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Participatory Democracy in Organizations

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Presentation

One of Escoltes Catalans' main topics for debate in recent years has been the three-fold nature of the operative structure of our movement: an educational youth association young people. In fact, the TROCA (Meeting of Leaders) held in March 2003 in Torredembarra, four years after our 3rd Congress, focused on these three pillars and their implications.

It is clear we are a movement of young people: the average age of the members of the Escoltes Catalans General Assembly is 22 and on our Permanent Board it is 28. Likewise, the work done regarding the educational facet of our organization has been intense in recent years, to such an extent that the term "educational association movement", used to describe the education provided in Scout/Guide groups, has now taken on its full meaning.

The association pillar, however, raises a number of issues worth addressing. It is clear that our condition as an association has the effect of creating a deepened sense of democracy in our internal structures and generating participatory-democracy dynamics in society. But what is the maximum level of participation possible? How should the organization develop to become more democratic?

We are now witnessing the limits of representative democracy in Western society. Despite the fact that the expression "citizens' participation" is becoming more and more popular, we are only at the beginning of the transformation of representative democracy toward a model of more participatory democracy in which people have many more effective mechanisms for participating in and deciding on matters that affect them, as well as more control of the people elected to run institutions. But we still have a long way to go!

At Escoltes Catalans we address the question of democracy in two ways: internally, by promoting and strengthening participation channels for everyone in the association, and externally, through our commitment to make democracy stronger and make change possible in order to achieve social transformation that will result in a fairer society where no one is discriminated against and there is greater sense of solidarity.

In terms of internal participation in the association, the level of participation in the annual Escoltes Catalans Assembly is one of the highest I know of in the world of associations. Close to 90% of members over 18 regularly attend! The Assembly, the top governing body, elects a Permanent Board made up of seven positions, each with a three-year term, to handle the executive work. Each year, these elected officials present their annual reports on the work done and the programmes for the new year, all of which is submitted to a vote for approval.

But although it is the most important channel for internal participation, the Assembly is not the only

place where concerns can be expressed and proposals made. Escoltes Catalans' participatory model stems from the rejection of vertical structures as a result of the anti-authoritarian movement of the late 1960s and is based on member participation in a number of different forums. The monthly meetings of different regions and the quarterly meetings of the branches (groups of educators for children of similar ages), the National Board and the General Council make it possible to coordinate work and ensure procedures are democratic and participatory. However, new systems that guarantee greater participation are continually being explored as part of an exercise of ongoing, constructive self-criticism.

Equally important is internal participation within the group and even within the unit. Article 9 of the Declaration of Principles says, "the educational method of Escoltes Catalans shall involve the comprehensive education of the individual [...] members shall be educated in democratic communities that are conscientiously related to the reality of their social environment." The leaders of each project learn to work in groups and willingly assume responsibility because they are the main players in a self-managed project. The experience of the meetings of the Group Council (the governing body of each Scout/Guide group) every Saturday after the den meeting or on Friday night, make quite a mark on many young people at an important time in their development. They learn to deliberate, assume responsibilities, come up with new projects and make decisions through completely participatory processes not unlike the collectivist-democratic model. But even at the Group Council it is clear that responsibilities

have to be delegated and assumed by electing people to hold office, whether this involves being responsible for material, such as petty cash, for the secretariat or being a Group leader, as elected by the Group Council, which very often shares a coordinating team.

In the Scout/Guide units, the emphasis is on educating everyone to participate: from the youngest to the oldest member. One key to self-management is knowing how to organize and distribute tasks cooperatively and constructively, and inside the units there is an effort to encourage children and young people to participate actively in the educational project and not see it simply as a leisure-time option.

In addition to internal participation and in conjunction with the second facet of Escoltes Catalans' work on democracy, part of our teaching methods stress providing education on social involvement and participation in group activities. This kind of external participation occurs on both the association level and at the more local level through Scout/Guide groups when they become involved in the platform of youth organizations or the youth council in their district or village, or when they participate in neighbourhood activities involving other children and young people to promote values such as peace, environmental sustainability and intercultural relationships.

