"This is What Democracy Looks Like" A Conversation with Direct Action Network Activists David Graeber, Brooke Lehman, Jose Lugo, and Jeremy Varon

by Francesca Polletta

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In November 1999, over 40,000 activists representing labor, environmental groups, human rights organizations, and anarchists tried to shut down the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization—and came close to succeeding.

The variety of issues represented testified to the possibility of building wide coalitions and the movement's decentralized structure made it hard for police to control. That the protests came off without a high command dictating tactics was a source of pride. "This is what democracy looks like," protesters proclaimed. Groups involved in the protest, such as People's Global Action and the Direct Action Network (DAN), found their directly democratic model of affinity groups and spokes councils the topic of sometimes admiring, sometimes bemused, media coverage.

On their return from Seattle, New Yorkers launched a DAN there. With working groups tackling labor conditions, police brutality, prisons, and corporate

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globalization, and members prominent in demonstrations at the national political party conventions and meetings of the WTO and the World Bank, New York DAN has become one of the most active of the national network. Between twenty and fifty people attend weekly meetings and about a hundred more are regulars in working groups. It's a tiny group. What makes it distinctive among the much larger anti-corporate globalization movement, say its members, is the effort DAN members put into crafting a model of direct democracy that works, even in the heat of battle, even when the issues in question are complex.

DAN activists Brooke Lehman, David Graeber, Jeremy Varon, and Jose Lugo met with me over pizza and beer one evening in March to talk about DAN's experiments with direct democracy. All four have been with the group since near its beginning and have had varying levels of involvement since then. Brooke, David, and Jeremy are academics; Jose is a Con Edison worker and hosts a public access television show. "We're the wooly-headed academic DAN contingent," David jokes. "Does that make you untypical of DAN?" I ask. "Not really." DAN members tend to be in their late 20's and 30's—slightly older than many of the Seattle and Washington protesters. "Young people

just don't find our concern with process interesting," they say ruefully. They are mainly white and middle class, something we will talk about. And many have had long histories in activism: in mobilizations against U.S. intervention in Central America, apartheid in South Africa, and the Gulf War, in gay and lesbian activism, feminism, and in direct action environmental groups like Earth First! More than half call themselves "anarchists," Brooke says, but they mean a variety of things by that. And one of DAN's credos, says David, is that "as long you're willing to act like an anarchist now, we don't care what your long-term vision is."

Like the other DAN activists I have met, Brooke, David, Jose, and Jeremy are both excited by the potential of what they are creating and unflinching in describing DAN's shortcomings. "DAN is simultaneously inflated and humble in its view of itself," Brooke observes. Their comments, they caution me, reflect only their own views. And indeed, there are few "DAN" positions as such, since the network exerts little control over the working groups that make it up. There is a set of principles expressing the group's commitment to nonviolent direct action, direct democracy, international solidarity, and an end to neo-liberalism (that is, against governmental policies that relax the protection of workers, consumers and the environment in the interests of "free trade"). In New York, groups that want endorsement or funding must get the larger group's approval—in other words, the approval of those who are in attendance at the general meeting—when the proposal comes up. Other than that, they are mainly free to pursue their own projects. General meetings held every Sunday evening plan actions, take up funding proposals (they are flush right now with $1,500 dollars, Brooke tells me), and consider proposals to be put to Continental DAN.

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I had seen the group's decisionmaking style in action at one of its Sunday meetings. Participants sat in a circle and were called on by two facilitators who also kept track of the agenda. A time-keeper alerted the group to the fact that it had used up the time allotted for an issue; in this meeting, participants "consensed" that they would devote ten more minutes to discussion. A difficult question about whether to fund a project—a hundred or so dollars—required two extensions in this meeting. Tempers flared during the discussion, and people signaled their intention to block what seemed to be an emerging consensus. The solution slowly hammered out was that DAN would not fund the project and people instead would contribute voluntarily. There was consensus and a hat was passed around and quickly filled. The next issue was taken up. Again, discussion seemed to go round and round; again, consensus was eventually reached.

Why strive for consensus? David: "Because that way people are never forced to do anything they didn't consent to. Real freedom would have to be based on consent." Jeremy expands: "The idea behind consensus is that you can work through differences to unity. It is not that everyone has to think the same way. But if you have a group of people committed to a common goal and you discuss a variety of political options you should be able to work towards some sense of what we should do in pursuit of this goal. It doesn't presuppose that dialogue is something adversarial and about winners and losers and blocs and majorities and factions. Instead," Jeremy goes on, "it tenders the possibility of a more cooperative mode, one unfamiliar in most American institutions, and creates a space and process for developing it." "It encourages a different way of thinking about other people's positions," David adds. Jeremy—cerebral, not one who seems prone to sen-

timental gushing—talks about the "joyousness" of reaching consensus. He and the others also talk about the practical benefits of directly democratic decisionmaking—its capacity to strengthen unity, especially when a group faces the possibility of arrests, and to secure multiple lines of input into a tactical decision. In their emphasis on the practical, DAN activists seem different from the antinuclear movement activists of the late 1970s and early 1980s who are in other ways their forebears. The antinuclear Clamshell Alliance pioneered the decentralist model of affinity groups and spokescouncils. DAN adopted the model—some Clamshell veterans were among DAN's founders—but apparently without the allergy to talking strategy that movement historian Barbara Epstein has described as a perennial problem in that movement.

