This Is What Direct Democracy Looks Like

Book review

Marieke Bivar

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a review of

Deciding For Ourselves: The Promise of Direct Democracy, Cindy Milstein, Editor. AK Press, 2020, **akpress.org**

"There are always movements, societies and communities in existence that are intimate and locally organized, where no one person owns every damn thing, and people can talk to each other and work things out among themselves; where everybody is relatively equal. Our most immediate work should be to learn how to adjust our vision so we can see these examples for what they are."

—Modibo Kadalie, from "Pan-Africanism, Social Ecology, and Intimate Direct democracy."

Deciding For Ourselves is a collection of writings on direct democracy, a practice that can range from people organizing daily life together in a housing squat to those from neighboring regions coming together to reimagine governance in the wake of war, ecological disaster, or uprising.

These accounts and reflections are stupendous. They empower us with evidence of something we already know, from somewhere deep: that we have the power to govern ourselves and our communities.

The systems we live under work hard to make us believe that we are not capable of self-governance, that we need protection from ourselves and each other. The State constantly reminds us that we need bosses, cops and presidents—powerful keepers to watch over us.

In *Deciding*, we see that people, from the Indigenous communities of the so-called Americas to the cantons of the Rojava Revolution in Syria, are leaving these ideas of power behind and turning to each other for guidance instead.

The essays in this book are collected and edited by Cindy Milstein, activist, death doula, author, co-author and editor of a number of books on anarchism including *Anarchism and Its Aspirations*.

This anthology serves as a collective remembering of alternatives to the current systems, and these examples are offered to us by people directly involved in these projects and struggles for collective autonomy along with their allies and supporters. Their reflections are thoughtful and they are careful to identify how the current systems fail yet also shape these movements and projects.

In "Restoring the Old Ways in the Anishnabe Nation" Shannon Chief, traditional knowledge keeper from the wolf clan of the Anishnabe nation, based in so-called Quebec, Canada, explains how the Algonquin Anishnabe "old pike" constitution "has always been there, since time immemorial." But Canadian colonialism has tried to erase the memory of this traditional system of governance, leaving the Anishnabe with "no sense of who [they] really are." Chief and others are working hard to restore knowledge of Anishnabe political traditions in order to self-govern within a culturally appropriate political framework.

This sense of loss, of longing to reclaim and relearn how to use collective power is all the more painful for Indigenous peoples and for Black people whose ancestors were brutally stolen and brought to the Americas as slaves. The State and centralized powers sever us from our own power and knowledge, and this violence is compounded by colonialism, intensified and perpetuated systemically against those it has robbed of self-determination.

The deep potential for self-governance that comes with shared needs and values is evident in the Guarani-Kaiowa occupation of abandoned land in the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, where people not only built much needed housing and infrastructure, but also a democratic process. A series of long debates on political stances, strategy, finances and how to function collectively laid the initial groundwork for a process residents could return to weekly for any issues that might arise.

"In this way," writes Cíntia Melo, a Brazilian anarchist activist, lawyer and writer who worked in solidarity with the people reappropriating the land, "residents ensured the sustainability of their community…until their homes were built and people were literally on solid ground."

Unlike the systems we are used to living under, direct democracy's goal is not to become set in stone or institutionalized. Each context calls for unique and adaptable approaches. Puerto Rico's people's assemblies are held in different towns and neighborhoods and address concerns specific to each community.

In France's Quartier Libre des Lentillières, a land occupation, and Greece's Notara 26, a refugee and migrant housing squat, residents hold regular general assemblies, while in Cheran, a self-governed municipality in Mexico, bonfires, assemblies and councils form a communal government structure. Each system of self-governance is a living, changing concept, and the complex work of reclaiming collective power takes time.

"It is easy to imagine flags hung upside down, uniforms worn inside out…but it is difficult to imagine a world without hierarchy," reflects Dilar Dirik, activist in the Kurdish women's movement and sociologist based in Europe. Dirik relates our need for "ready-made solutions" to the interwoven legacies of capitalism and patriarchy, and argues instead for a more holistic feminist politics that prioritizes considerations like care, sustainability, ecology and self-determination.

Echoing Shannon Chief, who sees Anishnabe governance as something that must begin locally and will require time, effort, and ample space for healing work, Dirik adds that "revolutionary processes require patience and love, hope and belief."

Besides the logistics of creating new ways or returning to traditional ways of living and deciding together, shared ritual and social events that "[nurture] community cohesiveness" are also essential to collective governance. In Guaraní-Kaiowá, parties and cultural activities provide this space, while for the Indigenous P'urhépecha people of Cherán, the tradition of building bonfires, which was used during the early days of their resistance to a destructive logging project, both provided a place for ceremony and gathering and would later be adapted into a fundamental part of their system of governance.

In Bon Pastor, a public housing estate in Barcelona, Spain, residents relied on the feast day of Saint-Joan to continue a tradition of dancing, lighting bonfires and drinking together to put conflict behind them at the start of each summer. In Christiania, Denmark, a former military fort that's been occupied and self-governed in some capacity since the 1970s, a public bathhouse serves as a public meeting place where everyone from "hard-boiled bike gang members to the softest hippie" gather to discuss freely.

The social connection created and maintained through shared ritual or social commons is essential to creating the kind of "intimate direct democracy" discussed by Modibo Kadalie in "Pan-Africanism, Social Ecology, and Intimate Direct Democracy." Kadalie is a Black revolutionary and union activist, and teacher. With his knowledge of movements and their foibles, he warns of how easily liberal forces can co-opt our collective longing for self-governance by providing us with so-called elected "representatives." Kadalie believes firmly that "participatory democracy is not direct democracy at all…it lacks the necessary intimacy…[and often means] participating in the conversation while someone else ultimately decides what to do."

The potential for our movements to be corralled into the sterile pen of the voting booth makes these accounts of people living and working together all the more precious. For direct democracy to thrive, we need spaces where "everything becomes possible…people feel seen and heard in their fullness [and] there is a sensual, bonding quality to social relations," as Milstein describes in the introduction.

We are used to the logic of the State creeping into our minds. Although the streets are filled with the beautiful righteous anger of the Black Lives Matter movement, and the examples of mutual aid networks and disability justice work that has kept so many people alive and connected through the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic are too many to count, our love, hope and belief are fragile.

Against the backdrop of the global rise of fascism and the cynical pandering and opportunism of disaster capitalism, it is hard to keep the faith. But we cannot let hope be taken from us. Because for every loss, and however brief some of these moments of "as if we were free" may be, they are still ours. As Milstein eloquently reflects in "Coda, Waking to Revolution," we can still add them to our history, as people who want freedom for ourselves and each other, so that "the next time, and the time after that/and perhaps even now,/ we'll know how to do-it-ourselves even more beautifully."

In this book, we can study our chosen history, learn from and with our extended ideological family, admire the fierceness of the people's imagination in the face of the State's repression of bodies and dreams. We can, most importantly, claim and see each other, in love and solidarity, and keep believing in the promise of direct democracy.

Marieke Bivar lives in Tiohtia:ke/Montréal, Canada, on stolen indigenous land. These days she sews masks, washes her hands and loves people from afar. She hopes to continue to learn about her history and privilege under white supremacy while building something new and beautiful from the ashes.

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