In keeping with the objectives of the 1999-2002 Triennial Plan approved by the Assembly, Escoltes Catalans has increased the effect its actions have on building a new society. This has occurred by promoting participation in politics in all areas,

getting involved in the move to strengthen the community of associations, especially in the National Youth Council of Catalonia, and participating in the design of youth policies at the municipal level, in Catalonia and throughout Europe, both on local youth councils and in the European network of Scout and Guide representatives on youth platforms or the European Youth Forum itself.

In short, participation, whether internal or external, is one of the pillars of the Scout/Guide method, as well as a cross-sectional teaching objective. As we say in our educational mission statement: "In keeping with its aims, Escoltes Catalans shall encourage its members and units to participate actively in social activities and make an effort to improve them. The social dimension of human beings forces us to participate in life with others. This participation should be aimed at improving society and shall therefore be active in the immediate context. Human beings cannot be separated from society and the progress of one cannot be understood without the other".

This essay by Xavier Godàs on participatory democracy and strengthening decision-making systems in organizations, associations and social movements will allow us to continue this ongoing constructive debate so we can make progress toward a more participatory model in our association and other groups that offer sufficient guarantees for participation.

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Participatory Democracy in Organizations

The discussion about finding a democratic model for both organizations and society in general that allows for maximum participation in decision-making processes has been raging for approximately four decades now. It all started with the legendary social uprisings of 1968, which triggered the first talk about new social movements, and since then the debate has gradually extended to other forms of civic and political organizations. In fact, most of today's progressive political parties try to vie with each other - with varying degrees of success - to convince voters just how democratic their internal procedures are.

In many cases, this process is said to involve an evolution from a *representative democracy* to a *participatory democracy*, but confusion arises when we try to provide a precise definition of just what "participatory democracy" means, especially when it is applied to the way associations and movements are organized.

Historically speaking, the origin of this interest in curbing authoritarian relations in organizations can be found in the Left's own criticism of itself. This is clear from the fact that the political movements and organizations that sprang up from the late-1960s

protest movements (e.g., ecopacifism and contemporary feminism) have been grouped ideologically by activists and social scientists alike as the "new Left", "alternative Left", "libertarian" or "anti-authoritarian Left" and "radial Left".

At first sight, then, it seems evident that all these terms share two basic ideas: these new social movements arose in the political tradition of the Left but reject the authoritarian components it has occasionally been marked by. The basic underlying concept that links these two ideas is that the new social movements provide a critique of representative democracy, based on the argument that it cannot guarantee systematic participation or actually allow citizens to control public affairs. As a result, parliamentary parties are perceived as excessively bureaucratized machines with little or no democratic substance. More specifically, these movements consider the political-mobilization methods of traditional left-wing parties, fundamentally the Communists, to be unsatisfactory because these methods have been known to make use of popular protest for ulterior motives.

However, this is not to say that the distinction between Left and Right is no longer important. What is being questioned are the Leninist and Social Democratic paradigms of political mobilization, i.e., the ones produced by the Left during most of the 20th century: namely, the rejection of the idea of a party as an organization of avant-garde revolutionary professionals geared for all intents and purposes to seizing power, and the rejection of these paradigms' virtually exclusive connection capitalism

through corrective action. Instead, the new social movements advocate decentralized, participatory organizational formulas, where the emphasis is on getting civil society to organize itself rather than wrestling for power. It should be noted that this general objective does not involve having a negative opinion of politics in and of itself, but emphasizes its ethical-participatory dimension in contrast to the school of thought that reduces it to the simple confrontation of opposing forces.

