

THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL ECOLOGY: LIBERTARIAN MUNICIPALISM

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For two centuries social revolutionaries have cherished the ideal of the "Commune of communes" as part of their vision of a future liberatory society. Ever since the Great French Revolution of 1789, they have dreamed of creating decentralized, stateless, and collectively managed "communes," joined together in confederations of free municipalities. All three of the major nineteenth-century anarchist thinkers--Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin--called for a "federation of communes" for an anarchist society. The Paris Commune, in its manifesto to the French people of April 19, 1871--which was greatly influenced by federalist anarchism--called for "communal autonomy [to be] extended to every township in France."

Libertarian municipalism, the political dimension of social ecology that was developed by Murray Bookchin, is the most recent manifestation of this grand tradition. As a libertarian politics of social revolution, it constitutes both a theory and a practice for building a libertarian communist society organized as a "Commune of communes."

Libertarian municipalism does not constitute a party program; nor does it advocate the formation of a party machine to attain state power. Rather, it is a program for direct democracy, in which citizens in communities manage their own affairs through face-to-face processes of decision-making.

What Is Politics?

As we all know, the state, with its monopoly of the legitimate means of violence, is a system of domination that, far from empowering the great majority of people as citizens, ensures the general abdication of their power and their subordination to rule by the few. Even though the state designates people in its jurisdiction as "citizens," it conceives them as something less than citizens: in earlier times it was "subjects," today it is "voters" or "constituents," but in either cases it considers them to be too juvenile or too incompetent to manage public affairs and instead takes their power to wield itself presumably in their behalf.

In the late nineteenth century, when social revolution seemed imminent in many parts of Europe, social democratic parties arose that sought to make use of state

structures, not to build socialism but to head off revolution and insure that people remained in passive conformity to the social order. Most recently, the state has been reducing people to "customers" or "consumers" of the social services with which it provides them. These dependent "consumers," as always, function passively and acquiescently, are to perform their limited tasks in a narrow corner of life, drawing salaries, raising families, and looking to the state to provide the rest.

The elites who wield power in the state are actually concerned less with the interests of the large number of people than with the practical exigencies of control and mobilization. Most notably, they form parties to try to gain power--parties that, in effect, are states-in-waiting. Professionalized and manipulative, in their periodic appeals to ordinary people for votes, these elite systems impersonate democracy, making a mockery of the democratic ideals to which they cynically swear fealty at opportune moments.

To label this system *politics* is a gross misnomer, as Bookchin has pointed out--as an apparatus for rule, it should more properly be called *statecraft.* Politics, by contrast, concerns the arena and institutions by which people directly manage their community affairs. Unfortunately, confusion between politics and statecraft has been widespread, not only in society as a whole but in the Left as well. Marxists, for example, are notorious for mistaking statecraft for politics. The Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm has recently informed us that "the commitment to politics is what historically distinguished Marxian socialism." What he means by politics here, however, is actually nothing more than statecraft. By calling for a workers' state to lead us to a communist society, Marxism failed to consider politics in the sense of civic institutions of the commune by which we manage public affairs. In this sense Marxism lacks any real political theory at all.

Anarchists, most lamentably, have suffered from a similar misidentification. They too have mistaken statecraft for politics--but where Marxists did so in order to practice statecraft, anarchists did so in order to reject it altogether. Bakunin expressed the typical view in 1871 when he wrote that the new social order can be created "only through the development and organization of the nonpolitical or antipolitical social power of the working class in city and country." Here he made "antipolitical" into a

synonym for "antistatist." Even Kropotkin--who called for the communalization of social life in **The Conquest of Bread** and described endless kinds of associations and groups that practice mutual aid--omitted to tell us by what specific political institutions people would manage their community in the postrevolutionary society.

In consequence anarchism, like Marxism, has historically given insufficient attention to politics in its fullest meaning. Yet the questions that Aristotle asked two thousand years ago still express the central problem of all political theory, including our own: What kind of polity best provides for the rich flourishing of communal human life?

As libertarian municipalists, we reply that the best polity is one that builds on the traditions of direct democracy. Indeed, we use the very word **politics** in its original Greek sense, to refer to the self-managing activity of empowered citizens in participatory civic institutions. In the politics we advance, citizens would manage their community affairs through face-to-face democratic institutions, especially popular assemblies and confederations of municipalities.

However remote this notion of politics may seem in today's era of nation-states, it has historically found lived expression in a variety of places. It first arose in ancient Athens, where citizens--limited, unfortunately, only to free Athenian males--nevertheless attained a remarkable degree of self-management. At later points in Western history, direct democracies have recurred, in the town centers of many medieval European communes after A.D. 1000, in the town meetings of eighteenth-century New England, and in the sectional assemblies of revolutionary Paris of 1793, among other places.

Each of these democracies was deeply flawed by class and hierarchical stratification, yet in each of them people successfully congregated for a time, sometimes even as free citizens, to directly manage the communities in which they lived. Generally, even as popes, princes, and kings developed overarching structures of power, people in villages, towns, and neighborhoods maintained control over much of their own community life.

The State and Urbanization

The rise and consolidation of centralized nation-states did much to stifle public participation and strip towns of their power and independence. Monarchs and their henchmen first brought nearby areas under their subjection, then later subordinated even distant localities to state control. Initially they carried out this invasion in the name of a privilege to rule that was said to be sanctioned divinely, but in later centuries the builders of republican states cast aside religious justifications and appropriated the terminology of "democracy" to sanctify their strictly representative institutions--parliaments, chambers of deputies, and congresses--cloaking the elitist, paternalistic, class-based, and coercive nature of those systems in the language of "popular sovereignty."

