# Building We: for Feminist Democracies

How we organise our (collective) lives for and in a post-capitalist, post-neoliberal, post-patriarchal feminist present and future, grounded in our belonging to nature
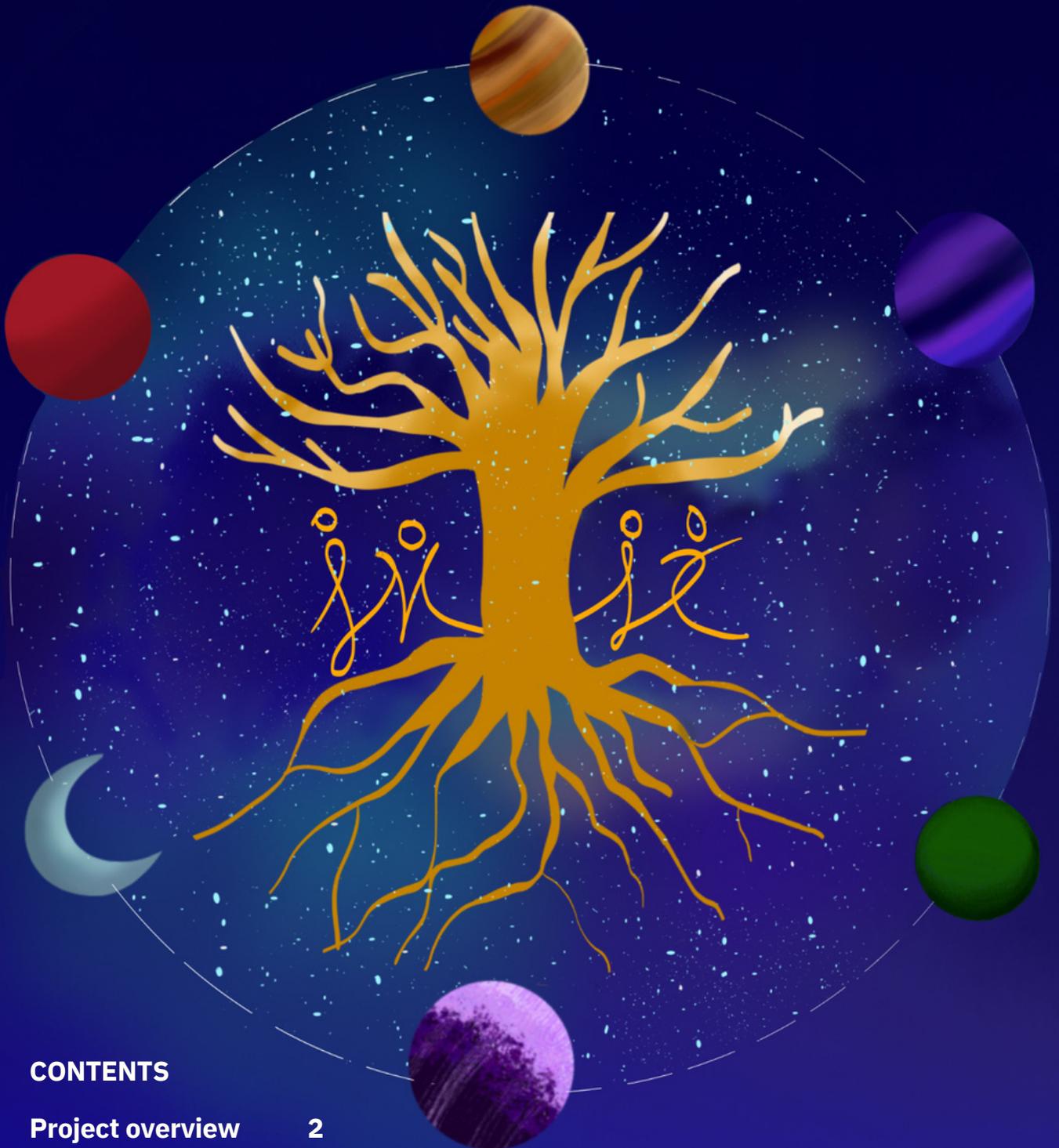
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**Collectively sowing the seeds for a feminist present: experiences, models and tools for a feminist and intersectional transformation of democracies embedding a collective feminist leadership and power vision for the common good of all nature.**

*"it is the collective that is the subject of history, not the individual"1*

Feminist Hiking Collective is a feminist non-profit organisation registered in Italy. Our aim is to build collective feminist leadership and power through hiking and mountaineering, and to contribute to transformative system change through feminist popular education and resource co-creation, to build a feminist world that is grounded in our belonging to nature. We work extensively to unpack and co-develop research and analyses of collective feminist governance, leadership and power, including through the Reflection project and the From me to we initiative. We started our analysis with a paper called "Building collective feminist leadership: unlearning the me,me,me" in 2020.

**Project concept summary**

Capitalism leaves us little energy to reflect, unlearn, critically analyse and learn. In such context, this process was a rebellion aimed to embrace wisdom, to value and honour the analyses coming from the experiences from movements and groups across time and geographies, and from our own experiences. This project does not aim to propose a "new model" or a "vision for the future", but rather to learn from the wisdom emerged and emerging from the multiple practices reviewed. The project aims to document experiences, elaborate on practice-based tools and learnings of and for 'what could be called' feminist democracies.

The project includes elaborating on collective feminist leadership and power, collective care, non-extractive learning, decolonisation of knowledge, collective accountability and responsibility. It will elaborate on the meaning and possibility (and necessity) of feminist democratic practices at any 'scale' of governance and organising — exploring autonomous feminist governance whilst also exploring the significance of democracy, grounded in our interdependence and belonging to nature. We will also learn from how other beings in nature organise to collectively thrive.

We believe feminist democracies can be applied and embedded everywhere, across informal and formal spaces, governments, institutions, groups, collectives, organisations, movements, etc. (with a note that the divide political vs. civil society, with the consequent de-politicisation of civil society, is questionable in itself). We recognise that the steps and ways to go towards and implement feminist democratic practices and structures are many and we therefore put forward the importance to apply and embed tools and elements of feminist democracies in an adaptive and contextual manner, without losing its core essence. We are still swimming in a sea of neoliberal, capitalist democracies, and their tools are dominant across the vast majority of spaces: it might thus seem un-realistic or un-transformative to "just build" our island of feminist democracy and reject transforming other existing spaces.2 Here, an important element is not losing the "how", not falling into the trap of neoliberal democracy and its tools, culture and co-optation – and that is also why the element of transforming ourselves and our relationships to unlearn the deeply embedded ways of neoliberal democracy is essential. We thus deeply value the efforts and practices that aim to democratise municipalism and public services, and feminist municipalist

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1. Lauren Jacobs, Partnership for Working Families,https://sw-ke.facebook.com/154670481249867/videos/871248249997220/,m. 2:15.
2. Inspired by analysis found in Marina Sitrin, Dario Azzellini, They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy (Verso Books, 2014), p. 35.

approaches that aim to radically transform power, state frameworks and practices, localise and build autonomy in the context of governance and public services.