One of the virtues of this eagerness to democratize political action is that it has forced us to pay attention to the organizational structures of movements and other kinds of organizations and, more specifically, to the decision-making processes that define them. But the question we are attempting to answer is this: how are decisions to be made without allowing any one person or small group to make them more or less unilaterally?

Some have attempted to solve the problem by criticizing the existence of any kind of representative body. For them, the communication space for offsetting or neutralizing representation is the plenary assembly. The leading defenders of this idea support a brand of politics known as a collectivist-democratic or direct-democratic system that rejects any kind of institutional leadership and is presented as a contrast to the so-called authoritarianism of representational democracy, while guaranteeing an increase in people's critical capacity, thus resulting in greater conviction when taking action.

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At this point, I should make it clear that I am not referring to the assemblies that are the governing bodies of associations and which have a statutory mandate, elect people to certain positions and evaluate programmes, as is the case of Escoltes Catalans. These association bodies are complemented by a system of elected officials and periodic reviews of the performance of the executive body or bodies. Rather, I am referring to a plenary assembly as a group's only decision-making body. This is the model of the collectivist-democratic system, which stipulates that the only authority with decision-making capacity is the meeting of all the members, even when it comes to deciding whether the assembly should meet or not. To avoid confusion in this essay, I will only use the word "assembly" to refer to this sole decision-making body of the collectivist-democratic system.

The following questions should be asked about this proposal of the collectivist-democratic movement: "Is the assembly enough to ensure members have the ability to voice their criticism? Does it guarantee the effectiveness of action in all situations? In the text that follows, I will point out the positive aspects of the assembly system in relation to these two questions and I will then describe some negative consequences.

The aims of a radically democratic form of organization

The sociologist Joyce Rothschild-Whitt provides a very good explanation[1] of what the collectivist-democratic system involves with regard to organizations. The author analyses organizations that are characterized by rejecting the justification of the authority that stems from representative bodies and refers to them as "collectivist-democratic organizations". Let's take a look at two of their basic features.

Feature number one: *there is no authority besides the assembly*. In assembly-based organizations, authority does not derive from specific individuals, regardless of whether they are civil servants, experts or formally elected leaders, but from the group of members that make up the organization. The supposition is therefore that such organizations learn self-discipline so that cooperative group dynamics are developed without the need to establish hierarchies. Because there are no hierarchical relationships, any decisions made become legitimate *only if they arise from an egalitarian deliberative process*, a process that requires a consensus on any decision to be made before a conclusion can be

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1. ROTHSCHILD-WHITT, Joyce: "The Collectivist Organization: An Alternative to Rational-Bureaucratic Models", in: *American Sociological Review*, 44, 1979, pp. 509-27. A very interesting source that discusses matters such as those presented here can be found in: LARAÑA, Enrique and Joseph GUSFIELD (eds.): *Los nuevos movimientos sociales: de la ideología a la identidad*, Madrid, CIS, 1994.

reached. In this model, the situations in which it is necessary to reach an agreement are only loosely established: both the decisions and the operations to be carried out have to bear in mind at all times the specific nature of the case at hand. In this way, an attempt is made to reduce the areas of activity of the organization that are subject to explicit rules of government.

Feature number two: *the method is also an end in itself*. One of the results of these organizations' egalitarian deliberative process is that their internal operations are guided mainly by higher values that sum up the participants' moral convictions. In this regard, the structure of the organization tends to be horizontal. Let's take a look at some of the most important features: 1. The minimization of any kind of internal differentiation in order to block any movement toward the hierarchization of positions (with special emphasis on breaking down the differentiation between manual and intellectual labour). 2. Procedures for people to rotate through the positions that involve a relative concentration of individual responsibility or leadership, such as spokesperson, delegate and coordinator. 3. The establishment of working groups ("committees" in the activists' language) in which everyone is equally responsible for the work to be done. 4. And finally, the debunking of the notion of specialized knowledge and any attempt to spread such knowledge in the group. Regarding the type of member these organizations seek, they logically value the qualities that match the organization's own orientation in terms of values, and initiative combined with a collaborative spirit is considered the

perfect mix. With that as a starting point, the assembly works on attributes such as skills involving coordination, organization and group motivation based on non-coercive procedures.

