Review

Visions of council democracy: Castoriadis, Lefort, Arendt

Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen:
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Political life in the West has long been seduced by the dream of a post-democratic future. Over the last 40 years, intellectuals of all stripes, from the technocratic right to the post-totalitarian left, have called for a variety of ways to tame democracy. Responding to these trends, political theorists have sought to retrieve the meaning of key words in our political vocabulary, including 'sovereignty', 'constituent power' and indeed 'democracy'. The book under review is an engagingly written and provocative contribution to this literature.

Benjamin Ask Popp-Madsen offers a lively account of the history of councils as what Arendt once called 'the only democratic alternative we know' (p. 138). The council system is an expression of 'the most spectacular of human powers' – that of creating 'new forms of political regime' (p. 9), and indeed of toppling empires. Often overlooked, workers' and soldiers' councils were 'responsible for ending World War I in Germany' (p. 34), and for the collapse of the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian empires (p. 2, cf. pp. 5, 68). In their manifold incarnations, democratic councils have sprung up over centuries as spontaneous, 'almost natural', forms of political self-organisation, especially in times of 'political disintegration' (p. 42) – from mediaeval towns to indigenous communes in Chiapas to Venezuelan *barrios*.

The core puzzle addressed in the book can be described as follows. The experience of democracy has profoundly shaped – if not defined – the modern world, and yet its constitutional form remains unknown. Even in ordinary speech today, democracy is typically qualified as (say) 'representative', 'constitutional', 'elite', or 'electoral' – as if it stood for sheer force, without inherent principles or aims. Every political regime begins with a democratic act, as Hobbes and Locke recognised, and virtually every country today claims to be 'democratic'. But the experience of genuine self-government has remained fleeting and elusive. The spark of collective autonomy, it seems, has either consumed everything around it in

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a revolutionary conflagration, or it has been smothered by constitutions, parliaments and political parties.

It is to counter this dominant view that Popp-Madsen proposes a 'theory of council democracy as political form' (p. 8). Prior to presenting this theory in the final chapter, the book provides a historical account of democratic councils in the 20th century (chapter 1), and four chapters that reconstruct the 'political theory of council democracy' from Bakunin to Luxemburg (chapter 2) to Castoriadis, Arendt and Lefort (chapters 3 to 5).

The core event that sustains the argument of the book is the emergence of revolutionary councils during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. It not only inspired the development of a 'positive conception of politics' in Arendt and Castoriadis, which was previously absent in their work (p. 136), but it also suggested that a 'plural' and 'self-limiting' revolution is possible (p. 122). Indeed, this is the way that the Budapest Council understood itself. And, more importantly, every articulation of the experience of workers' councils has pointed to the same feature, namely, the 'dual character' of councils as organs of both insurrection and self-government (p. 184). What this implies, according to Popp-Madsen, is (theoretically) revolutionary: contrary to a centuries-long tradition, stretching from Sieyès to Schmitt to Rancière, the constituent power of the people (as expressed in councils) is not inherently unruly and normless, but instead is guided and limited by 'immanent principles' (pp. 184–185).

The 'fundamental principle' Popp-Madsen finds in revolutionary councils is 'the mutual intertwinement of constituent power and constituted form' (p. 185). That is, workers' councils always tried to stabilise, without repressing, the constituent power. To this end, they used institutions that (paradoxically) subvert institutionalisation, such as imperative mandate, instant recall, election by lot and rotation. Thus, they enacted the kind of post-foundationalist political theory developed by Arendt, Castoriadis and Lefort in the wake of the Hungarian Revolution.

To briefly sketch this fascinating part of the argument, all three thinkers begin, in a broadly phenomenological way, from events experienced by 'worldly' historical actors, rather than from anthropological, legal or moral premises. Politics, in their view, cannot be domesticated by transcendent measures or 'figures of thought' (p. 166). Echoing Marx, they regard political forms as historical discoveries (cf. p. 13), and not as perennial alternatives. This allows them to break with inherited concepts of the state, law and order, to open new horizons for political life. Thus, when read anew in the light of 1956 and our current moment, Castoriadis, Arendt and Lefort are thinkers who rescue the experience of council communism by transposing it from 'discourse of Marxism' to the 'discourse of democracy' (p. 166).