At the same time the state itself was dramatically eroding municipal freedoms--as it continues to do today, eviscerating neighborhood life and municipal power in favor of professionalized institutions of administration and coercion. The Second World War further strengthened the state in relation to the cities, siphoning municipal power to allocate scarce resources upward to the national level, to military planners, and to bureaucrats, rendering cities ever more dependent on state planning. Today European cities are managed in great part by battalions of statist civil servants who administer it on a day-to-day basis.

If the nation-state did much to suppress municipal power, another phenomenon is wreaking even further havoc on the municipality today. Urbanization, that immense, formless capitalist blight, is swallowing up the definable, humanly scaled entities that once were authentic cities, absorbing small communities into larger ones, cities into metropolises, and metropolises into huge megalopolitan belts. Europe's extended regions of urbanization cross the boundaries of cities and even states, as suburbs are swallowed up and absorbed into a sprawling metropolitan octopus. So intimately have urban settlements now converged that the English Channel and the Alps are no longer barriers to their amalgamation: a single north-south metropolitan region extends from Lancashire to central Italy, while another runs east-west between Valencia and Vienna.

In the United States a corresponding trend has moved economic life away from the traditional urban centers of the Northeast and toward the Sunbelt, so that the Far West is now the most urbanized part of the country. As the megalopolis spreads, sprawl,

condominium subdivisions, highways, faceless shopping malls, parking lots, and industrial parks are sweeping ever deeper into the countryside.

This spread of the market economy serves nothing but the expansionist imperatives of capital. By corroding the public sphere in favor of the market, capitalism has accelerated the demolition of municipal freedoms to the point that they may very well disappear entirely from our societies. So avidly have centralized European governments accommodated the needs of capital that many municipalities are becoming little more than agencies for the delivery of social services originating in the state.

Perhaps the most extreme instance of this process occurred in Great Britain, where throughout the decade of the 1980s Thatcher's Tory government instituted a series of local government acts that aggressively and systematically stripped local government of many of its powers, appropriating some for itself but leaving others to private companies, culminating in the outright abolition of the Greater London Council in 1985. A new, distinctly nonpolitical model of municipal government has since emerged in Britain, in which it is expected, not to provide a democratic arena for policymaking by citizens, but to perform according to market and efficiency principles in the delivery of services. In the United States, in conjunction with the capitalist economy, municipal governments are not only privatizing public services but are blatantly pandering to corporations, doling out tax breaks to companies willing to locate within their borders.

Today the forces of capitalism cross national boundaries as well, and I sometimes think that the only place where people still sing "The Internationale" with conviction (albeit with significantly altered lyrics) must be the corporate boardroom. As the Third World or Southsinks into chaos and misery, much of the world is being arranged to meet the needs of the transnational corporations and the bond market.

As these larger social forces corrode neighborhood and community life, the authentic meaning of politics is gradually being forgotten. People in Western societies are losing their memory of politics as an active, vital process of self-management, and as they do so they participate in the idea that citizenship consists of nothing more than voting and paying taxes and passively receiving state-provided services.

In the United States political activity has migrated from neighborhoods, unions, wards, and civic associations to television, where even statecraft is becoming a

spectator sport. Indeed, in this "nation of spectators," the passive consumption of media entertainment fills the void of desocialized consciousness. Moreover, the prevalent American social desideratum is not to enrich the commonality but to acquire things for oneself. Rampant egotism, an overabundance of dishonesty, and celebrity worship pervade the culture of Dollarland.

The Civic Response

To a great extent, however, the hollowness, the meaninglessness of this system has become evident to people in the street, who understand that the pervasive influence of money and manipulation is undermining even statecraft's outward veneer of democracy. If they are passive in relation to state and party activities, it is often because they regard them as futile and untrustworthy, and because social and economic pressures have forced them to narrow their concerns to material survival.

Yet in many parts of the European and American world, local political life remains alive to a degree that is remarkable, considering the social forces arrayed against it. Even in communities that have been stripped of their former proud powers, formal and informal political arenas still abide--civic associations, town meetings, forums, issue-oriented initiatives, and the like--as arenas for face-to-face public processes. In the cities of Europe, self-government has a long and venerable tradition, and for many Europeans the municipality is still a significant locus of political identification. In the United States, a relatively decentralized system, a deep distrust of government dating back to the colonial era still persists, while a nostalgia for small-town life expresses a desire for a mutually nurturing community where people are no longer held hostage to market forces but are free to practice mutual aid and cooperation. Even in the Information Age, when asked what "community" is, people most often think of their town or neighborhood.

Nor has the city as a site of political resistance been entirely obliterated. Submerged as it is within an urbanized nation-state beholden to capitalism, it nonetheless lingers as a historic presence, a repository of long-standing traditions, sentiments, and impulses. Within itself it harbors memories of ancient civic freedoms, of self-management, on behalf of which the oppressed have struggled over centuries of

social development. Cities like Paris and Lyons, Saint Petersburg and Barcelona, carry repressed memories of revolutionary activity that was based at least as much in the city neighborhood as it was in the workplace. Said the program of the Friends of Durruti, as published in **Los Amigos del Pueblo,** "The municipality is the authentic revolutionary government."

A self-conscious municipal political life thus perseveres as a latent prospect, a cherished goal of human emancipation. Power, having been taken from the people, can be recovered by them once again, and the potentiality of the city as an irrepressible site for political self-management haunts the state like a bad dream. Despairing of the meaninglessness of their lives, ordinary people--at the level of the municipality--may once again begin to look outward to politics as the medium of empowerment and rediscover its communalistic joys.

Democracy potentially works best in urban communities where a long-standing commitment to the urban polity is expressed in flourishing civic associations and in a history of self-government. But that does not exclude from self-government those urban communities that lack such a history. Where the latent political realm no longer exists, a self-conscious movement for municipal direct democracy can and should revive it, so that over time it gains strength. Such a movement could enlarge the municipality's democratic content beyond the limitations of previous eras, building it into a living arena for change, education, empowerment, and revolutionary confrontation with the state and capital.

