Anarchism and Democracy

Zoe Baker

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Anarchism is a social movement which advocates the abolition of all forms of domination and exploitation in favour of a society based on freedom, equality and co-operation. It holds that this goal can only be achieved if the hierarchical social structures of capitalism and the state are abolished and replaced by a socialist society organised via horizontal free association. Doing so requires a fundamental transformation in how organisations are structured and decisions are made. Capitalism and the state are hierarchical pyramids in which decision-making flows from the top to the bottom. They are based on a division between a minority who monopolise decision-making power and issue commands, and a majority who lack real decision-making power and must ultimately obey the orders of their superiors. A horizontal social structure, in comparison, is one where people collectively self-manage and co-determine the organisation as equals. In an anarchist society there would be no masters or subjects.

Modern anarchists often describe anarchism as democracy without the state. Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin argued in 1993 that "there is no democracy or freedom under government — whether in the United States, China or Russia. Anarchists believe in direct democracy by the people as the only kind of freedom and self-rule" (Ervin 1993. Also see Milstein 2010, 97–107). Perhaps the most famous advocate of this position was David Graeber. In 2013 Graeber argued that "Anarchism does not mean the negation of democracy". It instead takes "core democratic principles to their logical conclusion" by proposing that collective decisions should be made via "nonhierarchical forms of direct democracy". By "democracy" Graeber meant any system of "collective deliberation" based on "full and equal participation" (Graeber 2013, 154, 27, 186).

This endorsement of direct democracy is not a universal position among modern anarchists. A significant number of anarchists have argued that anarchism is fundamentally incompatible with, or at least distinct from, democracy. Their basic argument is that democracy means rule by the people or the majority, whilst anarchism advocates the abolition of all systems of rulership. The word anarchism itself derives from the ancient Greek work anarchos, which means without rulers. Within a democracy decisions are enforced on everyone within a given territory via institutionalised mechanisms of coercion, such as the law, army, police and prisons. Defenders of democracy take this coercive enforcement to be legitimate because the decisions were made democratically, such as every citizen having the right to participate in the decision-making process. Since such coercive enforcement is taken to be incompatible with anarchism's commitment to free association, it follows that anarchism does not advocate democracy (Gordon 2008, 67–70; Crimethinc 2016).

Anarchists who advocate democracy without the state are themselves in favour of free association. Graeber, for example, advocates a society "where humans only enter those kinds of relations with one another that would not have to be enforced by the constant threat of violence". As a result, he opposed any system of decision-making in which someone has "the ability … to call on armed men to show up and say 'I don't care what you have to say about this; shut up and do what you're told'" (Graeber 2013, 187–8. Also see Milstein 2010, 60–2). Given this, the pro-democracy and anti-democracy anarchists I have examined are advocating the same position in different language. Both advocate collective methods of decision-making in which everyone involved has an equal say. Both argue that this should be achieved via voluntary association and reject the idea that decisions should be imposed on those who reject them via mechanisms of institutionalised coercion, such as the law or police. They just disagree about whether these systems should be called democracy because they use different definitions of that word.

During these debates it is common for anarchists to appeal to the fact that historical anarchists were against what they called democracy. Unfortunately these appeals to anarchist history are often a bit muddled due to people focusing on the words historical anarchists used, rather than their ideas. In this essay I shall explain not only what historical anarchists wrote about democracy but also how they made decisions. I do not think that the history of anarchism can be straight forwardly used to settle the debate on anarchism and democracy. My hope is only that an in-depth knowledge of anarchist history will help modern anarchists think about the topic in more fruitful ways.

The Historical Anarchist Critique of Democracy

The majority of historical anarchists only used the term 'democracy' to refer to a system of government which was, at least on paper, based on the rule of the people or the majority. Errico Malatesta wrote that, "anarchists do not accept majority government (democracy), any more than they accept government by the few (aristocracy, oligarchy, or dictatorship by one class or party) nor that of one individual (autocracy, monarchy or personal dictatorship)" (Malatesta 2014, 488). Malatesta did not invent these definitions. He is merely repeating the standard definitions of different forms of government in so called 'western' political theory. The same distinction between the government of the many, of the few, and of one individual can be found in earlier theorists such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau (Hobbes 1998, 123; Locke 2016, 65–6; Rousseau 1999, 99–100). These standard definitions of different forms of government derived from ancient Greek sources, including Herodotus, Plato and Aristotle (Hansen 1991, 65–9).

