



# From Perception to Participation

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*By Raghav Sharma*

1648, 1848, 2048

The history of Western civilization over the last four centuries is a history of steadily decentralizing political legitimacy. The Peace of Westphalia, a legendary covenant marking the end of the Thirty Years' War in Europe, established in 1648 the principle of state sovereignty. Whereas once Central Europe's princes and kings all depended on the Catholic Church and the grace of God to sanctify their reign, emergent religious and political tension demanded a novel ideal—granting individual rulers exclusive dominion over matters both religious and political within





their own borders. As power thus shifted from the church to each monarch, Catholic hegemony over mainland Europe—intact since the fall of Rome—gave way to a multipolar balance of power governed solely by national interest.

Two hundred years later, the primacy of the monarch established at Westphalia came under attack by a new ideal: democracy. The year 1848, the so-called “Spring of Nations,” marked the culmination of popular struggles to establish liberal democracy in dozens of countries. Though few succeeded, the revolutionary wave which birthed them hastened the eradication of absolute monarchy in Europe. These failed revolts—with their rallying cry of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity!”—enshrined the Enlightenment ideal of democracy governed by reason as the only legitimate political authority, giving rise to the rapid global proliferation of liberal democracy in the early twentieth century.

Humanity is rapidly approaching another such turning point. Even discounting historical cycles, the first half of the twenty-first century clearly faces a normative crisis emerging from fissures set in motion nearly 200 years ago. Inherent to liberal democracy, these contradictions first reared their ugly heads in the early twentieth-century fascist movement, as expansionist authoritarian despots appropriated democratic institutions, intent on imposing their singular visions around the world. But not until the neoliberal era of the late twentieth century did liberal democracy lose its allure in the eyes of its subjects. With governments paying pseudo-religious deference to market logic, the global public’s faith in structures—ostensibly designed to enact the public will—has reached historic lows.

The multifaceted causes of this capital-induced crisis of democratic legitimacy can be attributed to liberal democracy’s representative nature. Modelled after the structures established by American and French gentry—during their eighteenth-century revolutions—to curb the general public’s influence on the government at large, liberal democracy served to transfer power from the monarchy to the bourgeoisie, and did so with wars justified by the rhetoric of populist liberation. Then, as today, political participation was restricted to the dominant socio-economic classes, the general public’s perfunctory role merely selecting among bourgeois representatives with virtually identical interests.



The unrestrained pursuit of these interests is what has brought the planet hurtling headfirst toward catastrophe. The economics of endless growth practiced by the bourgeoisie has robbed Earth of its natural wealth and thereby goaded Mother Nature into fighting back with a climate increasingly hostile to our species. The drums of war beat heavier by the day as economic circumstances grow more dire and resources become more scarce. Even more troubling is humanity's spiritual decay—robbed of the democratic fervor that once deified the individual will common to all people, the citizens of liberal democracies seem numb to their own impending demise. Far from the apathy of hedonism, the enemy within is learned helplessness. So many now demand so little from the world of which they once thought themselves a part.

In keeping with the trend of centuries past, the solution to this liberal democratic crisis is clear: political decentralization brought about by reintroducing grassroots direct democracy and systems of mutual aid that sustainably provide for people and their environment. This answer is by no means novel. It has been the cornerstone of socialist and anarchist theories since the mid-nineteenth century. But time and again, movements with these aims have been stamped out by authoritarians of all stripes. From the long knives of the Nazis to the Bolshevik gulags, from the secret police of the FBI to CIA assassinations around the globe, people's movements to decentralize the dominion of the nation-state have been met with horrific violence wherever and whenever they arose in the twentieth century.

Today, the liberal democracies that fought so brutally to maintain their privilege—compromising their own ideals along the way—now find themselves defenseless. The global pseudo-populist right-wing resurgence of 2016, in the absence of a viable left-wing alternative, poses an authoritarian threat to representative democracy unseen since the twentieth-century fascist plague. It couldn't be clearer that the contradictions inherent to the liberal democratic nation-state are collapsing the entire ideological project from within. This tumult must give rise to an alternative. The future of freedom from global autocracy is at stake, and in pursuit of this goal, only participatory collective power can turn the tide.