Our project, as libertarian municipalists, is to build precisely such a movement: to resuscitate a local political realm and expand local direct democracy. We aim to institutionalize this direct democracy in citizens' assemblies--in neighborhood and town meetings--where citizens of a given municipality may meet, deliberate, and make decisions on matters of common concern. Where such assemblies already exist, we aim to expand their democratic potential; where they formerly existed, we aim to revive them; and where they never existed, we aim to create them anew. We seek to build that democracy into a strong force, by which citizens may manage society as a whole. In the end, we aim to evict both the capitalist system and the nation-state in favor of humane and cooperative social relations--a rational, ecological libertarian communist society.

To bring the nascent political realm of the municipality to this fulfillment, we need to place the management of the city entirely in the hands of its competent adult community members. Shedding their artificially induced personae as passive spectators, as consumers, and as isolated monads, citizens would recognize their mutual interdependence and as such work to advance their common welfare. In the political realm they would create the institutions that make for broad community participation and sustain them on an ongoing basis, finally regaining the power that the state has usurped from them.

Movement Building

To begin this long and complex process, we must start with the basic seed kernels of the political sphere: the crowded city sidewalk, the square, the park, the town hall--the public spaces where private life shades into public life, where the personal becomes, to one degree or another, the communal. Frequent and repeated encounters among community members in these spaces are the germs of the political realm, and the issues of common interest that people discuss here are the its primary subjects of concern. Our urban and social environment, as Lewis Mumford once rightly argued, should be one that, instead of shutting people off from one another, encourages them to encounter and interact with each other most often and most immediately.

Before we begin to cultivate these seeds, we need to form study groups, to educate ourselves and those sympathetic comrades who wish to work with us about the nature of the libertarian municipalist project. We must offer an alternative vision, a utopian vision--to use an unpopular word today--of what is socially desirable, in order to open up a concrete consideration of alternative possibilities. We need to commit ourselves to putting that vision into practice. As social anarchists and libertarian communists, we need to ground ourselves not only in our own familiar literature but in social ecology, in left-libertarian history and theory, in the history of democratic traditions and communalist practices, both in our own areas and in other parts of the world, and in democratic and political theory.

As our study groups become political groups, it is crucial that we commit ourselves to the development of libertarian municipalist theory. Some anarchist circles today are deeply suspicious of the very notion of theory, regarding it as inherently authoritarian, confusing theory with dogma, and confusing groups that advocate a theory with political sects. But if it is impossible to have a *correct* position, then it is also impossible to reject an *incorrect* position.

Adhering to a theory is crucial for maintaining our political direction, for as we build a movement, we will inevitably be called upon to make political choices, and in order to make the best choices, we will need an end vision--a theory--to guide us. Unless we have an end in view, we cannot intelligently choose our means. Our theory should be based on our understanding of the strengths and failures of past revolutionary experiences, as well as our analysis of present social forces. It should not be fixed and inalterable--if we discover that part of it is wrong, then we should change it. But if we are not to be swept to the right along with most of the rest of society, we need a theory to keep ourselves mindful of what is rational.

As the Friends of Durruti repeatedly emphasized, there is no revolutionary movement without revolutionary theory. What went wrong with the CNT, they said, was that it "was utterly devoid of revolutionary theory." The July 1936 revolution failed, they said, because "we did not have a concrete program. We had no idea where we were going. We had lyricism aplenty; but when all is said and done, we did not know what to do with our masses of workers or how to give substance to the popular effusion which erupted inside our organisations. By not knowing what to do, we handed the revolution on a platter to the bourgeoisie and the Marxists."

As our study group commits itself to this theory and becomes a political group, it should adopt a constitution and a statement of principles, to give the group clear political definition. Having educated ourselves, we then need to go on to educate others and become an active presence in our communities. We should study local political and ecological issues of concern and produce a literature that clearly links them with our theoretical ideas. We need to publish community newspapers, make posters and leaflets. We need to distribute this literature in local bookstores and neighborhood centers and cafés. We need to get people talking with each other about the deep systemic roots of seemingly local problems.

We need to hold lecture series in public spaces. We should organize actions around immediate issues. We should be a continual presence in community politics. When issues of concern come before the local city council or planning commission, we should testify at public hearings--clearly identifying our movement. As we work on these immediate issues, we should always tie them to our demand for citizens' assemblies in the municipality, always call for a direct democracy and a cooperative society as a long-term solution to the issue at hand. The most important political point in our public education efforts should be the call for direct democracy.

If the citizens' assemblies are to constitute a significant public sphere, they must eventually become arenas of substantive political power, and the decisions that citizens make there must become binding on the community. Our paramount demand to the existing local government should therefore be that these assemblies be instituted legally. We should demand that the municipal government change its governing charter to establish them, recognize their existence, and spell out their powers. Where citizens' assemblies already exist, we should call for strengthening their powers at the expense of statist institutions.

Local Elections

It is highly unlikely, of course, that existing municipal governments would yield easily and willingly to this demand, that they would voluntarily surrender their powers to citizens' assemblies. After all, in all too many respects current municipal institutions resemble miniature nation-states themselves. Indeed, existing city councils will almost certainly try to block any effort to establish effective citizens' assemblies. In this situation our libertarian municipalist group may do two things.

First, we may take the initiative to create assemblies ourselves on an extralegal basis. We may convene them, then appeal to all citizens in our community to attend and participate in them. These assemblies would meet on a regular basis and debate local, regional, national, and even international issues, issuing resolutions and public statements as they see fit. Even though these assemblies will have as yet no legal power, what they can do is exercise enormous moral and exemplary power. In time, to the extent that more and more citizens see their moral significance and attend their

meetings, existing municipal governments may well have no choice but to give them varying degrees of legality, an opening that we can then proceed to further expand and magnify.

