, decentralized planning process where input from various workers' collectives is aggregated and analyzed in real-time, allowing for a more dynamic and responsive planning system. AI can aid in processing vast amounts of data from production units, providing insights and suggestions without centralizing decision-making power.

These technological tools can be integrated into the network of directly-democratic and confederated assemblies, ensuring that the planning process remains grounded in the collective decision-making from the lowest levels. This network would constantly update and refine economic data, providing a dynamic and responsive planning framework that aligns with the principles of self-management and direct-democracy.



Basic Principles of Autonomous Society: Beyond the Plan Factory

In the vision of society that Castoriadis laid out, the key principle is workers' self-management of production. This concept would be embodied in workers' councils, organically formed from the workplace and powered by modern technology. These councils would be interconnected through a decentralized network, ensuring both autonomy and efficient coordination. In today's circumstance and surrounded by possibilities, we must go further than he suggested in the sketch of a self-managed society.

As we have proposed, the Plan Factory is a potential source of corruption, bureaucracy and policing. It becomes obsolete in this new context. Decentralized technology allows for the distribution of planning and managerial tasks among all workers, where there is a balanced division of labor and equitable remuneration, facilitated by user-friendly digital tools that enable everyone to participate in decision-making processes. This approach fosters a classless society where power truly resides at the lowest levels.



The practical management of the economy in a self-managed society would lean heavily on the decentralized use of technology. Each factory or enterprise, equipped with smart systems and interconnected through blockchain networks, would be capable of both autonomous management and active participation in the broader economic network. Decision-making authority would rest within local councils and assemblies, supported by advanced analytics and AI-driven insights, ensuring decisions are both democratically grounded and informed by comprehensive economic data. In this structure, technology doesn't replace human decision-making, but enhances it.

The Assembly of Decentralized Workers' Councils would not be a separate governing body, but an interconnected node embedded within a blockchain-like system, ensuring transparency, accountability and connection. This type of decentralized, digital direct-democracy embodies the values of equity, justice, and efficiency, steering clear of the pitfalls of traditional socialist organization.

Socialism and the Transformation of Work: Embracing Digital Autonomy

In the context of a self-managed society, the transformation of work is critical. Work must evolve from being a mere necessity to an expression of human creativity and autonomy. This change requires not only political autonomy but also the reimagining of the work process itself.

On the one hand workers' councils can organize their workplace tasks so that everyone has an equal balance of both desirable and undesirable tasks, where order-giving and order-taking is shared by all. On the other hand, modern technology, particularly AI and automation, can liberate humans from the more mundane tasks, allowing for more creative and fulfilling work within classless divisions of labor. This transformation aligns with the ideals of an autonomous society in that it is not just about economic output, but about fulfilling human potential.

In terms of "Money", "Wages" and Value, Castoriadis suggests an entirely new context and meaning:

People will probably receive a token in return for what they put into society. These "tokens" might take the form of units, allowing people to organize what they take out of society, spreading it out (a) in time, and (b) between different objects and services, exactly as they wish. As we are seeking here to get to grips with realities and are not fighting against words, we see no objection to calling

these tokens "wages" and these units "money" ... Under socialism labor value would be the only rational basis for any kind of social accountancy and the only yardstick having any real meaning for people. The first aim of socialist production will be to reduce both the direct and indirect expenditure of human labor power. Fixing the prices of consumer goods on the basis of their labor value, would mean that for everyone the cost of objects would clearly appear as the equivalent of the labor (in hours) s/he himself would have had to expend to produce them (assuming s/he had access to the average prevailing equipment and that s/he had an average social capacity).

It's worth being explicit here that where a person does not have the assumed "access to the average prevailing equipment" or the "average social capacity" that the principle of consumption based on human need would prevail.



Expanding on this proposed future of money and work, focusing on a token-based system where people receive tokens as a reflection of their contribution to society, can be practically implemented today using blockchain technology and tokenomics. Digital tokens that serve as a measure of individual contribution to society would be a form of “social currency” representing the labor value contributed by an individual.

Implementing a system to measure individual contributions to society could include various forms of work, community service, innovation, and other socially beneficial activities codified in smart contracts on the blockchain to automatically allocate tokens to individuals based on their measured contributions. The design of the tokenomics would include the establishment of mechanisms for the exchange of tokens for goods and services within the society, with prices fixed based on the labor value of the goods and services, as measured in token equivalents.



Basing the pricing mechanism on labor value would include developing algorithms to calculate the labor value of goods and services in terms of the average labor required to produce them. This includes accounting for the direct and indirect human labor involved, implementing dynamic pricing models on the blockchain, where the price in tokens for each good or service reflects its calculated labor value.

In terms of wages, we see no need to update Castoriadis' observations on this point:

Wage equality will give a real meaning to consumption, every individual at last being assured of an equal vote. It will abolish a large number of conflicts both in everyday life and in production, and will enable an extraordinary cohesion of working people to develop. It will destroy at the very roots the whole mercantile monstrosity of capitalism (both private and bureaucratic), the commercialization of individuals, that whole universe where one doesn't earn what one is worth, but where one is worth what one earns. A few years of wage equality and little will be left of the whole distorted mentality of present day individuals.