The most famous example of a democracy in ancient Greece is Athens during the 5th century BC. In democratic Athens all major decisions were made by majority vote in an assembly attended by adult male citizens. Key government officials were selected at random by lot. The majority of the population – women, slaves, children and foreigners – were excluded and lacked decision-making power in the assembly (Hansen 1991, 304–20). There is a tendency for modern radicals to argue that the example of 5th century Athens demonstrates that from a historical point of view true democracy is direct democracy. Doing so would be a mistake. As Raekstad has argued, in ancient Greece the word 'democracy' did not refer to a specific decision-making system. Ancient Greeks did not have our modern distinction between direct democracy and representative democracy. They instead viewed a city as a democracy if and only if it was ruled by its citizens or at least the majority of its citizens. As a result, cities with fundamentally different systems of decision-making could all be regarded as democracies providing that they were cities based on the collective self-rule of the citizenry (Raekstad 2020).

Aristotle, to give one example, does not only refer to cities where citizens debate and directly vote on decisions in an assembly as a 'democracy'. He also used the term 'democracy' to refer to cities where citizens merely elected government officials who wielded decision-making power, and then held these government officials to account (Hansen 1991, 3; Aristotle 1998, 235–6). Aristotle did so even though he regarded selecting officials via lot as a democratic method and selecting officials via voting as an aristocratic or oligarchical method (ibid, 80–1, 153–5). The reason why is that for Aristotle the key question when determining what to label a city's constitution is which group of people rule. If a city is ruled by the majority of its citizens, and these citizens are poor in the sense that they do not own a lot of property, then for Aristotle, it is a democracy inde-

pendently of the decision-making mechanisms through which this rule is achieved (ibid, 100–2, 139–41). A modern person could of course disagree with Aristotle about whether or not citizens who elect representatives truly rule their city. Such a disagreement does not change the fact that in ancient Greece the word 'democracy' did not just mean what we call direct democracy.

Between the late 18th and mid 19th centuries the term 'democracy' gradually came to refer to governments ruled by parliaments composed of elected representatives who belonged to political parties. These governments claimed to be expressions of the will of the people. It should be kept in mind that these democratic governments were not initially based on universal suffrage. Representatives were at first elected by adult male property owners, who were a minority of the population. Over several decades of struggle from below suffrage was gradually expanded to include most or all adult men and then, largely after WW1, all adult men and women. The gradual expansion of suffrage went alongside various attempts by rulers to prevent genuine universal suffrage, such as wealthy property owners having multiple votes rather than only one, or black people being prevented from registering to vote in the United States (Markoff 2015, 41–76, 83–5, 136–40). This historical context is why when anarchists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries wrote critiques of 'democracy' they focused on the representative democracy of bourgeois parliaments, rather than the direct democracy of ancient Athens.

The historical anarchist critique of democracy so understood is as follows. Anarchists began by arguing that the government of the people was impossible. What defenders of democracy referred to as 'the people' was an abstraction which did not really exist. The actual population of a country is constituted by distinct individuals with different and contradictory ideas, needs and aspirations. If people will never agree on everything, then there will never be a unanimous 'will of the people'. There will only ever be multiple and incompatible wills of different segments of the people. The decisions of governments are imposed on everyone within a country via the law and the violent enforcers of the law, such as the police or judges. A democracy is therefore at best a system of government in which the will of the majority is violently imposed on the minority in the name of an abstraction called 'the people' (Malatesta 1995, 77–8).

Such a system of government was rejected by anarchists on the grounds that it is incompatible with freedom. Anarchists were committed to the view that everyone should be free and that, as a result, no one should be dominated. As Alexander Berkman wrote, in an anarchist society, "[y]ou are to be entirely free, and everybody else is to enjoy equal liberty, which means that no one has a right to compel or force another, for coercion of any kind is interference with your liberty" (Berkman 2003, 156). In advocating this position anarchists were not arguing that violence is always wrong. They viewed violence as legitimate when it was necessary to establish or protect the equal freedom of all, such as in self-defence or to overthrow the ruling classes. (Malatesta 2014, 187–91) The violence of government, however, goes far beyond this since they are institutions which have the power, and claim the exclusive right to, impose their will on everyone within a given territory via force (ibid, 113, 136).