Second, to advance the creation of assemblies on a legal basis, our group may run candidates for local elective office. Some anarchists today object to libertarian municipalism on the basis of just this notion, rejecting such electoralism as a form of parliamentarism or "city-statism." Here a clear distinction must be made between parliamentarism and electoralism. Electoral activity in a municipality can be qualitatively different from statecraft, since the city and the state themselves are potentially qualitatively different from each other and even have a history of antagonism and even conflict. Bakunin himself favored anarchists' undertaking local political activity, because he saw that municipal politics is basic to people's political lives. The people, he wrote, "have a healthy, practical common sense when it comes to communal affairs. They are fairly well informed and know how to select from their midst the most capable officials. This is why municipal elections always best reflect the real attitude and will of the people."

In the short term, our electoral campaigns will be educational efforts, intended to school citizens in the basic ideas of libertarian municipalism. They will be occasions for us to publicize our ideas and to spark public discussion. At every opportunity--in interviews, debates, and speeches--our candidates should call for the creation of citizens' assemblies and advocate direct democracy as forums for an authentic democracy.

Before our group engages in municipal elections, however, we should write an electoral platform that states the aims for which we are fighting--especially the radical democratization of municipal government. The platform should also contain a series of clearly specified immediate demands--what socialists have long called a minimum program--concerning issues of housing, transportation, environment, welfare, education, and the like. If another political group in our community demands similar reforms, we should escalate these immediate demands, always demanding ever more radical changes and popular institutions.

Our program should place these immediate demands in a radical context by tying them to the longer-term goal of fundamentally transforming society. If many people in

our communities are not yet prepared to reject capitalism, we may use more palatable phrasing, referring, instead of "capitalism," to "the market economy." If the words "libertarian communism" are too frightening for some, then we may use the phrase "cooperative society" to refer to our ultimate vision. In any case we should speak in the idiom of our distinctive tradition even as we retain the substance of our libertarian communist ideals. Finally, when our efforts at public education have borne fruit and our community is radicalized, we may press for the achievement of our maximum program in all its magnificence--for libertarian communism in a rational, ecological anarchist society.

In the present period of political reaction, it is not likely that our movement will grow rapidly or meet with immediate electoral success. In fact, setbacks are to be expected. Only in a community whose political and democratic consciousness has been raised by the movement would it even be desirable for one of our candidates to actually win an election. If we are to avoid being demoralized by the inevitable setbacks, we must be prepared for our movement to grow slowly and organically, and we must be willing to explain our ideas over and over again, if necessary, with great patience, until the political climate finally becomes more radicalized and hence more amenable to our ideas.

When the citizens of a municipality do elect our candidates to office, it should be because they have come to agree with our platform. Immediately upon taking office, the new city councilors should begin to press, in public forums as well as the city council, for fully empowered citizens' assemblies at the expense of existing city institutions. Where citizens' assemblies do not exist, the councilors should aggressively introduce charter changes to create them; where they do exist, they should press for changes that give them increased power, including the legal power to formulate binding policies for the municipality as a whole.

Assemblies at Work

Once we establish an assembly, by whatever means, its first action should be to constitute itself--to draw up procedural bylaws specifying how it will conduct its proceedings. These bylaws should establish the assembly's decision-making procedures

and define its offices, as well as its procedures for selecting individuals to hold those offices and for holding them accountable to the assembly as a whole.

The decisions that the assembly makes should be taken according to majority vote. Although this process will require the minority to conform to the results of a decision it opposes, the minority nonetheless will retain the crucial freedom to try to overturn the decision. It is free to openly and persistently articulate its reasoned disagreements to

other members of the community, order to try to persuade them to reconsider the decision. By dissenting in an orderly and civil fashion, the minority keeps an issue alive and lays the groundwork for becoming the majority in its own right, hopefully advancing the political consciousness of the community in the process.

The establishment of a citizens' assembly is not in itself a fulfillment; until its participating citizens develop radical content, it will be only an institutional structure. As such, it is a battleground for social struggles--especially the class struggle, which will be extended beyond the factory into the community at large. Clearly, conflicting class interests will appear in the assembly: Real estate developers and business people, state bureaucrats and party functionaries, proprietors and reactionaries, will all come to assembly meetings and try to advance their own interests or those of the institutions they represent. It will be the responsibility of our group and our allies to counter the self-interested and reactionary arguments of these people and persuade our fellow citizens that the system they represent should be vigorously opposed in favor of the larger community interest.

Once the minimum step of creating an assembly is taken, we may advance a transitional program of expanding the assembly's power. As the popular democracy matures, with increased attendance at the assemblies--indeed, as citizens make these institutions their own--the assemblies can hope to acquire ever greater de facto power. Ultimately city charters, where they exist, would have to be changed to affirm that the assemblies hold substantive power in civic affairs.

Thereafter the assemblies could work toward achieving the maximum demands of a libertarian municipalist polity: the confederation of municipal assemblies and ultimately the creation of a rational, ecological, libertarian society.

The Formation of Citizenship

Creating a new society depends on changing not only political structures and social relations but consciousness as well, including the character qualities of the individual citizens who embody that society. Libertarian municipalism stands in the tradition of "civic humanism," which places the highest value on the active, responsible participation of citizens in the management of their common affairs. Where modernity leaves us directionless and uprooted, civic humanism would seek to reembed us in ethical lifeways and democratic institutions.

We believe that politics is too important to be left to professionals--it must become the province of ordinary people, who have attained a high degree of political maturity, rather than the province of elite "specialists." We believe that every adult citizen is potentially competent to participate directly in democratic politics. By rationally deliberating together, making decisions peacefully, and implementing their choices responsibly, citizens can be expected to develop a set of personal strengths and civic virtues--a character structure--commensurate with democratic political life.