## Deliberation and the Perceptual Void

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The fundamental hypocrisy of liberal democracy is its restriction of political power to the dominant classes. Elections, dependent on culturally constructed behavioral norms and the vast amounts of time and wealth demanded by campaigns, are exclusively the domain of the socioeconomic elite. So too is the franchise itself a mechanism for political exclusion. Although outlawing political exclusion is often touted as a solution to unequal power relations, historically accumulated privilege and the inherently fragile nature of democratic reform perpetually reduce the role of marginalized communities in the democratic process.

Marginalization in an ostensibly universal system demands the wholesale delegitimization of entire social classes. This delegitimization is accomplished by recourse to reason, representative democracy's Enlightenment-era bedrock. The suggestion, for example, that women lack the emotional fortitude for public discourse—or that blacks lack the intellectual rigor to vote wisely—establishes as deviant the perceptual capacities of these classes and belittles their rational potential. This inability to match the reason of the white man (determined, of course, by the white man himself) is what justifies the marginalization and exclusion from the polity which is historically characteristic of liberal democracy.

Perceptual deviance is thus the defining hallmark of democratic exclusion. The hysterical emotions of the woman, the submissive intellect of the African, the violent nature of the felon—these traits distinguish their bearers as ill-equipped for collective decision-making in structures designed by and for the neurotypical white male. To allow misguided perception into the sphere of rational governance, representative democracy's founders claim, would surrender the reins of society to the mentally inadequate, and ideological sacrifices must be made if the ideology itself is to survive. This blatant contradiction at the heart of liberal democracy suggests that perceptual deviance is not limited to marginalized communities. If even the hyper-rational white man could accept such a grotesque violation of the ideal to which he ascribes universality, something in the nature of perception itself must readily accommodate such distortion.



A thought experiment: consider our understanding of the cosmos. The atavistic view of a fixed galaxy comprised of immutable points of heavenly light has long since given way to an understanding of the stars as constantly shifting material of the same basic nature as the atoms in our own bodies. Science has also revealed that the stars in the night sky are shadows of the past—light travelling to Earth over distances so vast and at speeds so unimaginable that observers cannot perceive its true nature.

Suppose one reduces the scope of this thought experiment, restricting it to the realm of earthly perception. The temporal gap between object and subject remains. The divide between being and sensation—Kant’s *noumenon* and *phenomenon*—persists for every individual in each of the sensory modalities. Our perception of a moving object inherently lags behind the actual position of the object at any given moment. Even a stable object, states Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, cannot be observed without the act of observation itself posing a perceptual hurdle by virtue of the ceaseless swirling of the electron cloud.

This same fundamental uncertainty also problematizes political perception. The individual ability to analyze political conditions at any given moment is hopelessly imprecise because the accumulated experience that determines the mode of analysis employed by each subject is so voluminous. To suggest, then, that a specific class is burdened by deviant perception falsely implies the existence of such a thing as pure perception unfiltered by experience. Only when the collective experience of one class becomes a political norm does the worldview engendered by that experience become the standard to which other analytical modes must align.

Such is the case with liberal democracy. By nature aggregative—indicative of the empiricist bias toward quantitative evidence in Western Enlightenment thought—it interprets the public will through structures that inherently privilege the bourgeois white male’s perspective, both through socioeconomic gatekeeping of the chambers of power and legal barriers to the public’s already limited political participation. Defending such institutions from authoritarian assault simply reinforces the marginalization that right-wing populism feeds on, while doing nothing to protect authoritarianism’s intended victims.



This intrinsic, dualistic flaw of representative government will yield only to direct, deliberative democracy. By bringing people into the day-to-day act of forging their own political environment, direct democracy preempts the disempowerment felt when the political realm is ceded to socioeconomic elites. Deliberation also opens the realm of political discourse to lived experience, a form of reasoning that the culturally determined options offered by representative democracy exclude. Rather than being pandered to by candidates dependent on polling and market research for human connection, participants in deliberative, direct democracies can publicly offer practical and personal reasons for their proposed policies and, in doing so, foster the civic values of discourse and compromise so sorely lacking in the hyperpartisan charade of representation.