This was a form of domination which anarchists opposed irrespective of whether or not the government was ruled by a minority or a majority. In Luigi Galleani's words, even if "the rule of the majority over the minority" were "a mitigated form of tyranny, it would still represent a denial of freedom" (Galleani 2012, 42). Anarchists reject "the domination of a majority over the minority, we aspire to realise the autonomy of the individual within the freedom of association, the independence of his thought, of his life, of his development, of his destiny, freedom from violence, from caprice and from the domination of the majority, as well as of various minorities"

(ibid 61. Also see ibid, 50). This opposition to the domination of the majority went alongside the awareness that majorities are often wrong and can have harmful views (Malatesta 2015, 63–4). In a homophobic and transphobic society, for example, the government of the majority would result in laws oppressing queer people.

Anarchists did not, however, think that modern states have ever been based on majority rule. They consistently described them as institutions based on minority rule by a political ruling class in their interests and the interests of the economic ruling class. This included self-described democratic governments. In 1873 Michael Bakunin wrote that,

> modern capitalist production and bank speculation … get along very nicely, though, with so-called representative democracy. This latest form of the state, based on the pseudo-sovereignty of a sham popular will, supposedly expressed by pseudo-representatives of the people in sham popular assemblies, combines the two main conditions necessary for their success: state centralization, and the actual subordination of the sovereign people to the intellectual minority that governs them, supposedly representing them but invariably exploiting them (Bakunin 1990, 13).

Given this Bakunin thought that,

> Between a monarchy and the most democratic republic there is only one essential difference: in the former, the world of officialdom oppresses and robs the people for the greater profit of the privileged and propertied classes, as well as to line its own pockets, in the name of the monarch; in the latter, it oppresses and robs the people in exactly the same way, for the benefit of the same classes and the same pockets, but in the name of the people's will. In a republic a fictitious people, the 'legal nation' supposedly represented by the state, smothers the real, live people. But it will scarcely be any easier on the people if the cudgel with which they are beaten is called the people's cudgel (Bakunin 1990, 23).

The same position was advocated by Malatesta. He wrote in 1924 that, "even in the most democratic of democracies it is always a small minority that rules and imposes its will and interests by force". As a result "Democracy is a lie, it is oppression and is in reality, oligarchy; that is, government by the few to the advantage of a privileged class" (Malatesta 1995, 78, 77. Also see Berkman 2003, 71–3). The anarchist critique of democratic governments should not be interpreted as the claim that all forms of government are equally bad. Both Bakunin and Malatesta also claimed that the worst democracy was preferable to the best monarchy or dictatorship (Bakunin 1980, 144; Malatesta 1995, 77).

Given their analysis of the state as an institution which serves the interests of the capitalist class, anarchists concluded that a truly democratic government, where the majority rule, could only possibly be established in a socialist society based on the common ownership of the means of production (Malatesta 1995, 73). They did not, however, think that this could actually happen. Since the modern state is a centralised and hierarchical institution which rules over an extended area of territory, it follows that state power can only in practice be wielded by a minority of elected representatives. These representatives would not be mere delegates mandated to complete

a specific tasks. They would be governors who had the power to issue commands and impose their will on others via force or the threat of it. As a result they would constitute a distinct political ruling class. Over time these representatives would be transformed by the activity of exercising state power and become primarily concerned with reproducing and expanding their power over the working classes (Baker 2019).

In rejecting what they called democracy, historical anarchists were not rejecting the idea that collective decisions should be made in general assemblies. Historical anarchists consistently argued that in an anarchist society collective decisions would be made in workplace and community assemblies. Anarchists referred to these assemblies using various terms, such as labour councils, communes, and associations of production and consumption (Rocker 2004, 47–8; Malatesta 2014, 60; Goldman 1996, 68). The National Confederation of Labour (CNT), which was a Spanish anarcho-syndicalist trade union, proposed in its 1936 Zaragoza congress resolutions that decisions in a libertarian communist society would be made in "general assemblies", "communal assemblies" and "popular assemblies" (Peirats 2011, 103, 105, 107).