Of these civic strengths and virtues, the most important are solidarity and reason. By any definition, citizenship presupposes solidarity, or a commitment to the public good. In contrast to the cynicism that prevails today, mature active citizens should understand that the perpetuation of their political community depends on their own active support for and participation in it. A mature identification with the community should bring with it a sense of responsibility. Each citizen can be expected to understand that, like all the others, they not only enjoy rights but owe duties to their community, and they should fulfill these responsibilities with the knowledge that everyone else was making the same effort.

Second, the faculty of reason should be of crucial importance in a direct democracy. Reasoned restraint and decorum are needed to keep a civic assembly orderly, tolerant, functional, and creative. Reason should allow citizens to weigh the possible courses of action that their community should take and select the best one. Indeed, reasonable evaluation--in contrast to emotion-laden partisanship--is a prerequisite for constructive discussion and deliberation. It is indispensable for overcoming personal prejudices, leading us to treat our fellow citizens not with bigotry

or vindictiveness but with fairness and generosity. It is also necessary to the survival of the community: Some citizens, for example, might attempt to revive private property and an entrepreneurial, profit-seeking spirit. In an attempt to gain our support for this end, they may well make appeals to our cupidity and greed. To resist these highly emotional appeals, we will need reason--as well as personal!

strength of character--to reject them in the interest of preserving the cooperative nature of the community.

Such a "civilizing" process should transform a group of self-interested individuals into a deliberative, rational, ethical body politic. This is not to say that a libertarian municipalist society would require individual men and women to be wholly self-sacrificing and subordinate themselves to the collectivity. On the contrary, each individual would enjoy a personal life as well, with intimate family members and with the friends and fellows they choose as companions, and with co-workers in productive activities. But as participants in a bold experiment, citizens would rely on one another to share responsibilities--and as they become more worthy of one another's trust, they could place ever more trust in one another. Indeed, the individual and the community, rather than be subordinate one to the other, could mutually create each other in a reciprocal process.

Historically, the societies that participated in the development of direct democracy have been ethnically homogeneous. But direct democracy does not depend on ethnic homogeneity, since neither its practices nor its virtues are the exclusive property of one ethnic group. Thanks to international travel and communication, the world is shrinking, and municipalities today are becoming ever more ethnically heterogeneous; the mixing of cultures and ethnicities in cities will only grow in the coming years. In the school system of Vancouver, to cite just one example, Mandarin Chinese is now spoken more often than French, one of Canada's official languages. Latino and Asian immigration is a central fact of life in Los Angeles. Under the present social order, it may well happen that neighborhoods will define themselves by ethnicity or national origin rather than shared civic space. Should particularistic emotions intensify beyond a certain point, the result could well be interethnic antagonism.

A rational democratic polity, however, would provide the public spaces where mutual understanding among people of different ethnic origin could grow and flourish:

the citizens' assembly would provide the neutral procedural structures by which ethnic groups could articulate their specific problems in the give-and-take of discussion, leading to greater mutual understanding. In this shared context people of all cultures could develop modesty about their own cultural assumptions. At the same time the community would share a common recognition of a general interest, based on environmental and communal concerns, that transcended particularistic concerns. A shared commitment to the development of solidarity and the practice of reason in public affairs would make our multicultural municipalities into havens of mutual aid and gardens of cultural creativity.

Our movement will thus offer more than its distinctive political platform; it will also offer a moral alternative to the vacuity and triviality of life today, in the form of radical solidarity and freedom. Like the great manifestos advanced by socialist movements in the last century, it would call for moral as well as material transformation. It would generate a cultural and artistic life to enhance the community's political aims. It would be accompanied by communitarian institutions, like cooperatives, however limited and short-lived, that would help accustom people to the practices of cooperation. It would offer a meaningful life, with social roles far more satisfying than the never-ending buying and selling of useless goods.

Decentralization

If the democratic potential of the municipality is to be fulfilled, city life must ultimately be rescaled to the dimensions suitable for a democratic political realm. That is, even as municipalities undergo a process of democratization, existing large cities will have to be structurally decentralized into smaller municipalities of a manageable size.

Even the very largest of urban belts comprise within them smaller communities that share a distinctive cultural heritage or tradition. Most large cities today encompass smaller cities or boroughs, most famously London, which is a congeries of neighborhoods. The five-borough city of New York is actually a very recent phenomenon, dating back only to 1897. As recently as 1874, New York City consisted solely of the borough of Manhattan. A city that is only a hundred-odd years old has certainly not yet become eternal. At the same time, what one urban affairs specialist

calls an "urban confederacy movement" is now under way in many American urban centers, such as St. Louis, Denver, and Orange County: here the citizens of what began as suburbs are finding that the large city is too big to work, and they are trying to redefine it as a league of smaller, incorporated, often multicultural pieces.

In large cities, citizens' assemblies may at first be established in only few neighborhoods; they could then serve as models for other neighborhoods. The democratized neighborhoods that arise could then interlink with each other and form confederations that would coordinate transportation, sanitation, and other services. Neighborhoods that are in the process of being institutionally decentralized in this way could ultimately transform not only the political life of the city but its physical form as well.

Localism and Interdependence

As essential as decentralization is to libertarian municipalism, however, local self-reliance is not essential. No locality--not even a municipality that practices direct democracy--can be sufficient unto itself, nor should it be, in order to avoid local parochialism. Municipalities of all sorts are necessarily dependent upon one another and thereby share many common issues.

Least of all should individual communities seek to be entirely autonomous in their economic life. Any given individual community needs more resources and raw materials than it can derive from its own land. Economic interdependence is simply a fact--it is a function not of the competitive market economy, of capitalism, but of social life as such.