At the same time, we centre the core importance of co-creating and sustaining prefigurations of feminist democracies. Even though still within a "sea of neoliberalism", such prefigurations are deeply important and transformative, to feel and embody the understanding that 'another world is possible'. We deem it essential to build collective knowledge of feminist democracies structures, tools, ingredients, experiences, practices, including failings, to strengthen the interconnection of the practices and support such experiences in documenting learnings - the seeds for feminist futures.

**The importance of prefiguration of feminist realities**

This project aims to foreground the importance of the multiple sources and forms of knowledge and learning, including valuing practices emerging from our collective experiences - the ones we feel, the ones that 'feel good'.

That is how this analysis started for us at the Feminist Hiking Collective: when registering as a non-profit organisation, we encountered an imposition of how we should have structured and organised our governance and decision-making. These are the same infrastructure and tools that are used at wider institutional level, i.e. neoliberal democracy (for example: having a hierarchy of roles such as President, Vice-President and Secretary; a directive council; majority voting). We felt this wasn't good for us. We reflected on what a feminist framework, structure and tools of democracy could be like, to structure and run our organisation in the same way as we prefigure the type of feminist society we wish to co-build, at the micro level.

The importance of prefiguration of 'what could be called' feminist democracies is the importance of embodying and being part of the experience of democracies based on and for the common good of all nature, and the importance of the prefiguration is that we are actually living it, feeling it, breathing it, experiencing it. We are 'learning by doing', we realise how liberating it is and how we can collectively thrive only if we change the structures and the ways in which we "govern" our societies, take collective responsibility and accountability, interrelate to each other and organise with each other.

At the same time, we must not extract experiences and knowledge and put a "tag" on them as 'feminist democracies' because we decide so. It is about collectivising and strengthening the interconnection and the links between all these experiences from such a wide range of contexts and perspectives, because only united we can dismantle the neoliberal capitalist patriarchal system of violence, competition and oppression, and, within this effort, go beyond neoliberal democracy, which is what we know hegemonically across the world. This is why we don't want to "tag" experiences, it's not upon us to decide what constitutes feminist democracies but, based on intersectional feminist analysis and practices, we bring forward some common threads, some elements that could be useful tools to co-create feminist democracies across different structures and spaces.

What we also aim to propose is an analytical framework, a prefigurative framework of what could be called feminist democracies, as a work-in-progress, an open-ended framework that we need to co-create, co-build, nurture and sustain to document, inspire and saw the seeds for feminist futures.
We also realise and acknowledge that this project has a really complex and intense aim – thus we are conscious we will not be comprehensive, but we deem it useful to go as deep as we can, for this project to be as useful as possible.

## Background and context

The current widespread crisis of the meaning and practice of 'democracy' is deeply connected with the concurrent expansion of polarised politics, personalised and self-centred political leadership and centralised power. This is connected with the disillusion with political parties, and the emergence of nationalist, populist, anti-feminism and anti-gender organised mobilisations. At the same time, we see an increasingly evident necessity of strong, sustainable, decentralised and resilient social movements and autonomous governance practices. The way we have organised our society – in a neoliberal, competitive and ego-driven way – is leading to the destruction of the Earth, including the destruction of our interdependence, our communalism and belonging to nature.

We consider there is a need to transform existing Western-dominated, neoliberal democratic governance systems into ones that do not focus on individualised leadership, but rather focus on organised people, in a collective, decentralised manner. We thus need to deeply transform the meaning, practice and narrative of power. We need to build "We". To rephrase Audre Lorde's expression, we can't build the "new" world with the current tools of the system of individualism, domination and violence. We learn that transformative change happens from the ground, from what and how we learn, thanks to movements, collective long-term sustained work at the small scale, combining together and creating systemic change. But these collective stories of change and transformation are not highlighted in mainstream narrative and history, thereby preventing people, and especially young people, to realise that they already have the power within themselves to collectively thrive and transform our realities for the common good, - a power that just needs to be ignited by working with others, each having a role to play, as birds in a flock. There is an emerging need to transform the structures which underpin this narrative and the related individualistic paradigm that drives our current so called democracies i.e. our governance framework: how we organise our society, at any scale. This transformation takes courage because it means transforming ourselves deeply, unlearning the hegemonic pattern of individualism and competition, which underpin neoliberalism and are the brothers of capitalism, and the patriarchy.

The Covid-19 pandemic has made all this even more clear: what we need is solidarity, community and belonging. We find the seeds of this needed transformation from *me* to *we* all over the place, all over the world, across decades and perspectives. We believe feminist democracy to be possible and plural in its ways and we believe the small scale is where deep, transformative, sustainable change happens, to conform a tapestry of change and be reflected at the macro level. With this project, we wish to continue growing these seeds, to be courageous and humble in our radical collective imagination, and to have trust that in the future there will be feminists building on this work just like we try to do today.

## Key questions

This research project attempts to address questions such as: how could democracy be brought back to collective power and collective leadership? In a feminist pluralist world grounded in our interconnectedness and belonging to nature, how are we organised in our societies? What models and structures do we need to start and continue building to get there? How do we connect the micro to the macro spaces of change? How are communities coordinated and sustained; (how) are they self-organised? Which tools and structures can we co-develop to imagine new and feminist democracies together? How do we face conflict and solve issues? How is collective accountability, responsibly sustained and coordinated? How do we make decisions? What are the questions we need to answer to be organised? How do we co-create? How do we collectively thrive and build collective joy? We consider that we need a multi-layered approach: building collective consciousness of where power lies, transform and create new structures, and build a different narrative of power.

**Key outputs**

- Elaboration of a publication outlining practices, tools and elements of feminist democracies embedding feminist governance and collective feminist leadership;
- Creation of a digital tools pot - a multilingual digital toolkit based on the methodology of feminist popular education that would make the knowledge, tools and 'ingredients' that emerged from the research accessible and easily usable, with a digital model inspired by the WE RISE Toolkit (https://werise-toolkit.org/)

**Methodology**

Research tools for phase three will include desk-based research; feminist popular education; reflection circles; dialogues; feminist participatory research tools; on-site trips; consultations; participation to events and gatherings; embodied knowledge and observation; informal conversations. Through all these approaches, we wish to access several kinds of knowledge to build resources on multi-layered visions. We started with an extensive literature review of existing work. The analysis will focus on the structures and process, on "the how", but will also analyse the "what for" of feminist democracies. We seek to learn without extracting. We will also seek to learn from observing the way other beings in nature organise themselves, like migratory birds, trees and mycorrhizal fungi, organisms that organise and live interdependently and collectively thrive.

**Timeline**

- **Phase one: review of literature (1 September to 31 December 2021)**
- Phase two: establish research working group (including activists, academics, feminist researchers, feminist popular educators and more); frame key questions for dialogues; identification and outreach to key informants (2022 - timeline flexible)
- Phase three: information gathering and analysis (2023-2024 - timeline flexible)
- Phase four: digital toolkit development; elaboration of report (2025 - timeline flexible)

"We consider that we need a multi-layered approach: building collective consciousness of where power lies, transform and create new structures, and build a different narrative of power."