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DAN is also markedly different from 1960s versions of participatory democracy. A 1960s activist would be struck by the procedural paraphernalia that accompanies DAN's decisionmaking. There are formal roles in the process—"timekeeper," "stacker," "facilitator," "vibes watcher"—and sophisticated hand signals: "twinkling" (waving your fingers as if you're playing a piano in the air) to signal agreement and forming a triangle in the air to indicate concern with how the deliberative process is proceeding. These are not DAN's own innovations; rather, they are part of a repertoire of decisionmaking that activists learn from each other, as well as from handbooks, websites, and formal trainings for facilitators. The formality of the decisionmaking process is one source of its appeal. DAN activists are aware, perhaps in a way that their 1960s counterparts were not, of the inequalities that so often persist in relationships touted as informal or "natu-

ral." Rules protect people, they believe. But these radical democrats also reject conceptions of equality that require people to be treated identically. Such conceptions embody white, masculinist, middle-class norms, they argue. Far from neutral standards, they are already intrinsically biased. To begin to overturn such standards, DAN members "stack" people's interventions so that women speak more. They try to make sure that when the media seek out spokespeople, it is someone of color who speaks first. They want one of each pair of facilitators be a woman (but worry that that makes it impossible for both facilitators to be women).

When the process works well, Jeremy observes, "you don't even notice the machinery." So what makes it work? Why do DAN activists trust that no one will tie up the discussion in tangential talk or hold on to a selfish and ill-considered position to the point of paralyzing any action? David argues that the process itself, the orientation not to winning but to making the best decision, discourages that kind of obstructionism. Brooke points out that people are expected to uphold DAN's principles. Jeremy: "There's a degree of formality that discourages interpersonal rivalry." Plus, he adds, "you trust people because they keep showing up. I see the same faces week after week, and I think, 'my god, you're really committed to this.'" "Face-to-face interaction," says Jose. (All agree that the kind of debates that take place on the internet are not what DAN's deliberative process is about. Internet debates bring out the most polemical in people. And, Brooke points out, they tend to be dominated by men). A participatory democratic ethos, a set of formal rules, the affective bonds that develop among a group of people who meet frequently, and a culture of directly democratic decisionmaking—a

set of common experiences, techniques, and justifications—that was just beginning to develop in the 1960s; all these stand behind DAN's deliberative style.

There is an obvious question here. If DAN is a laboratory for experiments in direct democracy, how do these experiments have impact beyond the group? In several ways. People come to a demonstration and see direct democracy in action. "DAN isn't so important," says David, "but it does provide a structural model," a way of operating for other groups. "What was so amazing about Seattle was that it supplied a common language to people without a common language," Brooke remarks. For those who participated in an affinity group for the first time, or watched a spokescouncil operate, or had their first experience of reaching consensus, the payoff was a rationale for democratic decisionmaking as well as a set of tools for doing it. In actions since then—in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Quebec City, and in New York City—DAN has taught others the language of direct democracy. In between actions, some people also learn about DAN on the web and come to a meeting. DAN working groups occasionally draw in people who may have no initial interest in their deliberative process and then get turned on.

Still, Brooke observes, "I feel like there's this tension between chasing the global but also realizing that this model would only work on a local level." Fighting big global entities like the WTO or the FTAA [Free Trade Area of the Americas] supplies an "energy that sustains people's momentum," but if DAN really believes that direct democracy can work, it has to show that it can work outside a small group of like-minded people with time, extraordinary commitment, and few resources or positions to

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compete over. Tonight, Brooke sketches a strategy by which a DAN working group would campaign to dissolve the lowest offices of a local government into a citizens assembly—the notoriously unrepresentative Community Boards in New York City would be a fine target. "There may be institutions that already exist whose power structures we can bust apart and breathe some life back into, rather than start from scratch." Jose uses his television show to model the kind of technology-based democracy he has in mind. David talks this evening about the ancient Greek model of having people fill temporary functions by lottery as a way to build expertise into a directly democratic system.

Pie in the sky? Perhaps. But in the meantime, DAN looks for opportunities to show that it isn't such an impossible vision. When a group of DAN activists who had been arrested during the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia met with the lawyers who would defend them, they insisted on sticking to their deliberative process. "No one could have predicted that this kind of decisionmaking could work in a politically tight and legally effective defense against very serious charges," Jeremy observes. "And yet most cases that went to trial won dismissals or acquittals and the few convictions have been for relatively minor charges. Our goal was that nobody get sentenced to any jail time and so far we've succeeded. And the public defenders who were skeptical at first now speak our language: they're sitting cross-legged on the floor and making decisions by consensus." "They have their own spoke[sperson]," Brooke adds.