This book makes three central contributions. First, Popp-Madsen shows that Castoriadis's conception of politics as the groundless, 'ex nihilo', self-institution of society has roots in his analysis of the Hungarian councils. And to the extent that the councils embodied the 'immanent principles' discussed earlier, it is wrong to

align his thought with the decisionist language of Schmitt. Second, turning to Lefort, Popp-Madsen shows that his early work also stood for a 'savage democracy' that resembles Castoriadis's and Arendt's emphasis on instituting power and new beginnings (p. 110). Lefort's reading of the experience of 1956 thus provides an alternative vision of what democracy could look like, namely as the institutionalisation of uncertainty, conflict and plurality among actors involved in the quest to occupy the empty place of sovereign power. Finally, Arendt appears as a constitutionalist thinker concerned with the best way to establish, rather than simply limit, power (see Volk, 2015).

Popp-Madsen's contribution goes beyond historicising the authors discussed to retrieve inspiring visions. The book reminds us – somewhat disturbingly, but also in a liberating way – that we may not know what genuine democracy is. The protean, and seemingly formless, character of democracy may be its Achilles heel, not least as it has become an empty signifier legitimising almost any conceivable contemporary regime. But democracy may also have an undisputable (if minimalist) essence, which is the experience of public freedom and the power to change the terms of our collective existence. This experience, which may be synonymous with history understood as transformative social praxis, is arguably constitutive of the modern condition. Given the dissolution of every marker of certainty (such as natural or divine law), democracy – and particularly council democracy, as Popp-Madsen argues – has become the 'almost natural' way to organise our collective existence (p. 42). Totalitarian, fascist and populist regimes have gravely distorted this experience, but to judge from the authors discussed, the modern experience of collective freedom may be irreversible, rendering a return to autocratic rule legitimised by extra-human absolutes literally unthinkable.

None of this means that the future of democracy is secure. Indeed, alluding to the present surge of technopopulist regimes worldwide, the author insists that 'self-government of the people might only survive by being radicalised' (pp. viii, 197). To spell out what this radicalisation could mean is a third contribution of the book – in my view, the most ambitious but also problematic one. To radicalise democracy seems to mean, for Popp-Madsen, 'to deepen and widen democratic practices beyond, beneath and besides the institutions of liberal democracy' (p. 6). Beneath such institutions lies the capitalist economy, which workers' councils famously democratised (cf. p. 1). Beyond and besides liberal institutions, we find social movements, such as the post-2008 'Square movements', which also challenged the liberal separation of politics from economics, while taking democracy to the streets, making the extraordinary act of self-alteration an everyday occurrence without falling into anarchy or normlessness (p. 196). The book's wager on radical democracy thus seems to be to reconstruct the 'institutions that subvert institutionalisation' developed in democratic councils to inspire and guide 'democratic protest and experimentation' (p. 5). No 'blueprint' is intended, only inspiring 'visions' (p. 5). And yet Popp-Madsen also proposes a 'theory of council

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democracy' (p. 8) and 'an alternative understanding of constituent power' (p. 171). Indeed, as the book progresses, the stakes become much higher, culminating in a critique of the entire western tradition of political thought insofar as it allows no space for (democratic) formlessness or excess (p. 177).

This critique of the tradition finds powerful support in the work of Arendt, Castoriadis and Lefort. But in order to do so it would have to do more justice to the way these thinkers understood themselves. While the author convincingly shows that the history of workers' councils can be fruitfully transposed from the 'discourse of socialism' to the 'discourse of democracy', it must also be said that Arendt and Lefort were equally concerned with the discourse of political theology. From this perspective, what is essential to democracy is a 'paradoxical unity of law and anarchy' (Vatter, 2021, p. 286), which leads Lefort and Arendt to insist on the importance of authoritative principles that *transcend* and limit the constituent power of the people.

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