# Review of literature

## Limitations

We undertook our research reviewing resources written in English and Italian, and partly in Spanish. We did look into academic work in this area but it is either very limited, or has inaccessible language for non-academics. We used different search engines and used different platforms to access and purchase resources, but we still recognise the limits and biases of search engines. We chose to follow a creative literature research process and to have a wide scope of areas to review. We do not identify as 'experts' and our experiences are limited, also by age.

We looked for written resources available to download or purchase, alongside audio-visual materials, and we used different sources but we acknowledge the immense limitations of a desk-based research. Nevertheless, we were incredibly inspired by the amount of wisdom that opened up to us, and by the recurring core aspects present in so many of the books and resources we studied, from such diverse contexts, times and perspectives.

We acknowledge there is only so much we could review and that so many experiences are not documented in written word, thus documenting experiences beyond the literature review, and reviewing additional resources that emerged from our research, will be the focus on phase two. There is so much we haven't covered, or haven't found, thus the literature review is an open pot, and a non-comprehensive one. In this literature review, we are conscious we only scratched the surface. We hope to translate this paper in Spanish and French later in 2022.

**What this paper will not cover**: in this resources review, we will not lay out a glossary of key terms nor yet try to write down a definition of what feminist democracies mean to us. We certainly include some of what could be considered key elements, or 'ingredients', and some conceptual frameworks and analyses. Across phase four, we will aim to do this and to include a glossary of terms to be as comprehensive as possible.

## Methodology

- Pot of resources (pot one/pot two)
- Pot of insights (350+ pages) including both excerpts and analyses/summaries/reflections
- Reflection circle
- Importance of looking for resources outside the academic space and also for resources that do not use the word feminism.
- We focused on accessible language and creativity – resources and reflections need to be relevant to everyday life, be sources of joy and tools for collective power and application.

## Structure of the review

After a word cloud with some of the many common threads which emerged from the resources and literature review, we noted some reflections and analyses based on the review, followed by some of the key elements of 'what could be called' feminist democracies.

# Common threads

commoning

horizontalidad

degrowth

organisation

structure

wholeness

freedom

movements

knowledge commons

collective accountability

autonomy

stateless democracies

resilience

small is all

municipalism

organising

interconnection

collective care

collective decision making

trees

real democracy

ecology

network

belonging

decolonising

migratory birds

fractals

collective joy

essence

radical imagination

commons

creativity

noncapitalist

collective power

collective leadership

mutual aid networks

community

leaderless protests

solidarity

forests

## Reflections and insights

We have navigated the surface of an immense, diverse knowledge, wisdom, learnings, experiences, tools from all over the world, to draw core elements of what feminist democracies look like, sound like and feel like.

### What is democracy?

We wish to reclaim the word *democracy*: democracy (literally meaning 'rule by the people' from the Greek language) as a minimum is self-governance, self-rule - people ruling themselves. In an eco-feminist framework, it is not the self-rule of people over nature, but in belonging to nature. In a feminist framework, democracy is based on collective freedom and power, autonomy, interconnection, interdependence, collective reproduction of life, radically egalitarian structures, and horizontal relationships (feminism opens the 'private' door, as Srilatha Batliwala shares in her analyses), and freedom from all forms of violence, dominance and competition. Another key element of a feminist view and framework of democracy is that it looks at power and systemic, structural change: it is based on and aims to build collective transformative power for the common good of all nature. Power is central to an understanding of democracy, and the understanding and practice of power is central to feminist analysis. Another key element is that a feminist framework to democratic practices seeks to learn from our experiences, for the co-creation and sustainment of tools and structures.

In this paper, we use the expression 'feminist democracies' inspired by the Zapatistas expression *"un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos"* (a world where many worlds fit) and prefer the plural use of words. This is to foreground the wide richness across time and geographies of practices that can inspire and form the analytical and practical groundwork for future feminist democracies. But this doesn't mean that there isn't a core and common elements that underpin a feminist framework, meaning and practice of democracy.

The common elements and insights across so many of the resources we reviewed, ranging from 'Anarchy as a Theory of Organization' (Colin Ward) to 'They Can't Represent Us!: Reinventing Democracy From Greece To Occupy' (Marina Sitrin, Dario Azzellini), is that democracy, in its current form (i.e. liberal/neoliberal democracy - also called representative democracy) is actually not democratic at all, it is not what democracy is meant to be. What emerges from so much of the wonderful work of Marina Sitrin, including the recent book she was part of with the Colectiva Sembrar, called 'Pandemic Solidarity', is that solidarity and mutual aid-based commons-building practices are everywhere, all over geographies, outside and beyond the nation-State. Also, as highlighted by Colin Ward, they tend to emerge or get stronger in moments of "happening", in moments of crisis – in this case, the Covid-19 pandemic. It is in these moments that we realise how 'democracy' as we know it is not able to represent our interests and needs, and we realise that we can't and we shouldn't be represented, or at least definitely not in the way in which it works now. We need to be able to "extend" the moments and spaces of real democracy emerging in times of crises, for them to be present across spaces and permanent.

In this time of deep crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which exacerbates the crises brought by the capitalist patriarchal system, we cannot go to "business as usual", we are thus in a time of radical re-configuration of our societies. We realise that all we need is each other, to build community, to get organised, and together find solutions to our problems and our needs, and to build collective freedom. When we look around, when we dived deep into the resources we reviewed, when we notice these collective autonomous practices of self-governance, we can see

the prefiguration of 'what it could be', what it could feel like, look like, sound like. And the feeling is powerful: it is collective power. It is that we need each and every one of us there. It is true democratic wholeness.

Neoliberal "democracies" (imposed from the West to the vast majority of the world) were never meant to be democratic, as clearly explained by Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini in 'They Can't Represent Us!: Reinventing Democracy From Greece to Occupy', and they are evidently not fit for life: *"This book describes a few of the movements that have been active since 2011, explaining how they have rejected and reinvented the concept of democracy along the way. One of the many beautiful aspects of the new movements is the multiplicity of paths envisaged and created. There is no single static or predetermined goal, but instead a process of walking toward desires, and manifesting the desired future in day-to-day relationships."3*

We include below different excerpts from 'They Can't Represent Us!: Reinventing Democracy From Greece to Occupy' as we deemed their words and analysis immensely helpful and useful.