## The Issue of Scope

To suggest that a thoroughly depoliticized population—conditioned to engage exclusively at the ballot box—could somehow transition to direct democracy might seem hopelessly utopian. Making deliberation the responsibility of every citizen seems incompatible with both the highly specific time constraints of the modern wage-laborer as well as the all-pervasive public aversion to politics in general. But just as citizens of liberal democracies have been conditioned into political apathy by decades of elite dominance and capitalist alienation, so too can they be conditioned into participation by revolutionary social practices.

This sea change demands effort extending far beyond politics itself, into ostensibly apolitical personal realms which in fact are the canvas upon which political patterns assert themselves. By restructuring spheres of human experience outside the explicit jurisdiction of the state to conform with deliberative and participatory principles, disaffected citizens of representative democracies can create conditions conducive to the eventual eradication of state power. No individual, once empowered by deliberative participation in every sphere of social life, could willingly cede to the coercion inherent in the liberal democratic nation-state.

Can the state itself help democratize these spheres? That depends on the nature of the interaction in question. Where states play a very little role to begin with—say,



childrearing—the potential for democratization depends entirely on participants’ efforts. But in spheres of social life where governments are thoroughly ingrained—worker-employer relations or property rights—reckoning with state power is an essential hurdle to any attempt at establishing revolutionary interpersonal relations. Some state powers, such as that to establish school curricula, can be renegotiated within the realm of liberal democracy. Other powers, such as policing or democratic procedure, are impossible to seize from the state without radical measures. To the extent that the state can cooperate in democratization, its participation should be seen as merely a means to the end of creating systems of power that run counter to liberal democratic coercion.

The first and most significant sphere to be democratized is the family, the primary locus of social learning for any sentient organism. Dominance of children by their parents is the first form of authoritarian conditioning individuals need to escape so they can participate in political life. Parents aiming to raise politically engaged children can begin by offering children basic choices from as early an age as possible. Within reason, even toddlers can be empowered through simple binary decisions, such as which book to read at bedtime or which meal to eat for dinner. Older children can be exposed to more complex choices that demand deliberation to reach an answer, such as which school to attend or where to vacation. By introducing children early on to the power of making their own decisions and the responsibility of providing reasons for their choices, parents can raise a generation equipped for more profound political engagement.

Empowering children at home is not enough if society doesn’t also embody democratic values. The second sphere to be democratized in the lifecycle of a political participant in the making is education. Since state-imposed education demands strict adherence to an authoritative pedagogy, politically motivated parents—ideally in groups that are themselves participatory and deliberative—can devise lessons in civics and history that unearth knowledge concealed by state curricula. More significantly, such supplemental education provides an opportunity to educate children about effective deliberative procedure—a skill sorely lacking in individuals raised in the competitive public school environment. Children who



learn to listen carefully and assert themselves without silencing others—whether overtly or through microaggressions—will know how to participate fully in even the most contentious debates.

Education organized around participatory principles also enables children to learn how to design their own curricula. Rather than relying on textbooks written with the intent of mass indoctrination, children can ask trusted adults about any subject they wish to explore. The role of the adult, then, is to learn enough to teach the child or find someone who can. By nurturing the individual pursuit of knowledge, participatory education encourages specialization-based, individual inclinations instead of social expectations. By supplementing the rigid structure of traditional schooling, communities of adults can show the democratic participants of tomorrow the stark difference between authoritative and deliberative processes.

Understanding that difference will become all the more important upon the entry of the child into the labor force. Whereas participatory child-rearing is independent of the state and participatory education is an alternative to the state, participatory economic structures in contemporary society are absent largely because the state intervenes in favor of economic elites. The steady eradication of the labor movement in the neoliberal era alongside the erosion of workers' rights and the stagnation of wages have all helped fragment the solidarity needed for economic security. In the liberal democracies of Gerhard Schröder, Tony Blair, and Bill Clinton, “flexible” workers sacrifice to accommodate a global economy designed to serve the wealthy.