In summary, as far as we are concerned here, the key element that unifies these two features is that Rothschild-Whitt's collectivist-democratic organizations constitute an end in and of themselves: the system of relations established within the group follow the same regulatory precepts as the alternative ways of organizing society proposed by the group. Their motto could be: "We can't aspire to equality if we keep on setting up authoritarian organizations". Most of the 20th-century Communist parties provide clear examples of the incongruities collectivist-democratic organizations seek to avoid.

Therefore, the most positive aspect of the way collectivist-democratic organizations work would appear to be their pedagogic nature: if the information flows through the organization and moves horizontally, the assembly basically provides the chance to discuss the issues in depth, voice an opinion on the decisions to be made and gain a clear understanding of the complexity of the matters discussed. The most valued result of the collectivist-democratic process is that it reinforces participants' conviction regarding the action to be taken, and what is even more important, it consolidates democracy as the ideal political reference, both as a value to be praised and a means of establishing procedure.

However, the decision-making method of the collectivist-democratic system also has its limitations,

which should be pointed out and borne in mind. One initial limitation is very clear: there can be no "direct democracy" when the group is too large to allow everyone to participate. A group of many thousands of people, for example, cannot form an assembly where everyone's opinion is considered. More specifically, however, there are three basic limitations. The first two are related to what appear to be collectivist-democratic conditions: (a) when the context is one in which opaque power games are being played, and (b) when the assembly ends up limiting the skills and neutralizing the proactive character of certain participants. Finally, the third limitation raises a common question: (c) is it possible to unrestrictedly maintain the collectivist-democratic method of operation when there are many people involved in the action?

All this leads us to a few conclusions: the collectivist-democratic system is not the be-all and end-all of democratic relations; it is not the paradigm, but only a part, of participatory democracy; and the collectivist-democratic process is not exempt from occasionally giving rise to paradoxically anti-democratic dynamics.

Opaque leadership vs. legitimate leadership

The first limitation of the collectivist-democratic system leads us to address an issue that always tends to be kept under wraps in such organizations:

leadership. It would seem clear that in any group action there are people who, for one reason or another, stand out as a result of specific characteristics, either because of the knowledge they have, their organizational or work skills or their highly sociable nature.

There are also individuals who naturally possess a complementary quality that is much more intangible than those described above: charisma. Charismatic people can have some or all of the group-dynamic qualities that facilitate action, but they stand out for their enterprising, imaginative and influential working capacity. All of us have known at least one person who exuded confidence, was always the first one to pitch in, and instinctively knew how to organize a discussion and reach a consensus or an agreement.

In any democratic relationship, the group must necessarily control influential people by ensuring all members can have their say and that information is transferred horizontally. This attitude makes it necessary for people with leadership traits to delegate responsibility and allow other people to have control over them, while letting their proactive qualities make a positive contribution to group dynamics. This is the group's legitimate form of leadership. From this perspective, it is more positive to "institutionalize" the different management tasks for group action rather than deny they exist. If the group has such positions as spokesperson, coordinator and working committee head, it will be easier for the group to control the people who carry out these tasks: they can be asked to account for

what they have done and, if necessary, be dismissed. Representative bodies are excellent democratic models because authority is based on consensus, which supports a person's legitimacy to hold the position and his or her capacity to perform the tasks associated with it.

However, from the collectivist-democratic perspective, the subject of leadership is complicated and difficult to discuss because accepting people with this kind of personality is considered incorrect. This is true to such an extent that some associations and social movements, while denying the function of leadership, paradoxically encourage the creation of antidemocratic situations that hinder the collectivist-democratic process.