*"Liberal and representative democracy were never meant to be democratic. The logic of representation has always been at the foundation of modern democracy - but not of classical democracy. In liberal democracy, "the economic," "the political," and "the social" are constructed as three separate spheres. The economic and social spheres are excluded from democracy. (...) But if we do not accept the whole idea of the autonomy of economy, the difference between those who govern and those who are governed, the autonomy of the political sphere, and so on, the whole edifice simply collapses like a house of cards. The rationale for wielding power over others, and for making decisions against the will and interests of the majority without consulting them, lies in the construction of a separated political sphere that follows its own logic. The separation of spheres is grounded on the idea of representation (The modern effort to find a universal generalization of the specific, which emerged with the Enlightenment). While abstraction is often important in the construction of collective decisions, representation is simply not possible, since it is based on homogenization and the necessary negation of diversity. The crisis of representation is a crisis of liberal democracy. (...) The self-evidence which assimilates democracy to a representative form of government resulting from an election is quite recent in history. Originally representation was the exact contrary of democracy (Jacques Rancière, Hatred of Democracy, London: Verso, 2009, p. 53). (...) Liberalism and democracy have been fierce enemies for hundreds of years."4*

*"We are taught that there are certain generally shared assumptions and rights that we have as a fundamental part of liberal democracy - things such as limitations on the government's ability to restrict citizens' movements and ideas, on the government's ability to exercise arbitrary power; the holding of fair and free elections, and respect for civil liberties such as freedom of speech, thought, religion, assembly, and so on. We are taught that these things exist and are grounded in the very nature of this democracy. But it is important to make clear that those civil liberties and rights we do have are not at all an inherent part of liberal democracy. In fact, they were won in long, hard struggles going back to the nineteenth century and earlier, and took effect only after the enforcement of the new model of production. Upon closer examination, one can see that, just as soon as almost all of these "rights" or "liberties" were won, governments set to work trying to dismantle them - from the right to an eight-hour work day to the right to be free from unlawful search and seizure. Volumes have been written about the encroachment on rights in modern*

3. Marina Sitrin, Dario Azzellini, They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy (Verso Books, 2014), p. 27.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 73-75.

*democracies, and while many are outraged, and should be, the fact remains that these rights were never a fundamental part of the conception of liberal democracy."5*

*"We can find direct-democratic and egalitarian practices and principles throughout history in various geographic and cultural settings, and they do not depend on any knowledge of previous democratic practices or councils. These practices and principles are the expression of a search for a truly democratic society of equals. Humans are social beings who evolve collectively through cooperation. Nevertheless, as Walter Benjamin emphasizes, historical consciousness of the role of past generations is a crucial element in building emancipatory paths."6 "Many movement participants are hesitant to use any one word or category to describe the relationships that have been developing in the wake of the rejection of liberal and representative democracy. While direct democracy, self-organization, horizontalism, and participatory democracy are all terms that have currency, there is no single framework, like for example the "Democracía Real Ya!" in Spain, or the use of the word "horizontal" in the US."7*

The deeply individualistic, meritocratic, hierarchical, competitive and anthropocentric framework of neoliberalism benefits from destroying people's collective autonomy, as *one only learns about freedom by being free.8*

## Our gaze

In our review, we encountered *horizontalidad*, horizontality, horizontalism, which *are "words that encapsulate the ideas upon which many of the social relationships in the new global movements are grounded. The idea that they express is based on affective and trust-based politics. It is a dynamic social relationship that represents a break with the logic of representation and vertical ways of organizing. This does not mean that structures do not emerge, as they do with mass assemblies and autonomous governance, but the structures that emerge are non-representational and non-hierarchical".8* We believe that feminist democracies, at their very essence, rely on how we look at each other and all beings, on whether our gaze is the one that is at the core of the neoliberal capitalist patriarchal democracy: a gaze of superiority, of competition, of dominance, a ladder of importance for whatever reason, or whether our gaze is horizontal, grounded in interdependence and solidarity, recognising that we are deeply interconnected and part of the web of life. This reflects in how we organise our lives collectively – how we structure and our society to collectively thrive, and not just as humans – but in ecology, in togetherness with the Earth and all beings on Earth. This is where the *feminist* "adjective" we add to *democracies* really finds its essential significance: democracies do not just mean how we organise in our society at whatever scale, it also – and fundamentally – speaks to how we relate with each other and with all beings. It speaks to 'the personal is political'. Adding the adjective fundamentally means that relationships and structures are not based on dominance, competition or exclusion, and the multiple ways in which we co-build this are based on what we can co-create and shape together.

5. *Ibid.,*pp. 76-77.
6. Marina Sitrin, Dario Azzellini, They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy (Verso Books, 2014), p. 101.
7. Marina Sitrin, Dario Azzellini, They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy (Verso Books, 2014), p. 171.
8. We might have read this somewhere, amongst the resources we reviewed, or have been inspired by a similar wording read somewhere, but cannot find the source – if you are aware of it, please let us know athello@feministhikingcollective.org
9. Marina Sitrin, Dario Azzellini, They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy (Verso Books, 2014), p. 35.
*"The word horizontalidad was first heard in December2001, in the days after the popular rebellion in Argentina. No one recalls where it came from or who might have used it first. It was a new word, and emerged from a new practice of people coming together and solving their problems without anyone being in charge or asserting power over one another."*

**It's all connected**

We started our reflection journey by going deep into the structure and the culture of the neoliberal capitalist patriarchal system, that is at the roots and the sustainment of all forms of oppression, dominance and violence. Going deeper, we found how struggles across territories interweave towards dismantling the capitalist economic system, its neoliberal ideological framework that sustains it, and the patriarchal structure and culture of dominance, individualism and competition.

This struggle includes and also centres around the destruction of the Earth. As we have learnt from Movimiento de Mujeres Indígenas por el Buen Vivir and their framework of 'terricide', capitalism is destroying life, and this encompasses all destruction. As analysed by Shereen Essof from JASS in a dialogue10 with the Feminist Hiking Collective, all the "isms" of dominance are part of one same core "idea" and power dynamic: one over the other, one more valuable than the other, one at the expense of the other. This dynamic is also translated through human dominance over nature. This hierarchy of importance, of power, of value of life, is translated also in how we are organised in nation-States — the State is born out of this. The patriarchy was the way to learn how to dominate, on the bodies of women. Capitalism strengthened it, with its neoliberal ideological framework. They are part of the same dynamic and system of self-centredness, culture of ego and individual wealth. This led us to the *"point zero"11* of the neoliberal capitalist patriarchal system. The basis and roots of all forms of violence, oppression and dominance, including against the Earth, is grounded in individualism, hierarchy, competition, division, separateness.

This is similarly reflected on by Murray Bookchin in his 'Ecology of Freedom' and links the patriarchy to the submission of nature. As Bookchin pinpoints, patriarchy was born not only to affirm the superiority and dominance of men over women, but also as a way of submitting nature to the power of humans. It is not a coincidence that nature has always been identified with the female genre. Bookchin lays out that patriarchy was the first system to emerge, side by side with the concept of 'power over' and the internalisation of this by humans. As patriarchy developed as a form of domination, the concept of the State, and later capitalism and all other "isms" of violence, dominance and oppression, were born as consequences of how society changed.

By reviewing the resources we found, we dived into the wisdom and richness of the multiple experiences and reflections for autonomous collective and non-capitalist, non-neoliberal, non-patriarchal ways to organise and "govern" our communities. Our common struggle is to dismantle this system and move into a society where we collectively sustain our societies through interdependency, our co-creation and collective reproduction of life.

**Inspiration**

We have searched for resources and experiences that have aimed to create and/or created practices, analyses and tools of 'what could be called' feminist democracies. In most experiences we have learnt about, collective decision-making and power are rooted in resilient struggles. We have learnt from diverse feminist, social justice and ecologist groups, collectives, autonomous governments, municipal feminist governance experiences, and from communities and movements worldwide organising and "governing" their spaces in a structured, collectively way, including in hostile contexts for transformative change. We have learnt how we can be able to interdependently and autonomously meet our needs and prefigure the feminist realities we wish to co-create for the common good of all nature.