Deliberative processes can help flatten workplace hierarchies too. Establishing workers' cooperatives wherever possible is the ideal option. By deliberating about important business decisions, individuals learn vital managerial skills in a context far more inclusive than the traditional steady slog to a position of relative power demanded by our current economy. Cooperative workplaces subvert the traditional capitalist division of labor by encouraging the filling of every vital role by anyone available. Most important, in cooperatives workers retain all the surplus value now ceded to an exploitative capitalist class. This buffer of economic security gives workers an incentive to promote socially responsible productive



practices that sustain themselves without the damage to human life and the environment which the contemporary corporate sector is hopelessly linked in service of its dogma of endless growth.

As important as establishing new workers' cooperatives is, seizing and transforming today's hierarchical workplaces into cooperatives at the same time is even more important. This radical transformation demands a dedicated program of direct action sustained through a thriving communal infrastructure. Specifics are discussed below; of chief importance here is infrastructure's capacity to meet the material needs of all individuals engaged in radical resistance as well as their dependents. If workers cannot strike without endangering their loved ones, employers maintain an advantage that effectively nullifies radical energy latent in the workplace. Thus the primary function of any program of direct action ought to be mutual aid for those taking the action. By providing food, water, safe shelter, and medical care for striking workers, radical allies can enable and support the long-term resistance needed to push the bourgeoisie toward democratization.

Although radical energy in the workplace is most often harnessed in strikes to ensure fairer wages and safer working conditions, more radical tactics are needed to match the significantly more radical, transformative goal. Bosses are unlikely to give in to a transformative demand and thereby forfeit their class privilege. Although some bosses may be won over through deliberation with their employees, many will refuse to even negotiate. Still others will do so only as a token gesture, or use the failure of these mock negotiations as an excuse to disrupt strikes through violence.

Thus, the radical tactics deployed to democratize workplaces must extend beyond mere strikes to the loss of productive capacity on behalf of the bosses. Targeted property destruction against employers, sabotage of productive equipment, propaganda campaigns against businesses and their owners, physical resistance against scabs and private police forces, and countless other tactics popularized during the American labor struggle at the turn of the twentieth century demonstrate the value of militant tactics in achieving workplace reforms. So long as bosses believe their businesses will remain standing, even after a lengthy



campaign of direct action, they have no incentive to concede to demands for participatory workplaces.

This enhanced militarism is essential to the next sphere of social life in desperate need of democratization: neighborhood self-defense. The communities most in need of protection today are also those most subjugated by the state police. As the enforcement apparatus of the modern nation-state—a fundamentally misogynistic, racist, and bourgeois construct—police departments exist to maintain misogyny, racism, and bias toward property. Often, this oppression is manifested through selective interpretation of the law when law enforcement officers ignore crimes committed against marginalized communities. Many times, the officers themselves perpetrate acts of violence against social undesirables. In either case, law enforcement exists to preserve the social order, no matter how discriminatory it is.

The task for participatory structures of community defense is to maintain secure living conditions in their neighborhoods without resorting to the coercion and violence inherent in modern nation-states and their police departments. Non-violent confrontation tactics, designed to de-escalate tense situations through mediation and dialogue, have proven successful when implemented by police departments criticized for their excessive use of force. On an organizational level, a rotating staff selected by lot from every community member would ensure the even distribution of policing power. Strict transparency measures within community-watch organizations would prevent the rampant abuse behind the “blue wall of silence” that now surrounds police departments.

A primary function of these self-defense organizations, as discussed below, would be the armed defense of the community against hate crimes and state repression. In service of this goal, every citizen above a certain age would enroll in a compulsory course detailing responsible firearm usage and the proper means of reacting to specific forms of violence. As in the Rojavan model, where every military and police unit has an all-female counterpart, marginalized populations would have a prime role in maintaining group safety. By ensuring the formerly disenfranchised a place in the new system’s security apparatus, revolutionaries can make a clean break from the institutional bigotry of the modern nation-state.