To allow for the full participation of citizens in political life, our libertarian communist society must rest on a sound technological as well as economic base that affords them sufficient free time; otherwise the demands of survival and personal security will overtake all other concerns and activities.

Today productive technologies have been developed sufficiently to make possible an immense expansion of free time, through the automation of tasks once performed by human labor. The basic means for eliminating toil and drudgery, for living in comfort and security, rationally and ecologically, for social rather than merely private ends, are potentially available to all peoples of the world.

Not even in the wealthiest existing societies, however, has this promise of post-scarcity--of a sufficiency in the means of life and the expansion of free time--been fulfilled. The reason lies not in the productive technologies themselves but in the social relations that determine their use--social relations drive ever greater corporate profits and expansion. In the present society, for example, automation has very often created social hardships, like the poverty that results from unemployment, because corporations prefer machines to human labor in order to reduce production costs and increase profits. In a rational anarchist society, however, organized along cooperative lines, the social relations that drive the profit motive would be eliminated.

Under such a system, productive technologies--as part of a new economic order--could be used to create free time rather than misery. A post-scarcity society would retain much of today's technological infrastructure--including automated industrial plants--but it would use them to meet the basic needs of life and remove onerous toil rather than serve the imperatives of capitalism. Men and women would then have the free time to participate in political life as well as enjoy rich and meaningful personal lives. At the same time, rather than perpetuate the gross forms of concentration and centralization that we have today, we could rescale and retool our technological resources along ecological lines, decentralize them to meet a regional, even confederal division of labor and production, and thereby bring town and country into a creative balance.

The fruits of the productive forces would be distributed according to individuals' need for them. Such distribution would be institutionalized through a system of organized cooperation, emanating from the interdependence of the democratized municipalities

Confederalism The type of political and social organization for institutionalizing such interdependence is the confederation.

A confederation is a lateral union in which several political entities combine to form a larger whole. Although in the process of confederating, these smaller entities form a larger entity, they do not dissolve themselves into it but retain their freedom and distinct identity. In the society we are seeking, the municipalities that have undergone democratization by forming citizens' assemblies would form confederations on a regional basis to address shared transmunicipal or regional problems.

In a republican state, a parliament or legislature of representatives determines social policy by voting to approve or reject specific laws. In a confederation, by contrast, a congress or council of delegates acts to administer the policies that have been established by the assemblies of the member communities. In our new polity, the libertarian municipalities of a given region would send delegates to a confederal council. These delegates would not be policymaking representatives; rather they would individually be accountable to the assemblies that chose them, and they would be imperatively mandated by those assemblies. They would not be permitted to make policy decisions without first gaining the assent of their home assemblies, and they would be immediately recallable at the assemblies' discretion.

Indeed, rather than making policy decisions itself, the confederal council would exist primarily for administrative and adjudicative purposes--that is, for the purpose of coordinating policies formulated by the assemblies, reconciling (with base approval) differences among them, and carrying out their administration.

It is the citizens, deliberating in their democratic assemblies, who would make policy. They would develop possible various courses of action on a particular issue, deliberate their various strengths and weaknesses, then make their decision according to majority vote. Free citizens in assemblies alone have the right to make policy. The functions of the confederal council, by contrast, would be purely administrative and coordinative--executing policies that the municipalities have already adopted.

Would ordinary citizens in assemblies be capable of making decisions about a society that is as complex as ours? Today and every day, parliamentarians--commonly lawyers--make decisions about a multitude of various complex and difficult subjects. Even when an issue involves great technological complexity, however, these parliamentarians rarely need extensive technical knowledge in order to weigh the alternatives. Few parliamentarians today, for example, would know how to technically engineer a road, yet they frequently make policy decisions about the need for, location, and size of roads. In a free society, in cases where specific technical knowledge is actually needed to make a decision, those who have that expertise would present it clearly and accessibly, so that ordinary citizens of reasonable competence can make the best policy decision.

When a policy decision must be made on a matter that affects the entire confederation, the confederal council would coordinate confederation-wide voting by majority rule. The final outcome of the voting would be determined by tallying not the votes of individual towns voting as units, but the aggregate votes of all the citizens of all the municipalities in the confederation. The confederation would thus possess, by majority vote of its citizens, the power to prevent a particular municipality from inflicting moral or physical damage on its own members or on other towns or cities.

At the same time the aggregated municipalities would have ultimate power within the confederation, in that they embody direct democracy of free citizens and in that their separate assemblies engage in rational discourse before making decisions. The principles of assembly sovereignty and free discourse decisively distinguish our approach from statism: where statism allows, at best, for the illusory liberty of isolated monads in mass plebiscites, confederal democracy encourages citizens to frame possible approaches to an issue in their own terms and explore them thoroughly before deciding among them. Consciously formed to accommodate interdependencies, then, a confederation of municipalities would unite face-to-face democratic decision-making with transmunicipal administration. Confederations of municipalities could be formed on a global basis, thereby fulfilling the longstanding dream of revolutionary movements past, to achieve a rational "Commune of communes."

The Municipalized Economy

The type of economic life that we advance is neither nationalized (as in state socialism), nor placed in the hands of workers by factory (as in syndicalism), nor privately owned (as in capitalism), nor reduced to small proprietary cooperatives (as in communitarianism). Rather, it is municipalized--that is, placed under community "ownership" and control in the form of citizens' assemblies.

This *municipalization of the economy* means the "ownership" and management of the economy by the citizens of the community and its coordination with other municipalized economies through confederation. Property--including both land and factories--would come under the overall control of citizens in their assemblies, coordinated by confederal councils. The citizens would become the collective "owners"

of their community's economic resources and would formulate their economic policies in the interest of the community as a whole.