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10. https://feministhikingcollective.org/semillas-blog/f/feminism-power-and-liberation---conversation-with-shereen-essof
11. Reference to Silvia Federici, Revolution at Point Zero, Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle, Second Edition (PM Press, 2020)

We have learnt from leaderful spaces and horizontal governance structures, from decision-making processes based on consensus and thematic-focused committees, from indigenous and ecofeminist movements about the interconnectedness of all nature, and from feminist economic models and community economies that challenge capitalism and extractivism.

We have analysed tools from practices of radical, direct and participatory democracy across cities, towns and self-governed communities worldwide building consciousness that *"it is the collective that is the subject of history, not the individual"12*, thus building the culture of the 'we'. These experiences take us closer to a system and structure where people are not only seemingly exercising their 'power' through a vote, but are rather organising themselves and practising collective governance, autonomy and agency.

In addition to this, we have learnt from the analyses of municipalism, and from post-scarcity anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism, and other forms of organised and structured anarchism models for a liberated humanity. We reviewed theory and practices of communitarian models, experiences of cities, democratic confederalism and cooperativism, non-hierarchical and autonomous self-organised communities in assemblies, rotating collective leadership and decentralised organisations for the commons. We scrapped the surface of feminist communications and technology knowledge, including social media and search engines.

In our review, we put attention to two practices in particular, not to create a sort of hierarchy of importance, but because of how we have felt connected to these struggles, where in both geographies there is a deep connection to the mountains, and because of accessibility to resources bringing insights into these revolutions. We are referring to Rojava and the Zapatistas.

Dilar Dirik from the Kurdish Women's Liberation Movement, writes in an interview with Jonas Staal 'Living Without Approval', that *"there needed to be political structures that could serve the empowerment of the people, structures that would politicize them to such a degree that they internalize democracy"* and that *"democratic confederalism is built on the work of many thinkers, but it is customized to the particularities of the oppression that takes place in Kurdistan. It considers the question of how to build an alternative to the state - for and by the people".13* In 'Stateless citizenship: 'radical democracy as consciousness raising' in the Rojava revolution', Dilar Dirik writes that *"future research on Rojava and other sites on developing revolutionary perspectives on radical democracy can advance our understanding of the relationship between political belonging and participation, justice-seeking, and social transformation by going beyond discourses and taking seriously the practical use of terminologies, the everyday practices, and the long-term perspectives advanced in collective self-organisation from below."14*

*(From 'La Travesía por la Vida: ¿A QUE VAMOS?, Enlance Zapatista) "Is Zapatismo one more grand answer to the problems of the world? No. Zapatismo is a bunch of questions. And the smallest can be the most disturbing: And you? In the face of the capitalist catastrophe, does Zapatismo propose an old-new idyllic social system which would repeat the imposition of hegemonies and homogeneities now deemed "good"? No. Our thought is small like us (...) Each person, according to their calendar, their geography and their customs, will have to make their path, and just like us Zapatista peoples, they will stumble and get up, and what they build will*

12. Lauren Jacobs, Partnership for Working Families,https://sw-ke.facebook.com/154670481249867/videos/871248249997220/,m. 2:15.

13. Dilar Dirik, Jonas Staal, Living Without Approval, https://www.bakonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Living_Without_Approval.pdf,pp. 38-39

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

15. Dilar Dirik (2021): Stateless citizenship: 'radical democracy as consciousness raising' in the Rojava revolution, Identities, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2021.1970978, p.15-16.

*have whatever name they want to give it. (...) So, what is our purpose in this Journey for Life if we do not aspire to dictate paths, routes or destinies? If we do not seek supporters, votes or likes? (...) Well, to tell you the truth like the Zapatistas we are: we are not only going to confront our analyses and conclusions with the other who fights and thinks critically. We are going to thank the other for their existence, for the teachings that their rebellion and their resistance have given us. To deliver the promised flower. To embrace the other and whisper in their ear that they are not alone [sola, soloa, solo]. (...) Also, and above all, we are going to look for accomplices...for life.” SupGaleano. June of 2021, Planet Earth.15*

## Autonomy, interdependence, commons, oneness

As Silvia Federici writes in 'Re-enchanting the World – Feminism and the Politics of Commons', *“history shows us that 'commoning' is the principle by which human beings have organized their existence on this earth for thousands of years”.17 “Commons are not things but social relations. (...) Commoning is a practice that appears inefficient to capitalist eyes. It is the willingness to spend much time in the work of cooperation, discussing, negotiating, and learning to deal with conflicts and disagreement. Yet only in this way can a community in which people understand their essential interdependence be built.”18 “Commoning is reclaiming the power of making basic decisions about our lives and doing so collectively.”19*

As outlined by Silvia Federici, autonomy does not mean self-sufficiency and isolation from others (which is akin to the individualistic framework of Rousseau and liberal political theory). In this literature review, we added the adjective 'collective' to strengthen the meaning of autonomy as a social-collective capacity for self-activation and independence from external powers. *"(the capacity) to gain sustenance from the earth, to live in woods and forests, to be guided by the stars and winds on the roads and the seas was and remains a source of 'autonomy' that had to be destroyed. The development of capitalist industrial technology has been built on that loss and has amplified it.”20*

We deem it necessary to move beyond academic discussions that are focused on whether interdependence and cooperation is 'how humanity really works.' From our review, what we have certainly learnt is that human beings collectively thrive and can sustain interdependent lives, in cooperation and autonomy, as the life of all nature is deeply interdependent and interconnected. We must be attentive not to frame this in an instrumentalist way stating that this is how, individually, we would all be wealthy and/or happy, as this only perpetuates the neoliberalist capitalist framework and culture. The switch is to understand ourselves as part of a whole. Whether we have to dig deep into 'how we used to be' at the very origins of humankind, or whether we need to learn and be inspired from communities that have lived in harmony with nature and from other beings within the ecosystems (or whether it's both, or somewhere in-between, avoiding dualisms or binaries), the understanding remains the same.

Another key element which emerged from the resources, is the fundamental need to reconnect with ourselves, with each other, and with the whole of nature. The reconnection with our belonging to nature is deeply dear to us as Feminist Hiking Collective, and we found so much resonance in the words of Vandana Shiva and Kartikey Shiva, and the way they describe earth democracy, in 'Oneness vs. the 1%: Shattering Illusions, Seeding Freedom': *“Forests are the storehouse of biodiversity and can teach us lessons in democracy; of sharing space with others while drawing sustenance from the common web of life. Democracy is participation, and since*

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16. 'La Travesía por la Vida:¿A QUE VAMOS?' https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/06/27/la-travesia-por-la-vida-a-que-vamos/
17. Silvia Federici, Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons, (Kairos, 2018), p. 86.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
19. *Ibid.*,p. 96.
20. *Ibid.*,p. 191.