A few historical anarchists did refer to anarchism as democracy without the state but they were in the minority. During the 1930s the Russian anarcho-syndicalist Gregori Maximoff rejected both "Bourgeois democracy" and the "democracy" of "the Soviet republic" on the grounds that, contrary to what they claimed, they were not based on the genuine rule of the people. They were instead states in which a minority ruling class exercised power in order to reproduce the domination and exploitation of the working class. Given this, Maximoff advocated the abolition of the state in favour of the self-management of society via federations of workplace and community councils. He regarded such a system of self-management as genuine democracy. He wrote, "true democracy, developed to its logical extreme, can become a reality only under the conditions of a communal confederation. This democracy is Anarchy" (Maximoff 2015, 37–8). On another occasion Maximoff declared that "Anarchism is, in the final analysis, nothing but democracy in its purest and most extreme form" (Maximoff n.d., 19). In arguing that anarchism was "true democracy" Maximoff was not advocating different forms of association or decision-making to other anarchists. He was only using different language to describe the same anarchist ideas.

The majority of anarchists did not refer to an anarchist society as 'true democracy' because for them 'democracy' necessarily referred to a system of government. A key reason why historical anarchists associated 'democracy' with government was that anarchism as a social movement emerged in parallel with, and in opposition to, another social movement called Social Democracy. Although the term 'social democracy' has come to mean any advocate of a capitalist welfare state, it originally referred to a kind of revolutionary socialist who aimed at the abolition of all forms of class rule. In order to achieve this goal Social Democrats argued that the working class should organise into trade unions and form socialist political parties which engaged in electoral politics. This was viewed as the means through which the working class would both win immediate improvements, such as the eight hour day or legislation against child labour, and overthrow class society through the conquest of state power and the establishment of a workers' state. Social Democrats argued that in so doing socialist political parties would overthrow bourgeois democracy and establish social or proletarian democracy (Taber 2021). Anarchists responded by making various arguments against Social Democracy, such as critiques of trying to achieve socialism via the conquest of state power. The consequence of this is that one of the main occasions when historical anarchists used the words 'democracy' and 'democrat' was when they were referring to Social Democracy (Kropotkin 2014, 371–82; Berkman 2003, 89–102).

One of the great ironies of history is that the Russian anarchist Michael Bakunin initially used the language of 'democracy'. In 1868 he co-founded an organisation called The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and wrote a programme for it which committed the group to the goal of abolishing capitalism and the state (Eckhart 2016, 3; Bakunin 1973, 173–5). The language of 'democracy' was echoed by the anarchist led Spanish section of the 1st International even though it was formally opposed to the strategy of electoral politics. The September 1871 resolutions of the Valencia Conference declared that "the real Federal Democratic Republic is common property, anarchy and economic federation, or in other words the free worldwide federation of free agricultural and industrial worker's associations" (Eckhart 2016, 166. For resolutions against electoral politics see ibid, 160). This language did not catch on among anarchists and by 1872 Bakunin had definitely abandoned it. This can be seen in the fact that when he founded a new organisation, which he viewed as the successor to the original Alliance, he decided to name it the Alliance of Social Revolutionaries (Bakunin 1990, 235–6, note 134; Eckhart 2016, 355).

Historical Anarchist Methods of Decision-Making

Having established what historical anarchists thought about democracy, I shall now turn to their views on collective systems of decision-making. Historical anarchists proposed a variety of different mechanisms through which decisions in general assemblies could be made. It can be difficult to establish how exactly historical anarchists made decisions because it is a topic which does not appear frequently in surviving articles, pamphlets or books. Those sources which are available do nonetheless establish a number of clear positions. Some anarchists advocated majority vote, whilst other anarchists advocated unanimous decisions in which everyone involved had to agree on a proposal. Other anarchists advocated both depending upon the context, such as the size of an organisation or the kind of decision being made. It should be kept in mind that what historical anarchists referred to as systems of 'unanimous agreement' was not modern consensus decision-making in different language. I have found no evidence of historical anarchists using the key features of consensus as a process, such as the specific steps a facilitator moves the meeting through or the distinction between standing aside and blocking a proposal.