In this new society, the role of technology is crucial. It is not just a tool for increasing production efficiency but a means to enhance human autonomy and creativity in the workplace. This approach to technology and work aligns with the project of autonomy where human needs, both as producers and consumers, are accounted for. This vision hinges on leveraging technology to ensure direct-democracy, decentralization of power, and the transformation of work into a fulfilling and autonomous activity. It moves beyond traditional socialism by embracing the potential of technology to create a truly self-managed, equitable, directly-democratic and just society.



The Role of direct-democracy and Confederated Assemblies

Finally, the role of direct-democracy and confederated assemblies is crucial in a technologically integrated self-managed society. While technology can streamline processes and provide valuable insights, it is the people, organized in their local councils and assemblies, who must remain at the heart of decision-making. The assemblies would not only serve as platforms for discussion and decision, but also provide distributed oversight ensuring that the technological tools are used in alignment with the values of equity, justice, and collective welfare.

In conclusion, the application of modern technology within a self-managed society offers a path to overcome the limitations of traditional centralized planning and even augments the possibilities beyond conceptions of libertarian socialism when Castoridis originally wrote Workers' Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society. We can transcend these narrow conceptions of socialism to a society-wide directly-democratic and autonomous project that we believe Castoridis would endorse today. By harnessing the power of modern technology in service of tapping into human potential and development, it is possible to create a dynamic, responsive, and democratically controlled society that subsumes the principles of workers' management, direct-democracy, solidarity and social equity more broadly.

Note: [1] 'Sur le Contenu du Socialisme' first appeared in the summer of 1957 (in issue Number 22 of the French journal, Socialisme ou Barbarie)

ABOUT A OR B

THIS PAGE ANSWERS THE “WHO”, “WHAT”, “WHERE” AND “WHY” QUESTIONS THAT YOU MAY HAVE ABOUT AUTONOMY OR BARBARISM, “A OR B” FOR SHORT.

WHO

A OR B IS CURRENTLY IN ITS EMBRYONIC STAGE AND IS DEVELOPING TOWARD A COLLECTIVE OF INDIVIDUALS FORMING AUTONOMOUS LOCAL GROUPS. WE ENVISION OTHERS CREATING SIMILAR AUTONOMOUS GROUPS THAT TOGETHER FORM A REGION OR TRANSNATIONAL OF AUTONOMOUS GROUPS (SEE “WHERE” BELOW).

WHAT

THE TERM “GROUP” USED ABOVE IS USED VERY LOOSELY AND COULD BE INTERCHANGEABLE WITH “MOVEMENT”. EITHER WAY, THE POLITICS THAT BRING US TOGETHER ARE SPELLED OUT IN OUR UNIFYING DOCUMENT “AS WE SEE IT” (FOUND ON OUR WEBSITE AORB.INFO). IN A BROAD SENSE, A OR B IS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF DIRECT DEMOCRACY FOR AN AUTONOMOUS SOCIETY. THIS TRANSLATES TO SUPPORTING EFFORTS ACROSS THE TOTALITY OF SOCIAL RELATIONS AGAINST BUREAUCRACY AND OPPRESSION IN ALL ITS GUISES.

WHERE

CURRENTLY THIS PRECIPITATING A OR B GROUP IS IN COMMUNICATION WITH OTHER GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS IN GREECE, LATIN AMERICA, THE US, AND ELSEWHERE AROUND THE WORLD. WE ENVISION AUTONOMOUS A OR B GROUPS EMERGING IN VARIOUS LOCATIONS AND GEOGRAPHIES.

WHY

A OR B IS HERE TO OFFER SOLIDARITY AND WORK TO HELP DEMYSTIFY THE FORCES THAT ENTRENCH SOCIAL AND MATERIAL MISERY AND ALIENATION. THIS INCLUDES DEMYSTIFICATION OF THE INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL RELATIONS THAT NOT ONLY MAKE FOR PAINFUL EVERYDAY LIFE EXPERIENCES, BUT THAT IMMISERATE HUMAN BEINGS ACROSS THE COMPLEX AND INTERWOVEN SPHERES OF RACE, CLASS, GENDER AND SEXUALITY AS WELL AS EXPLOIT AND DOMINATE THE PLANET’S SCARCE HUMAN AND NATURAL RESOURCES.

WE SUPPORT DIRECT ACTION AND DIRECT DEMOCRACY FOR A SOCIETY THAT IS DECENTRALIZED, SELF-REFLECTIVE, SELF-LIMITING, AND TECHNOLOGICALLY ADVANCED; A SOCIETY WHERE INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS HAVE DECISION-MAKING SAY OVER THE THINGS THAT AFFECT THEM. IN OTHER WORDS, WE ENVISION AN AUTONOMOUS SOCIETY THAT IS SELF-ORGANIZED AND BASED ON DIRECT DEMOCRACY. THAT IS WHAT WE STRUGGLE FOR.

FOR MORE INFORMATION READ “AS WE SEE IT”. aorb.info