*participation is embodied, not disembodied, participatory democracy is lived and living democracy. (...) Every cell, every microbe, every being is autonomous and autopoietic, self-organised and free, dynamic and evolving, interconnected and non-separable."21 "The mycorrhizal fungi in the soil provide nourishment to plants and derive their own nutrition from them. The freedom of the plants is dependent on the freedom of the mycorrhizal fungi."22 "Swaray - the resurgence of freedom from all beings. Because we are not isolated, atomised particles, but interconnected beings, freedom is not atomistic. It is relational, and it is interconnected. (...) Freedom is self-organisation, autopoiesis."23*

*"Our challenge is to look for ways to shift the dominant political system away from the exploitative and non-sustainable economic model. (...) The old democracy, based on electoral representation, is a linear extraction of power from the people. It is increasingly leaving people powerless to protect their land, their lives, their livelihoods and their freedoms in the face of land grab, the destruction of livelihoods and the destruction of our life-support systems and democratic rights. (...) We need to connect the economy to democracy, and economic democracy to earth democracy. (...) When we practise earth democracy based on local living democracy, the principle becomes applicable to all societies and all communities. (...) In region after region, where foreign investment is diverting local resources from the survival needs of local communities to the boundless appetite of global markets, people are putting investment to the test of ecological and social accountability. They are redefining the principles of governance on the basis of decentralised democracy. (...) They are redefining democracy in terms of people's decisions in their everyday lives."24*

*"This is how the planetary freedom movement is evolving and will grow – from the bottom up, decentralised, self-organised, and interconnected. (...) we can be both local, rooted in a place, and planetary in our consciousness. (...) The web of life unites us." 25*

The collective building of commons is a prefiguration of the collective co-creation that is part of 'what could be called' feminist democracies. In the words of Silvia Federici in 'Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons', *"the very sense that we are living at the edge of a volcano makes it even more crucial to recognize that, in the midst of much destruction, another world is growing, like the grass in the cracks of the urban pavement, challenging the hegemony of capital and the state and affirming our interdependence and capacity for cooperation. Though differently articulated - commoning, el común, comunalidad - the language and the politics of the commons are today the expression of this alternative world. (...) the many struggles that people are waging across the planet to oppose the expansion of capitalist relations, defend the existing commons, and rebuild the fabric of communities destroyed by years of neoliberal assault on the most basic means of our reproduction."26 "Commons are a perspective fostering a common interest in every aspect of life and political work and are therefore committed to refusing labor hierarchies and inequalities in every struggle and prioritizing the development of a truly collective subject."27 "No common is possible unless we refuse to base our life and our reproduction on the suffering of others, unless we refuse to see ourselves as separate from them. Indeed, if commoning has any meaning, it must be the production of ourselves as a common subject. This is how we must understand the slogan "no commons without community." But 'community' has to be intended (...) as a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation, and of responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals. Certainly, the achievement of such community, like the collectivization of our everyday reproductive work, can only be a beginning. (...) But it is an essential part of our education to collective government and our recognition of history as a collective project, which is perhaps the main casualty of the neoliberal era of capitalism."*

21. Vandana Shiva and Kartikey Shiva, Oneness vs. the 1%: Shattering Illusions, Seeding Freedom (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2020), Chapter 1, p.3.
22. *Ibid.*, Chapter 1, p.2.
23. *Ibid.*,Chapter 4, p.3.
24. *Ibid.*,Chapter 4, pp.4-6.
25. *Ibid.*,Chapter 4, p.16.
26. Silvia Federici, Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons, (Kairos, 2018), p. 1.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
28. Ibid., p. 110.

Building autonomy, building collective subjects,seeing ourselves as part of a whole and not self-centred or seeking personal recognition, doesn't mean deleting individualities, but rather building interdependent, interconnected individualities that co-create and perceive themselves as part of larger selves – our collective selves, where everyone has a role to play bringing their talent, passion, skills, in an equally fundamental way. We learn from our greater systems in this respect, from the of the moon with the tides and the ecosystems, to the whispers of resilience between the trees and the mycorrhizal fungi in the forest. When living and working in wholeness, *"the other becomes less other"29*, and every contribution and expression is acknowledged, because it is part of the broader co-creation, part of the common purpose for collective joy and the common good of all, in interdependence and interconnection with not only the whole of nature on Earth, but also the entire solar system and the wider *pluriverse30.* When one tree is harmed, other trees connected to that tree hurt. We are all in this common struggle, for the common good.

To practice feminist democracies involves (re)grounding ourselves in our belonging to nature and dismantling the illusion of separateness. Humanity as a collective needs to go back to its roots and appreciate that our existence is only meaningful when it is connected to the existence of other beings. In western democratic societies, we are disillusioned about our collective agency and power, and within that about the role we can play as part of the whole, because we learn that in order to lead we must be charismatic, "arrive somewhere" and hold a certain status in society to be a leader. As we reflected on with Srilatha Batliwala in a conversation31 on collective feminist leadership, dismantling our ego and recognising our deeply profound and intrinsic interconnectedness with everything is at the heart of achieving an interdependent and harmonious relationship with the land and wider communities. This illusion of humanity's separateness from other beings needs to be overcome and ways of living and being and practicing democracy needs to recognise this.

As part of this process, it is necessary for us to embody practices of collective responsibility and care in strategies and practices that allow us to re-signify our relationship with nature. The commoning-community in the Daboxtha Valley in San Andres is one of many examples of commoning. For a few decades the Milpa Maguey has been generating livelihoods by producing agave syrup through collective practices that have built on their indigenous knowledge and acknowledges the role that we all have to play, household workers, peasants, soil, ants and fungi alike, in building community.32 Within these practices, there are also examples and practices of money commons on which members may draw since many are not able to access formal credit. This encompasses a practice of democracy that also embodies what we have learnt about regarding postcapitalist economies, and indicates how feminist democracies must constitute a practice of this.

29. Pandemic Solidarity, Marina Sitrinhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xVvGhceXL-I
30. FRIDA Pluriverse https://youngfeministfund.org/frida-pluriverse/
31. https://feministhikingcollective.org/semillas-blog/f/from-me-to-we-dialogue-with-srilatha-batliwala-crea
32. Sato, C. and Soto Alarcón, Toward a postcapitalist feminist political ecology' approach to the commons and commoning. International Journal of the Commons, 13(1), pp.36–61. DOI: http://doi.org/10.18352/ijc.933

"We learn from our greater systems in this respect, from the dance of the moon with the tides and the ecosystems, to the whispers of resilience between the trees and the mycorrhizal fungi in the forest. "

### *Small and prefiguration*

Neoliberal democracy is embedded in so many of the spaces we are part of – from the State to the way non-profit organisations and civil society groups are organised. When we look at feminist democracies, we look at so many different scales and shapes. As described by adrienne maree brown in Emergent Strategy, another way that capitalism, neoliberalism and the patriarchy dominates our culture is that it creates a perception that only 'mass' or 'massive' scale matters. To de-patriarchalise our understanding of impact and scale also means realising that *"small is good, small is all. (The large is a reflection of the small.)"33* As we learn from fractals, the micro reflects the macro and vice versa. *"We have lived through a good half century of individualistic linear organizing (led by charismatic individuals or budget-building institutions), which intends to reform or revolutionize society, but falls back into modeling the oppressive tendencies against which we claim to be pushing. Some of those tendencies are seeking to assert one right way or one right strategy. Many align with the capitalistic belief that constant growth and critical mass is the only way to create change, even if they don't use that language. (...) If the goal was to increase the love, rather than winning or dominating a constant opponent, I think we could actually imagine liberation from constant oppression."34 "Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions (Nick Obolenksy). In the framework of emergence, the whole is a mirror of the parts. Existence is fractal (...). There are examples of emergence everywhere. Birds don't make a plan to migrate, raising resources to fund their way, packing for scarce times, mapping out their pit stops. They feel a call in their bodies that they must go, and they follow it, responding to each other, each bringing their adaptations. (...) Emergence is beyond what the sum of its parts could even imagine." 35*