The ultimate goal of fostering public participation in all these spheres of social life is the creation of deliberative, democratic structures that supersede the authority of the nation-state by building power outside its confines. Once again, the model for such a political structure is the Rojavan system of democratic confederalism in Northern Syria. Designed around participation from the ground up—from communes comprised of several dozen households, to people’s councils in neighborhoods, districts, and the whole region—democratic confederalism creates a system akin to the dual power of the Soviet revolution—the key difference being a refusal to co-opt the state machinery. Readily recallable representatives drawn from the entire community are elected for short terms to various councils. Councils are comprised of committees for various functions, with a women’s council interacting at every level with each committee. By vesting the most administrative power in local communes while restricting representation to a purely administrative function—accessible to everyone in society—the Rojavan model actively promotes decentralized, society-wide political participation, granting maximum autonomy to individuals and their communities.

Undergirded by a comprehensive framework of civil liberties and human rights, the Rojavan experiment has emerged from the chaos of Syria’s civil war as a city on a hill. Founded by ethnic Kurds seeking the homeland that has been denied them for centuries, Rojava is a beacon of multiculturalism, feminism, and grassroots democracy in a part of the world rife with deep ethnic divisions, brutal patriarchal norms, and tyrannical regimes often imposed by foreign powers. For these very reasons, Rojava faces constant assault from Daesh, the Assad regime, and the Turkish military. Yet, Rojavan militias remain the single most-effective fighting force in the war against ISIS, with many fighters claiming the struggle to preserve their new government is worth any risk imaginable. When given a role in building their society, people will go to unimaginable lengths to preserve it—even willingly descending into hell.

## The Issue of Scale

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Although the democratic confederalist experiment in Rojava demonstrates the applicability of decentralized government over a wide region, deliberative



democracy operates mainly locally. For reasons both practical and ideological, deliberative power is best expressed on a municipal scale—practically, because the gathering in a general assembly becomes more inefficient as numbers increase; ideologically, because appropriate policies for one community may not apply to even an adjacent settlement. Thus, the infrastructure for preserving such a system in one region must be readily adoptable by any other region seeking to join the confederation. This requires providing clear guidelines for democratic procedure as well as the material conditions necessary to sustain effective governance and public welfare.

The deliberative process is impossible without a readily accessible general assembly. Designing public spaces with deliberation in mind is essential. Indoors, so that they can operate year-round, these spaces should be arranged so that participants remain in full view of one another and are on the same level. The general assembly should meet at regular intervals, with widely disseminated records of decisions made at each gathering. Deliberative procedures should be clearly outlined before each assembly begins. Participants should speak one at a time in both the general assembly and in their respective committees, free of any implicit or explicit hostility or bigotry, and should share speaking time equitably. The agenda for each assembly should be open to public suggestions in the days or weeks preceding each session. Although modifications to the deliberative process based on the local assembly's character may be needed, the central principles of transparency and inclusiveness should not be compromised.

A function of all municipal assemblies must be distributing resources within the region. This requires establishing parallel productive structures also operating on participatory models—akin to the workers' cooperative—so each municipality is entirely autonomous. The foremost productive function is providing food for the entire community. Recent advances in permaculture technology make a high-yield nearly resource-neutral harvest possible on a regular basis through closed systems of soil enrichment and crop rotation. This approach meets the community's consumptive needs without entailing the environmental degradation associated with mass production. Shelter, too, will be provided—both by appropriation of vacant buildings as well as the construction of new housing projects.



This basic-needs agenda raises the question of private property within a municipality. Although some wealthy citizens might be sympathetic to a reversal of the social order as dramatic as the shift to democratic confederalism, most will undoubtedly be threatened by a local breakdown of the system that granted them privilege and influence. In the cases of revolutionary Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War and Rojava in present-day Syria, many wealthy landowners simply abandoned their property when conflict broke out. This property was readily appropriated for public use. Those who remained and refused to surrender their property were not forced to give it up, but were excluded from many of the functions and protections of the new system. By whatever means—ideally short of seizure—the abolition of private property is essential in the pursuit of an egalitarian society and must be incentivized.