Malatesta advocated a combination of unanimous agreement and majority voting. He wrote that in an anarchist society "everything is done to reach unanimity, and when this is impossible, one would vote and do what the majority wanted, or else put the decision in the hands of a third party who would act as arbitrator" (Malatesta n.d., 30). This position was articulated in response to other anarchists who thought that all decisions should be made exclusively by unanimous agreement and rejected the use of voting. He recalled that,

> in 1893 … there were many Anarchists, and even at present there are a few, who, mistaking the form for the essence, and laying more stress on words than on things, made for themselves a sort of ritual of 'true' anarchism, which held them in bondage, which paralyzed their power of action, and even led them to make absurd and grotesque assertions. Thus going from the principle: The Majority has no right to impose its will on the minority; they came to the conclusion that nothing should ever be done without the unanimous consent of all concerned. But as they had condemned political elections, which serve only to choose a master, they could not

> use the ballot as a mere expression of opinion, and considered every form of voting as anti-anarchistic (Malatesta 2016, 17. Also see Turcato 2012, 141).

This opposition to all forms of voting allegedly led to farcical situations. This included endless meetings where nothing was agreed and groups forming to publish a paper and then dissolving without having published anything due to minor disagreements (Malatesta 2016, 17–8). From these experiences Malatesta concluded that "social life" would be impossible if "united action" was only allowed to occur when there was "unanimous agreement". In situations where it was not possible to implement multiple solutions simultaneously or effective solidarity required a uniform action, "it is reasonable, fair and necessary for the minority to defer to the majority" (Malatesta 2016, 19). To illustrate this point Malatesta gave the example of constructing a railway. He wrote,

> If a railroad, for instance, were under consideration, there would be a thousand questions as to the line of the road, the grade, the material, the type of the engines, the location of the stations, etc., etc., and opinions on all these subjects would change from day to day, but if we wish to finish the railroad we certainly cannot go on changing everything from day to day, and if it is impossible to exactly suit everybody, it is certainly better to suit the greatest possible number; always, of course, with the understanding that the minority has all possible opportunity to advocate its ideas, to afford them all possible facilities and materials to experiment, to demonstrate, and to try to become a majority (Malatesta 2016, 18–9).

This is not to say that Malatesta viewed an anarchist society as one where people voted on every decision. He thought that farmers, for example, would not need to vote on what season to plant crops since this is something they already know the answer to. Given this, Malatesta predicted that over time people would need to vote on fewer decisions due to them learning the best solution to various problems from experience (Malatesta n.d., 30).

Malatesta was not alone in disagreeing with anarchists who opposed all systems of voting. During the 1907 International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam, the Belgian anarchist Georges Thonar argued that the participants should not engage in voting and declared himself "opposed to any vote". The minutes of the congress claim that this caused "a minor incident. Some participants applaud noisily, while lively protest is also to be heard" (Antonioli 2009, 90). The French anarchist and revolutionary syndicalist Pierre Monatte then gave the following speech,

> I cannot understand how yesterday's vote can be considered anti-anarchist, in other words authoritarian. It is absolutely impossible to compare the vote with which an assembly decides a procedural question to universal suffrage or to parliamentary polls. We use votes at all times in our trade unions and, I repeat, I do not see anything that goes against our anarchist principles.
>
> There are comrades who feel the need to raise questions of principle on everything, even the smallest things. Unable as they are to understand the spirit of our anti-parliamentarianism, they place importance on the mere act of placing a slip of paper in an urn or raising one's hand to show one's opinion (Antonioli 2009, 90–1).

Malatesta's advocacy of majority voting was also shared by other anarchists. The Ukrainian anarchist Peter Arshinov wrote in 1928 that "[a]lways and everywhere, practical problems among us have been resolved by majority vote. Which is perfectly understandable, for there is no other way of resolving these things in an organization that is determined to act" (Arshinov 1928, 241).