DAN activists also provide legal observation, nonviolence training, and bodies on the line for groups fighting for undocumented workers and against police brutality. "When it comes to oppressed com-

munities, there's a definite awareness that they are more in touch with their own struggles than we are, so the question is how do we support them on their terms," says Brooke. For DAN itself is mainly white and mainly middle-class. "DAN is not an organization of poor people who at a visceral level know what it's like to live as a poor person," says Jeremy. "So we try to come up with a political agenda that is aligned with groups facing severe forms of pressure. Poor people, people of color. And the best we can do as a middle class white group is to apply political pressure at the right spots and ally ideologically. ...If your politics addresses what interests people of color, you will be more likely to attract people of color." But, Jeremy goes on, "even if you have the right message, quote unquote, there are still ways in which groups remain, not racially exclusive but racially restrictive. There is a sense that this is a white group."

"Sometimes people have come to a meeting and left because they felt that we were using academic terms or specialized language and they considered it classist. And we've never really addressed that," Brooke says. David disagrees: "People in DAN-labor have dealt with it." Some of the union people they work with were turned off by the endless discussion and "touchy-feely" character of DAN discussion—David hesitates—"...and we came to the conclusion that we should never send those union guys to a DAN general meeting."

A fuller answer, say DAN activists, is to build coalitions with groups of color, unions, and poor people's organizations rather than rely solely on efforts to make their membership diverse. Not that this is so much easier. In spite of their best intentions, some DAN activists simply have not had much experience in working politically with groups of color.

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"People have put their feet in their mouths" says Brooke. She describes DAN's initially rocky relationship with the Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM), a direct action group made up mainly of young people of color. The two worked together, ultimately very effectively, in planning the Philadelphia demonstrations. But early on there were conflicts. SLAM members and some people in DAN had wanted to focus the action on the "prison industrial complex" and racial oppression. Another group in DAN, almost all white, wanted to continue focusing on globalization issues and democracy in general. The problem was that "these white activists were essentially saying that focusing on racial oppression and prisons issues was a narrow focus. And globalization was a broad focus. And a lot of people were saying, how can you say that racial oppression is a narrow focus when it's at the core of almost all oppressive systems. And so the challenge was to orchestrate people being able to focus on what they wanted without insulting or diminishing the importance of the other people's views." They also realized that they needed to do "some anti-oppression work," Brooke adds.

DAN activists' self-awareness about the challenges they face will not make believers out of skeptics. Community and labor organizers who know how much work it takes to win even limited concessions from those in power and, even more important, to turn verbal concessions into actual changes, may see direct actionists' emphasis on big, dramatic demonstrations without much follow-up as unlikely to have much lasting impact. What happens after WTO spokespeople make some mildly pacifying public statements about workers' rights and corporate accountability? Where does the pressure come from: to do more, or to enforce what's been "won"?

Should activists be better integrating national/international targets with local ones than they are now? Undoubtedly. There are other problems. If those making a decision cannot agree, the issue is tabled—but that, of course, is making a decision too. Activists are scrupulously unwilling to tell each other what to do, and they sometimes lose out on opportunities for coordinated action as a result. Again, the problem extends far beyond DAN. Those who organize working people with jobs and families may wonder what of practical value will come out of the effort to perfect a deliberative process that, no matter how well things are going, demands literally hours of discussion.

Those problems are real ones. Still, if DAN and the movement of which it is a part are judged on their capacity to make "democracy" something contentious and alive, there is reason for optimism. "The FTAA is going to be a huge issue," Brooke says. The WTO is undemocratic in the sense that it simply mediates among corporations; but the FTAA takes out the government, or any monitoring agency, altogether. "That's something you can explain to your mother." Democracy is a powerful ideal in American society, yet we spend surprisingly little time in public dialogue about what counts as democratic participa-

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tion. If anything should have provoked that discussion it was last November's election. That it did not attests either to the public's short attention span (as the media pundits tell us), or to the fact that we simply are not in the habit of talking much about democracy. We may not know the questions we should be asking, and we haven't much in the way of alternatives, models of how democracy can work, fairly and effectively.

Not that DAN offers a blueprint for a new electoral system, or even, perhaps, for an effective movement organization. The more realistic hope is simply that the people who are exposed to DAN—the teenagers who show up at a demonstration, their mothers, the media consumers who read about protesters' wacky form of direct democracy, the lawyers who defend those arrested, and the immigrant rights and police brutality groups DAN works with—will see possibilities in democratic decisionmaking that they had not before. And that they will begin to see democracy as a standard rather than just a trumpeted ideal, one that can be applied to transnational financial institutions as well as national political ones, and to schools and churches and workplaces. Getting Americans to argue over what counts as democracy would be no small accomplishment.