So we need to put focus and attention to the small, micro prefigurations of 'what could be called' feminist democracies. In the resources we reviewed, and in our own experiences, we have lived, learnt from, been inspired by, and encountered countless prefigurations, countless seeds and inspiration. Of course, we know that mainstream history and culture seek every possible way to delete them, erasing their narratives and radical change potential. This is due to their radical transformation of the status quo and because they show clearly that another world is possible.

### Anarchy as organisation and Municipalism

We resonated with older writings, such as those on libertarian municipalism, and multiple anarchist elaborations and resources. As Colin Ward writes in Anarchy as a Theory of Organization, the book *"aims precisely to show that an anarchist society, a society that organizes itself without authority, has always existed, like a seed under the snow (...) (in this book anarchism is intended as) the description of a human way of organizing rooted in the experience of everyday life."36* A modern anarchist, Paul Goodman, stated that *"a free society cannot be achieved by substituting a 'new order' for the old one, but rather by the expansion of free spheres of action until they become the foundation of the whole of social life."37*

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33. adrienne maree brown, Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds (AK Press, 2017), p.27.
34. *Ibid.,* p.10.
35. *Ibid.,* pp.9-11.
36. Colin Ward, Anarchy as a Theory of Organization (1996)
37. *Ibid.*

In his work, Bookchin talks about libertarian municipalism, a political strategy based on direct democracy, where the State is replaced by a confederation of municipalities that takes decisions by popular assemblies, so in this way it is the commons that is put at the centre of society. As Bookchin explains in '*Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview'*, this concept *"seeks to reclaim the public sphere for the exercise of authentic citizenship while breaking away from the bleak cycle of parliamentarism and its mystification of the 'party' mechanism as a means for public representation. In these respects, libertarian municipalism is not merely a "political strategy."38* Together with the concept of libertarian municipalism, Bookchin also supports the creation of an ecological society. The social ecology he talks about in his book '*Ecology of Freedom',* is the study of the relations between animals, plants and the environment surrounding them. From this, Bookchin argues that what society needs is a world made harmonious by a strong community commitment based on mutual help.

Looking at formal State-centered competitive politics vs grassroots decentralised practices, we are missing something: part of the challenge is not only how to have more grassroots politics, but also how to go towards decentralised organised coordinated practices, how to stay horizontal but not being unrealistic, how to co-build structures and tools that allow micro experiences to interconnect without centralising and creating hierarchies, and how to do this without falling into the trap of neoliberal politics.
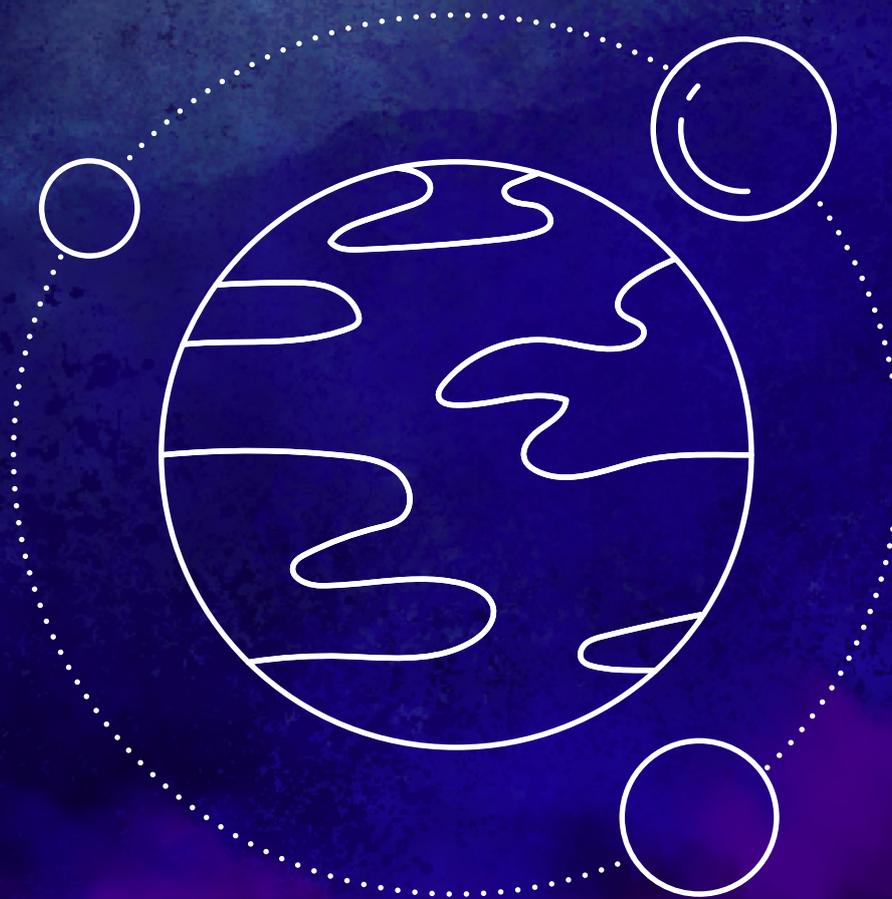
38. Murray Bookchin, Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview,
https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-libertarian-municipalism-an-overview(1991)

On feminist municipalism, we learn from the work of Laura Roth in that there are practices already taking place in many cities and towns across continents *"shifting focus from states towards local politics as a strategy not only to find answers to this crisis but also to deeper systemic issues. In Spain, municipalism implemented by many cities in 2015 was connected not only to new more democratic and feminist policies but also to changing political processes, linking to the anti-austerity movement."39* The necessity to transform politics is further explored within Fearless Cities, A Guide to the Global Municipalist Movement, where Laura Perez describes the interdependancy of the revolution and feminism. She concludes that *"feminizing politics means being realistic about our society's interpersonal and community needs, never forgetting that the ideal, strong individual, independent from the rest of the world, is actually dependent on the care of others, usually women."40* Here we connect with what Laura Roth shared with us in conversation around how feminism is deeply connected with the micro scale and micro practices - 'big scale' proposals usually forget about the reproductive work. That is why one cannot simply make political proposals that are at the macro level - that has the assumption that the necessary work for that to happen will be carried out by some "other" people. Focusing on big scale is a very patriarchal practice. This also links with the analysis in 'Reinventing the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons', where Silvia Federici centres the reproduction of life in her analysis.