The same commitment to majority voting was implemented in the CNT, which had a membership of 850,000 by February 1936. (Ackelsberg 2005, 62) The anarchist José Peirats explained the CNT's system of decision-making as follows. The CNT was a confederation of trade unions which were "autonomous units" linked together "only by the accords of a general nature adopted at national congresses, whether regular or extraordinary". As a result of this, individual unions were "free to reach any decision which is not detrimental to the organisation as a whole". The "guidelines of the Confederation" were decided and directly regulated by the autonomous trade unions themselves. This was achieved through a system in which "the basis for any local, regional, or national decision" was "the general assembly of the union, where every member has the right to attend, raise and discuss issues, and vote on proposals". The "resolutions" of these assemblies were "adopted by majority vote attenuated by proportional representation". The agenda of regional or national congresses were "devised by the assemblies" themselves. These general assemblies in turn "debated" each topic on the agenda and after reaching an agreement amongst themselves elected mandated delegates to attend the congress as "the executors of their collective will" (Peirats 2011, 5).

Anarchists who advocated majority voting disagreed about whether or not decisions passed by majority vote should be binding on everyone involved in the decision-making process, or only those who had voted in favour of them. Malatesta argued that the congress resolutions of a federation should only be binding on the sections who had voted for them. He wrote in 1900 that since a federation is a free association which does not have the right "to impose upon the individual federated members" it followed that "any group just like any individual must not accept any collective resolution unless it is worthwhile and agreeable to them". As a result, decisions made at the federation's congresses, which were attended by mandated delegates representing each group that composed the federation, were "binding only to those who accept them, and only for as long as they accept them" (Malatesta 2019, 210, 206).

Malatesta repeated this view in 1927. He claimed that congresses of specific anarchist organisations, which are organisations composed exclusively of anarchist militants, "do not lay down the law" or "impose their own resolutions on others". Their resolutions are only "suggestions, recommendations, proposals to be submitted to all involved, and do not become binding and enforceable except on those who accept them, and for as long as they accept them". (Malatesta 2014, 489–90) The function of congresses was to,

> maintain and increase personal relationships among the most active comrades, to coordinate and encourage programmatic studies on the ways and means of taking action, to acquaint all on the situation in the various regions and the action most urgently needed in each; to formulate the various opinions current among the anarchists and draw up some kind of statistics from them. (ibid, 489. See also ibid, 439–40)

Malatesta's position on congress resolutions should not be interpreted as the claim that a person could do whatever they wanted within an organisation without consideration for the organisation's common programme or how their actions effected others. In 1929 he clarified that

within an organisation each member should "feel the need to coordinate his actions with those of his fellow members", "do nothing that harms the work of others and, thus, the common cause" and "respect the agreements that have been made – except when wishing sincerely to leave the association". He thought that people "who do not feel and do not practice that duty should be thrown out of the association" (Malatesta 1995, 107–8).

A more concrete understanding of what this position on congress resolutions looked like can be established by examining actual anarchist congresses. In 1907 anarchist delegates representing groups in Europe, the United States and Argentina attended the previously mentioned International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam. Proposals or resolutions at the congress were adopted by majority vote and each delegate had a single vote. How this was implemented varied depending upon the kind of decision being made. On the first day of the congress there was a disagreement about the agenda. One faction proposed that the topic of anti-militarism should be removed from the agenda and that this topic should instead be discussed at the separate congress of the International Antimilitarist Association. The other faction argued that the anarchists would have to formulate a position on anti-militarism at their anarchist congress before they attended a distinct congress attended by people who were not anarchists. The first proposal won 33 votes and the second 38 votes. Since only one proposal could be implemented the majority position won and the congress included anti-militarism on its agenda (Antonioli 2009, 36–7. For the later discussion on anti-militarism see ibid, 137–8).

Over several days the congress passed a variety of resolutions via majority vote. These resolutions were not binding on the minority. As the Dutch delegate Christiaan Cornelissen explained, "[v]oting is to be condemned only if it binds the minority. This is not the case here, and we are using the vote as an easy means of determining the size of the various opinions that are being confronted" (ibid, 91). The proposed resolution against alcohol consumption was not even put to a formal vote due to almost every delegate being opposed to it (ibid, 150–52). In situations where there was no need to have a single resolution, multiple resolutions were passed providing that each received a majority vote. This occurred when four slightly different resolutions on syndicalism and the general strike were adopted (ibid, 132–5). The congress minutes respond to this situation by claiming,

> The reader may be rather surprised that these four motions could have all been passed, given the evident contradictions between them. It defies the parliamentary norm, but it is a conscious transgression. In order that the opinion of the majority not suffocate, or seem to suffocate, that of the minority, the majority presented the single motions one by one for vote. All four had a majority of votes for. In consequence, all four were approved (ibid, 135).