Citizens would thus make economic decisions not for their individual workplaces but for the entire community. Those who work in a particular factory, for example, would participate in formulating policies not only for that factory but for all other factories as well. They would participate in this decision-making not as workers, farmers, technicians, engineers, or professionals, but as citizens. The decisions they make would be guided not by the interests of their specific enterprise or vocation, which may be very parochial or trade-oriented, but by the needs of the entire community.

Where resources are distributed very unevenly, popular rule cannot be sustained. Without a rough economic equality, democracy of any sort is ephemeral, giving way sooner or later to oligarchy or worse. In our free society, economic inequality would be eliminated by turning wealth, private property, and the means of production over to the municipality. Through the municipalization of the economy, citizens in assemblies would ultimately expropriate the riches of the possessing classes and place them in the hands of the community, so that it can be used for the benefit of all.

The assembly would also make decisions about the distribution of the material means of life, fulfilling the communist promise of post-scarcity. ">From each according to ability and to each according to need"--the demand of all nineteenth-century communist movements--would become a living practice, with levels of need rationally determined by the assembly. Everyone in the community would thus have access to the means of life, regardless of the work he or she was capable of performing. A rough economic equality would emerge, based on morally and rationally formulated criteria established by its citizens' assembly.

Economic life as such would be brought under the control of the political realm, which would absorb it as part of the public business of the assembly. Neither the factory nor the land could ever again become a separate competitive unit with its own particularistic interests.

The assembly's decisions, it is to be expected, would be guided by rational and ecological standards, and the economy would become a moral economy. An ethos of public responsibility could avoid a wasteful, exclusive, and irresponsible acquisition of goods, as well as ecological destruction and violations of human rights. Citizens in

assemblies could consciously insure that economic entities adhered to ethical precepts of cooperation and sharing. Classical notions of limit and balance could replace the capitalist imperative to expand and compete in the pursuit of profit. The community would value people, not for their levels of production and consumption, but for their positive contributions to community life.

Over the wider geographical range, citizens would make economic policy decisions through their confederations. The wealth expropriated from the property-owning classes would be redistributed not only within a municipality but among all the municipalities in a region. If one municipality tried to engross itself at the expense of others, its confederates would have the right to prevent it from doing so. A thorough politicization of the economy would thereby extend the moral economy to a broad regional scale.

Dual Power

We do not believe that a "Commune of communes" can be achieved in a single revolutionary upsurge. Rather, as our movement grows over the long term, more and more municipalities would democratize themselves and form confederations. Eventually, when a considerable number of municipalities are democratized and confederated, their shared power would constitute a clear threat to the state and to the capitalist system.

The existing power structure would hardly tolerate the existence of such confederations, with their democratic politics, empowered citizenry, and incipient municipalized economy. In defense of capitalism and its own power, the state would almost certainly move against the confederations. If our movement is serious about opposing the state, we must work to divest the state of its monopoly of armed force, by creating a civic guard or citizens' militia for the protection of our freedom and rights.

For a century and a half, the international socialist movement recognized the necessity of a citizens' militia as an alternative to the standing army. The anarchist and syndicalist movements considered an armed people to be a sine qua non for a free society. Bakunin wrote in 1866: "All able-bodied citizens should, if necessary, take up arms to defend their homes and their freedom. Each country's military defense and

equipment should be organized locally by the commune, or provincially, somewhat like the militias in Switzerland or the United States."

A citizens' militia is not merely a military force whose purpose is to defend major social change. It is also a symbol of the power of a free citizenry, their popular will, their resolve to assert their rights, and their commitment to build a new political dispensation based on face-to-face democracy. Moreover, the very presence of a civic militia is an appeal to the rank and file members of the state's armed forces to support the establishment of such a democracy.

We therefore include in our program the formation of a civic militia or guard, under the strict supervision of the citizens' assemblies. It would be a democratic institution in itself, with officers elected both by the militia and by the citizens' assembly.

The larger and more numerous the municipal confederations become, the greater would be their latent power, and the greater would be their potentiality to constitute a counterpower to the nation-state. As they realize this potentiality, tension would likely grow between themselves and the state. Citizens must clearly recognize that this tension is highly desirable--indeed, that their confederated municipalities constitute a potential counterpower to the state.

In fact, the confederated municipalities may eventually gain enough support to constitute a *dual power* to the state. This situation would likely be highly unstable, and resolving it could well involve a confrontation. It is possible, too, that our direct democracy will institutionally "hollow out" the state power itself, delegitimizing its authority and winning a majority of the people over to the new civic and confederal institutions. With or without a confrontation, however, power will have to be shifted away from the state and the professional practitioners of statecraft and entirely into the hands of the people and their confederated assemblies.

In Paris in 1789 and in Petrograd in February 1917, state authority collapsed in the face of a revolutionary confrontation. So hollowed out was the power of the seemingly all-powerful French and Russian monarchies that when a revolutionary people challenged them, they merely crumbled. Crucially, in both cases, the ordinary rank-and-file soldiers of the armed forces went over to the revolutionary movement, to the armed

people. What happened in the past can happen again, especially with an effective, conscious, and inspired revolutionary movement and program.

The Problem of Revolutionary Transition

Despite their historical antagonism, anarchism and Marxism share in the last instance a common social goal: a stateless communism. Where they perhaps have differed most fundamentally is on the question of the revolutionary transition: the nature of the institutions that will struggle against counterrevolution and construct a new social and political order. Marxist movements thought it would be necessary to create a workers' state to carry out the transition; once the state carried out this function, they expected it to wither away.

As anarchists rightly pointed out, this expectation was absurd--the "workers' state" would merely become a new tyranny and, if anything, would have to be overthrown by another revolution. Further, they objected, the wide discrepancy between Marxism's revolutionary means and its revolutionary end was so wide as to be intrinsically immoral. Let the means and ends be the same, anarchists demanded; let a free, cooperative society be created by a free, cooperative movement on the part of the people.