Another rationale for restricting systemic change to the municipal level is the unavoidable threat of state retaliation. Any region that establishes its own democratic procedures, productive infrastructure, and communal militia is likely to draw the wrath of the state against which it is actively organizing—particularly if this movement is of a leftist persuasion. Furthermore, reactionary social forces opposed to multiculturalism and feminism, or the hired guns of threatened capitalists will use persistent violence to disrupt and dismantle these participatory municipalities. On a municipal level, democratic confederalists can readily fortify their assemblies and productive resources, preventing the participatory system's lifelines from being severed—work requiring active militancy by every able-bodied member of the society. Neighboring deliberative municipalities can offer material and military support to one another in times of crisis, serving in peace as networks of mutual aid and accountability.

If this scenario seems utopian, consider the success and proliferation of the Rojavan experiment, which demonstrates that genuine democracy can bloom even under constant fire. Even if Rojava were to collapse tomorrow—as did Occupy, Catalonia, and the Paris Commune—its existence will enter the historical record as another model for genuine resistance against the tyranny of capital and the state. A single example of deliberative democracy can embolden and inspire its



participants for a lifetime. The act of collectively crafting a political environment stands as a testament to all who witness it of the power latent in every individual.

## Modernism, Postmodernism, and Beyond

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The proliferation and dominance of liberal democratic nation-states are legacies of the modernist era. Characterized by competing drives for absolute truth—including fascism and communism—the modernist project aimed to universalize forms of human relations that were nevertheless specific to the context in which they were crafted. Liberal democracy, with its self-ascribed claim to reason, spread models of political rationality centered on the perspective of bourgeois white males and thereby restricted political participation to a specific class while equating “the people’s will” with this class’s interests.

Critiques of this forcibly imposed pseudo-universalism abounded in the post-modern academic and cultural revolution beginning in the late 1960s and continue to this day. Subjectivity replaced absolutism as the dominant form of social discourse, outlining through deconstructive analysis the various ways in which liberal democracy failed to live up to its universal ideals. But critics have constructed few viable alternatives, assuming that the process of devising a new system is beyond the intellectual scope of any person or group. The left contented itself with piecemeal reforms in the postmodern era while the right—never burdened by the leftist ambivalence towards absolute truth—maintained its universalist aspirations. Thus right-wing authoritarianism is now poised to fill the systemic vacuum left by liberal democracy’s impending democracy.

The modernist aspiration to universality must be reclaimed now if the left is to pose a coherent ideological alternative to authoritarianism. But the lessons of postmodernism—which have helped vitalize the liberation struggles of marginalized communities around the world—cannot be forgotten. It is subjectivity *itself* that must be universalized—recognized as the common trait unifying all beings endowed with perception. What is needed is a language, like music or mathematics, in which subjective human experience can be expressed to give it the quality of absolute truth.



This language is deliberation—a set of rules designed to deify every individual voice, taking as sacrosanct individual perception and lived experience. Deliberative structures, designed around mutually secured participation and welfare, have the universal aspect of modernism as their mission and the individual character of postmodernism as their mode. By bringing people back into the process of crafting a collective existence through individual expression, the war against authoritarianism today can only be won with a renewed vision of democracy for the world of tomorrow.

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Raghav Sharma is a writer and political activist currently in his senior year at the University of Pittsburgh studying politics, philosophy, and economics. Having spent the last few years learning about deliberative democracy through both theory and practice, he found an entirely new form of social interaction from what he was previously exposed to through the traditional channels of American democracy. Grassroots political struggle has made Sharma keenly aware of the inadequacies of the current liberal democratic paradigm underlying the majority of contemporary nation-states. But it is the authoritarianism which threatens to supercede these institutions that he regards as the ultimate challenge facing our generation. In service of the war against these forces, Sharma seeks to offer alternative systems of political engagement based on what he has experienced in nonhierarchical political movements.



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