More specifically, official declarations denying that certain people are more influential than others generally have the effect of removing the people who have a tangible effect on group dynamics from positions of control. Instead of generating more democracy as a result, it is easy for relations of domination to form that undermine the democratic nature of the assembly; because this domination (which continues to exist), though now hidden from the outside, can sill have overwhelming effects. The supposed absence of leadership makes it possible for the reins of group dynamics to fall into the hands of someone who is not easily influenced, thus giving rise to the opaque leadership of a person or persons who use the excuse *we're all equal* to control information and not release it, and who can play (individually or in small groups) with the people who make up the group to pursue their own objectives and interests, including

attracting recognition to themselves. In short, negating the existence of leadership can paradoxically lead to the use of a position of power the group has no control over and that may not necessarily be looking out for the interests of the group.

This, then, is a striking detail well worth noting: in the framework of an assembly, democratic or authoritarian relations may arise. Let's take a closer look. Unlike what happened in the case of legitimate leadership, an assembly process can create an opaque form of leadership that behaves in an authoritarian, uncontrollable manner – a brand of leadership organized around having coffee and dinner with select individuals and maintained through the control of information by not releasing it to everyone in the group.

In a nutshell, if the institutionalization of representative bodies (regardless of how minimal they are) is undervalued, the assembly process will depend entirely on the good faith of influential people. We probably agree, though, that democracy is too valuable for us to let it depend entirely on any one person's good or bad faith. It should be borne in mind that opaque leadership generates relations of domination that are difficult to resolve because such leaders generally knit their power into a close weave of personal contacts that may even include the realm of intimate relations. And if the leader's opaque dealings become hegemonic, the dynamics of the group can worsen even more and turn the organizational model into a kind of sect. This condition is perceived when the group follows someone blindly and loses touch with its own critical

or self-critical voice, delegates its own capacity to think to other people, adopts a vigilant attitude toward others' opinion of influential people and "translates" complicated lines of thought into simple, summarized dogma or catch phrases.

Another problem should also be mentioned: when anti-authoritarian rhetoric demonizes the existence of the legitimate leader, i.e., the proactive person who adds to group dynamics and is eager to take on responsibility, a situation can arise in which some people with leadership qualities decide to hold their tongues out of fear that they may seem interested in standing out or drawing attention to themselves. In this way, contributions are blocked that could be highly positive for group operations. If initiative itself is demonized, the group goes in a direction that can block the decision-making process itself and make all action impossible. Arguments become trivial and the absence of clear-cut responsibilities breaks down the individual's commitment to the group. In these situations, the group often falls into a general trance of naïve egalitarian idealism that is incapable of perceiving each group member's individual skills.

Is everyone the same in the collectivist-democratic dynamic?

The second limitation is that the collectivist-democratic system pays little attention to the unequal conditions of potential participants in the

assembly. In order for participation to be democratic, it must be borne in mind that not all members of the group have equal access to the assembly, given people's different living conditions. It is particularly important to make it easy for the people who have less time to get involved to participate. Situations such as gainful employment and family obligations make it impossible for some people to participate as much as others.

If the assembly is the only decision-making body, the most influential people may turn out to be the people who are prepared to spend the most time at a meeting without a fixed agenda. This creates the paradox that only people who are relatively commitment free can participate in decision-making processes, while the contributions of people with less free time are disregarded.

Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that the underlying myth of the spontaneity of action is not an option for conventional politics because it is extremely ineffective. Spontaneity is anti-political, as is the naïve idea that the organization and any representative body destroys the creative capacity of its members. One look at the historical evidence shows that the social movements that have had the greatest impact on politics since World War II were all very efficiently organized, from the American Civil Rights movement to the European demonstrations against the proliferation of nuclear arms in the 1980s.

May 1968 in France and the anti-Vietnam War movement in the US were backed by dozens of

organizations that helped mobilize people. Even today, it is almost laughable to hear the media talk about the spontaneous nature of the massive demonstrations against the war in Iraq, when the platform that promoted them involved the coordination of more than two hundred organizations of all kinds.