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39. From https://longreads.tni.org/feminist-realities-transforming-democracy-in-times-of-crisis
40. https://fearlesscities.com/sites/default/files/fearless_book_en.pdf

## Decide together

In the book from Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzevellini 'They Can't Represent Us!: Reinventing Democracy From Greece to Occupy', there are a lot of experiences and tools on decision-making and consensus practices emerging from movements and communities across geographies and contexts, aiming to make decisions by consensus, including in creative and adaptive ways, thus dismantling the 'majority rule' but instead making decisions where everyone contributes, but also being flexible with tools, including to avoid vetoes, and sometimes voting too. At the same time, there are decision-making tools that support horizontal structures of decision-making, shared and clear responsibilities and accountabilities, and spaces that sometimes are conformed in full assembly, sometimes in smaller groups/councils based on thematic areas. Whilst not falling into the trap of representation, sometimes there are rotating spokespeople and/or delegation, accompanied by spaces to share learnings and collectivise training for that. In 'Emergent Strategy', adrienne in dialogue with Autumn Maree Brown says that consensus *"is what we long for"*.41

As read in many anarchist writings, direct democracy needs to be accompanied by a sustained and collective process of politicisation, conscientisation42 and cultural action. We could frame this process as politicisation and feminist popular education, as a key element of feminist democracies. Tools must be available through which communities can learn from their experiences and link systemic transformation to the common good of the community. Starting from relationships, we need to support a process of conscientisation and cultural revolution. This is something that was incredibly significant for the leaderless protests that were carried out in Hong Kong within the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill movement, as we read in 'Hong Kong's Summer of Uprising: From Anti-Extradition to Anti-Authoritarian Protests'43, as fostering relationships of mutual solidarity and trust was essential for consciousness raising and to forge radical protest strategy and tactics.

Very importantly, as Laura Roth's pointed out to us in a dialogue, there is very little resource readily available on how to solve conflict in a feminist framework – and here we connect with the important analysis brought forward by the 'Tyranny of Structurelessness'44. How can we create spaces, build and sustain structures and co-create and collectivize tools to solve conflict in a transformative, feminist way, and unleash creative energy and deeper trusting relationships? How do we sustain collective care together with sustained accountability and shared responsibility? We know tensions do arise, conflict arises, we cannot always agree and consensus is something to be built for the common good, but are we equipped enough with tools to surface (and avoid the creation of deep, invisible power structures), face and solve, and transform, tension and conflict? How do we learn from experiences and document tools to be applied in contexts? We deem this an essential part of the 'toolbox' of feminist democracies.

## Another world is possible

Real democracies have been existing, resisting and thriving since time immemorial, in parallel to the neoliberal "democracy" hegemony based on individualism, dominance and violence. So we don't need to convince anyone that "this is possible", as this has always been happening and is already happening now too. We believe that within the storm of the patriarchy, the multitude of feminist realities and transformative forms of democracy for the common good of all nature, in any space and in multiple shapes, are the lighthouse guiding our way for the present and future.

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41. adrienne maree brown, Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds (AK Press, 2017), p.93.
42. Paulo Freire
43. Lee, Francis L. F., Samson Yuen, Gary Tang, and EdmundW. Cheng. "Hong Kong's Summer of Uprising: From Anti-Extradition to Anti-Authoritarian Protests."*China Review*19, no.4 (2019). p. 1–32.https://www.jstor.org/stable/26838911
44. Jo Freeman (1970)

Community

scale matters

beyond the nation state

interconnected with ecology

Un mundo donde quepan muchos mundo

Earth democracy

structure

ecological democracy

Common good of all nature

small scale matters

democratic confederalism

no hierarchy

collective responsibility + accountability

Co-creation

radical honesty
interdependance
healing justice
disability justice
transformative justice
horizontal relationships
collective governance structure

# A few elements of 'what could be called' feminist democracies
## *(non-comprehensive)*

- Feminist democracies overcome representative democracy, or at least radically transform it.
- Feminist democracies are based on collective autonomous governance structures.
- No hierarchy, no 'tyranny of the structurelessness' - yes organisation, yes structure (structures are fundamental)
- Collective responsibility and accountability.
- Feminist democracies are based on horizontal relationships and community.
- Horizontality - core importance of how we relate to each other and to nature.
- Feminist democracies work for the common good not just of humans, but of all nature.
- Interconnected with ecology and a way to structure and self-govern our societies in belonging to nature.
- Feminist democracies go beyond the nation-State in its radical and ideal way.
- Swaraj: real democracy, ecological democracy, direct democracy, earth democracy.
- Various shapes of forms can conform feminist democracies – there is no 'one-way fits all', but the opposite, as we learn from the Zapatistas with *"un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos"* (a world where many words fit)
- Organised groups not only on the basis of geography/territory, but also on work/interest/affinity.
- Transformative justice, disability justice and healing justice.
- Importance of learning from "old" resources that are relevant today - history of real democracy is deleted from mainstream culture and education (we looked back as far as the Paleolithic and Neolithic ages, thanks to the resources we reviewed)
- Feminist decision-making process and structure tools e.g. how to take decisions by consensus/creative and adaptive consensus tools; if/when to do majority; rotating spokespeople, tools and spaces to surface and solve conflict and hidden power dynamics; division of areas of work, etc.; tools for collective accountability and responsibility; nurture and sustain trust, radical honesty and collective care.
- Small scale matters: macro reflects micro.
- Prefiguration – co-creation is key.
- From individualistic to collective notion of autonomy and creation.
- This is not only how we collectively thrive, but this is also key to avoid our extinction and that of many other species that we would take with us.
- The core of our essence: collective subjects in interdependence.
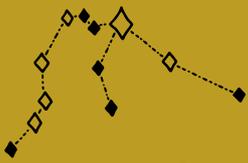
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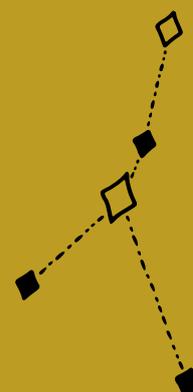
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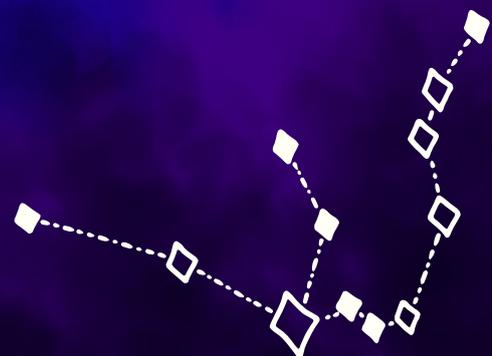
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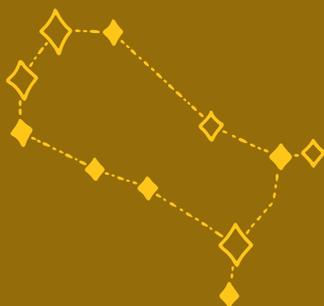
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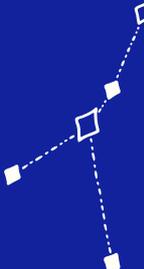
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*Collective creation*

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*The artwork has been inspired by the wonderful creations in FRIDA Pluriverse https://youngfeministfund.org/frida-pluriverse/*

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