Their criticism of the Marxist transition was more than justified, but on the other hand, by depending on changes of consciousness and spontaneous upsurges to enact the revolution, anarchists too often left unanswered the question of the revolutionary transition: How would the struggle against a counterrevolution be carried out? In many cases they seemed to assume that the initial spontaneous upsurge would be sufficient to eliminate the state and capitalism, and that establishing the new social order would simply be a matter of finally permitting existing cooperative institutions to rise to the surface. Bakunin was typical when he wrote: "With the abolition of the State, the spontaneous self-organization of popular life, for centuries paralyzed and absorbed by the omnipotent power of the state, will revert to the communes."

But clearly in our day, when the state and capitalism have done so much to damage the ability of ordinary people for spontaneous self-organization; when most people are hypnotized into pursuing never-ending consumption and the maximization of

their own self-interest; and when they have been reduced to passive spectators in relation to everything beyond their personal concerns--in such circumstances the new communal order will not be created by a spontaneous upsurge. The process, now if not in Bakunnin's day, will require preparation. Civic politics is threatening to drift out of memory, and if people are to fully recover that historical memory, they will need education.

Most important, the revolution will require an institution to carry out the revolutionary transition. Certainly the revolutionary institution that the Marxists chose, the workers' state, was nothing short of disastrous. But what, then, is an appropriate transitional institution? We reply that it is the confederal democracy itself, the Commune of communes, the rudiments of which we can work for now, and that will both educate the citizenry and make the revolutionary transition. And in accordance with anarchism's demand for the unity of means and ends, our transitional institution, the counterpower against the state, is the same as our final institution, the polity that, as Aristotle described it so long ago, best provides a rich flourishing of human life.

Today's Agenda

As capitalism creates deeper and deeper inroads into social and political life, we cannot stand back and watch the process happen with resignation. Many of the appalling changes that society is undergoing at century's end are not fated to take place but may be aborted, or turned to the good, or their evil delimited; together as we create a movement to transform society, we will decide how we can curtail them.

Nor can the nation-state and the capitalist system survive indefinitely. Not only is this system widening the divisions between rich and poor around the world into a yawning chasm, but it is also on a collision course with the biosphere. Capitalism's grow-or-die imperative, in particular, which seeks profit for capital expansion at the expense of all other considerations, stands radically at odds with the practical realities of interdependence and limit, both in social terms and in terms of the capacity of the planet to sustain life.

In the next century global warming alone is expected to wreak havoc with the climate, causing rising sea levels, catastrophic weather extremes, epidemics of

infectious diseases, and diminished arable land and hence agricultural capacity. At the very least, hunger and disease will soar. It is reported that, at a U.S. cabinet meeting in September 1997, Robert Rubin, the U.S. Treasury secretary, exclaimed to Vice President Al Gore: "This damn global warming issue could send the economy into a death spiral!"

If such a death spiral does develop, however, its social outcome will by no means necessarily be the rational, ecological, libertarian society that social anarchists desire. It is certainly possible that states will attempt to become even more authoritarian in order to repress social unrest. If the crisis is to result in human emancipation, the liberatory alternative will have to already be in place at least to some extent. Increasingly, our choice seems clear: Either people will establish a democratic, cooperative, ecological society, or the ecological underpinnings of society will collapse. The recovery of politics and citizenship is thus not only a precondition for a free society; it may very well be a precondition for our survival as a species. In effect, the ecological question demands a fundamental reconstruction of society, along lines that are cooperative rather than competitive, democratic rather than authoritarian, communal rather than individualistic--above all by eliminating the capitalist system that is wreaking havoc on the biosphere.

Capitalism will not provide us with the popular democratic institutions that we need if we are to eliminate it. On the contrary, it will fight to the bitter end to preserve itself, its social relations, and its state institutions. If we are to gain emancipatory institutions, we must create them ourselves, with our well-organized libertarian municipalist movement.

Prerevolutionary periods are usually quite short. Once revolution is on the horizon, we are unlikely to have a great deal of time to perform the painstaking, molecular work of education and organization that the situation will require. Left libertarians should be building such a movement now, showing people how they can take their political and economic lives into their own hands, how they can coordinate and institutionalize those arenas to build a society that will restore their humanity. It will require endless patience, but it must be done, lest the coming crisis result in tyranny.

The social problems that compel us to act are quite concrete and in many cases transcend strictly class issues, as important as class issues are. The desire to preserve

the biosphere is universal among most rational people. The need for community is abiding in the human spirit, welling up repeatedly over the centuries, especially in times of social crisis. As for the capitalist economy, let us recall that it is little more than two centuries old; in the mixed economy that preceded it, culture restrained acquisitive desires, and it could do so once again, reinforced by a post-scarcity technology.

It is impossible to predict when social crises will take place, or what social conditions will result from them. What is clear, however, is that the demand for a rational society summons us to be rational beings--that is, to live up to our uniquely human potentialities and construct the Commune of communes to fulfill our very humanity..

In many places old democratic institutions linger within the sinews of today's republican states. The commune lies hidden and distorted in the city council; the sectional assembly lies hidden and distorted in the neighborhood; the town meeting lies hidden and distorted in the township; and municipal confederations lie hidden and distorted in regional associations of towns and cities. By unearthing, renovating, and building upon these hidden institutions, where they exist, and building them where they do not, we can democratize the republic and then *radicalize* the democracy to create the conditions for a degree of social freedom unprecedented in history.

Radicalizing a direct democracy would impart political fulfillment to the institutions that our movement has created. Hence the slogan for our movement: "Democratize the republic! Radicalize the democracy!"