The myth that these movements do not originate from structured organizations, but spring up through the work of anonymous individuals, as if by spontaneous generation, needs to be done away with. The people who are leading these movements are either the heads of organizations or are the former leaders of organizations founded in the past.

The collectivist-democratic system and social movements

Now let's address the third limitation, i.e., the problems of the efficiency of the collectivist-democratic system when taking action directed at the general public with the aim of receiving support. Let's examine, for example, the dilemma that systematically arises in the dynamics of social movements. The impact or success of a given campaign is the result of the quantitative and qualitative ability to successfully mobilize people. However, an increase in the number of participants in a given action often has no clear correlation with the participants' total acceptance of the action, the discourse behind the movement or the methods used.

organizational aspects become. In other words, there is a greater need for some kind of system of representation and there must also be a higher degree of internal discipline with regard to coordination tasks. Under these circumstances, the time required for democratic relations based on the collectivist-democratic model can become a problem. It goes without saying that horizontal communication and decision-making by consensus create a high level of moral commitment to the group, which consequently becomes better at adapting to the solutions to complex issues. But the decision-making process is too slow and can even come perilously close to blocking the group's potential for mobilization. Therefore, the relevant question is: Do we agree enough about the basic issues to allow some kind of representative body to make the day-to-day decisions?

The second option, the "congruent" one, presents the problem that the model of consensus, under conditions of political mobilization, has an effect with questionable democratic potential: the generation of situations where differences of opinion are neutralized in favour of seeking consensus or maintaining it so that the proposed activity is not endangered. In other words, sustained unified action will only be possible if the individuals in the group substantially agree about everything. In principle, this second option guarantees a more pronounced fighting spirit than the first, but it may give the group an exclusive or self-referential character that expresses more an ideal about life than a political activity aimed at social change. Here the relevant question is: What is more important? Achieving the

social change we seek or keeping our idea of group relations intact?

The dilemma may be best expressed as follows: the danger of the "pragmatic" option is based on creating an organizational logic that does not completely follow the collectivist-democratic model, despite the fact that the group acquires greater capacity for response in a dynamic political context; whereas the danger of the "congruent" option is expressed by the fact that a collective-action organization so closely and statutorily tied to its declared intentions will probably be ineffective, despite the distinct fighting spirit it has to offer.

A clearer meaning of participatory democracy

Having reached this point, I propose retaining the following conclusion from everything that has been discussed thus far: Deliberation by the general assembly constitutes an essential democratic principle that no self-respecting democratic organization should be without. All the members of an organization should be able to participate in the decision-making process and deliberation. As the governing body of an association, the assembly's function is just that. It allows all members to participate and is regulated by statutes that guarantee this participation. These statutes should also ensure the people chosen to assume certain responsibilities are answerable to the assembly.

Systems for democratic participation should be revised on a regular basis, which means delving deeper into methods that provide greater access to information, fuller participation in deliberative processes (and not just every once in a while) and a better capacity for response to immediate challenges. The new technologies provide an interesting laboratory for testing these options.

But delving into the democracy of an organization does not mean extending the collectivist-democratic method to every possible context where it can be used. Reaching agreements based on a well-informed deliberative process is important when establishing the general programme for action and making decisions that affect the organization's moral character. But the day-to-day dynamics of the organization should obey criteria of efficiency and effectiveness if the group attempts to implement some kind of social change and not start at the beginning over and over again and hash out everything that has already been discussed and approved. It is here where representative bodies step in: they cannot replace deliberation by the assembly, but can pin it down and make it more efficient. In a way, participative democracy should be a dynamic, plural middle point between strict representative democracy, where participation is limited to voting, and systemic collectivist-democratic models, where some people are able to effectively give orders without being answerable to anyone.