Other anarchists argued that decisions passed by majority vote should be binding on every member of the organisation. In June 1926 a group of anarchists, who had participated in the Russian revolution and been forced to flee to Paris to escape Bolshevik repression, issued the Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists (Draft). The text made a series of proposals about how specific anarchist organisations should be structured. This included the position that the collectively made decisions of congresses should be binding on every section and member of a specific anarchist organisation such that everyone involved is expected to carry out the majority decision. The platform states that,

> such an agreement and the federal union based on it, will only become reality, rather than fiction or illusion, on the conditions sine qua non that all the participants in the agreement and the Union fulfil most completely the duties undertaken, and conform to communal decisions. In a social project, however vast the federalist basis on which it is built, there can be no decisions without their execution. It is even less admissible in an anarchist organisation, which exclusively takes on obligations with regard to the workers and their social revolution. Consequently, the federalist type of anarchist organisation, while recognising each member's rights to independence, free opinion, individual liberty and initiative, requires each member to undertake fixed organisation duties, and demands execution of communal decisions (The Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad 1926a. Also see Arshinov 1928, 240–1).

Within a specific anarchist organisation differences of opinion about its programme, tactics and strategy would of course emerge. In such situations the authors of The Platform later clarified that there were three main potential outcomes. In the case of "insignificant differences" the minority would defer to the majority position in order to maintain "the unity" of the organisation. If "the minority were to consider sacrificing its view point an impossibility" then further "discussion" would occur. This would either culminate in an agreement being formed such that "two divergent opinions and tactics" co-existed with one another or there would be "a split with the minority breaking away from the majority to found a separate organisation" (Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad 1926b, 218).

The position that decisions passed by majority vote should be binding on every member of the organisation was not a uniquely platformist one. The CNT's constitution, which was printed on each membership card, declared that "Anarcho-syndicalism and anarchism recognise the validity of majority decisions". Although the CNT recognised "the sovereignty of the individual" and a militant's right to have their own point of view and defend it, members of the CNT were "obliged to comply with majority decisions" and "accept and agree to carry out the collective mandate taken by majority decision" even when they are against a militant's "own feelings". This position was justified on the grounds that, "[w]ithout this there is no organisation" (Quoted in Peirats 1974, 19–20).

Members of the CNT did nonetheless disagree about whether or not this system of majority voting, in which decisions were binding on all members, should be applied to much smaller specific anarchist organisations. The Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) was a specific anarchist organisation composed of affinity groups. These affinity groups had between 4 and 20 members. The FAI initially made most of their decisions via unanimous agreement and rarely used voting. In 1934 the Z and Nervio affinity groups pushed for the FAI to adopt binding agreements established through majority vote. The Afinidad affinity group agreed with the necessity of such a system within the CNT but opposed it being implemented within small specific anarchist organisations or affinity groups. After a confrontational FAI meeting Afinidad left the organisation in protest (Ealham 2015, 77; Guillamón 2014, 28–9).

Conclusion

Having systematically gone through the evidence, it is clear that modern and historical anarchists advocate the same core positions. What many modern anarchists label as democracy

without the state, historical anarchists just called free association or anarchy. At least one historical anarchist, Maximoff, referred to anarchism as democracy without the state several decades before it became a popular expression. Historical anarchists made decisions via majority vote, unanimous agreement or a combination of the two. Modern anarchists use the same basic systems of decision-making. The main difference is that modern anarchists often use consensus decision-making processes, which historical anarchists did not use.

This, in turn, raises the question of whether or not anarchists should use the language of democracy. In a society where people have been socialised to view democracy as a good thing, it can be beneficial to describe anarchism as a kind of direct democracy. Yet doing so also comes with potential downsides, such as people confusing anarchism for the idea that society should be run by an extremely democratic state that makes decisions within general assemblies and then imposes these decisions on everyone via the institutionalised violence of the law, police and prisons. Independently of what language modern anarchists choose to use, our task remains the same as historical anarchists: during the course of the class struggle we must develop, through a process of experimentation in the present, the forms of association, deliberation and decision-making which simultaneously enable effective action and prefigure a society with neither master nor subject.

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Zoe Baker
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