Libertarian Municipalism: The New Municipal Agenda

by Murray Bookchin

Any agenda that tries to restore and amplify the classical meaning of politics and citizenship must clearly indicate what they are not, if only because of the confusion that surrounds the two words. . . . Politics is not statecraft, and citizens are not "constituents" or "taxpayers." Statecraft consists of operations that engage the state: the exercise of its monopoly of violence, its control of the entire regulative apparatus of society in the form of legal and ordinance-making bodies, and its governance of society by means of professional legislators, armies, police forces, and bureaucracies. Statecraft takes on a political patina when so-called "political parties" attempt, in various power plays, to occupy the offices that make state policy and execute it. This kind of "politics" has an almost tedious typicality. A "political party" is normally a structured hierarchy, fleshed out by a membership that functions in a top-down manner. It is a miniature state, and in some countries, such as the former Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, a party actually constituted the state itself.

The Soviet and Nazi examples of the party qua state were the logical extension of the party into the state. Indeed, every party has its roots in the state, not in the citizenry. The conventional party is hitched to the state like a garment to a mannikin. However varied the garment and its design may be, it is not part of the body politic; it merely drapes it. There is nothing authentically political about this phenomenon: it is meant precisely to contain the body politic, to control it and to manipulate it, not to express its will--or even permit it to develop a will. In no sense is a conventional "political" party derivative of the body politic or constituted by it. Leaving metaphors aside, "political" parties are replications of the state when they are out of power and are often synonymous with the state when they are in power. They are formed to mobilize, to command, to acquire power, and to rule. Thus they are as inorganic as the state itself--an excrescence of society that has no real roots in it, no responsiveness to it beyond the needs of faction, power, and mobilization.

Politics, by contrast, is an organic phenomenon. It is organic in the very real sense that it is the activity of a public body--a community, if you will--just as the process of flowering is an organic activity of a plant. Politics, conceived as an activity, involves rational discourse, public empowerment, the exercise of practical reason, and its realization in a shared, indeed participatory, activity. It is the sphere of societal life beyond the family and the personal needs of the individual that still retains the intimacy, involvement, and sense of responsibility enjoyed in private arenas of life. Groups may form to advance specific political views and programs, but these views and programs are no better than their capacity to answer to the needs of an active public body. . . .

By contrast, political movements, in their authentic sense, emerge out of the body politic itself, and although their programs are formulated by theorists, they also emerge from the lived experiences and traditions of the public itself. The populist movements that swept out of agrarian America and tsarist Russia or the anarcho-syndicalist and peasant movements of Spain and Mexico articulated deeply felt, albeit often unconscious, public desires and needs. At their best, genuine political movements bring to consciousness the subterranean aspirations of discontented people and eventually turn this consciousness into political cultures that give coherence to inchoate and formless public desires. . . .

The immediate goal of a libertarian municipalist agenda is not to exercise sudden and massive control by representatives and their bureaucratic agents over the existing economy; its immediate goal is to reopen a public sphere in flat opposition to statism, one that allows for maximum democracy in the literal sense of the term, and to create in embryonic form the institutions that can give power to a people generally. If this perspective can be initially achieved only by morally empowered assemblies on a limited scale, at least it will be a form of popular power that can, in time, expand locally and grow over wide regions. That its future is unforeseeable does not alter the fact that it development depends upon the growing consciousness of the people, not upon the growing power of the state--and how that

consciousness, concretized in high democratic institutions, will develop may be an open issue but it will surely be a political adventure.

. . . The recovery and development of politics must, I submit, take its point of departure from the citizen and his or her immediate environment beyond the familial and private arenas of life. There can be no politics without community. And by community I mean a municipal association of people reinforced by its own economic power, its own institutionalization of the grass roots, and the confederal support of nearby communities organized into a territorial network on a local and regional scale. Parties that do not intertwine with these grassroots forms of popular organization are not political in the classical sense of the term. In fact, they are bureaucratic and antithetical to the development of a participatory politics and participating citizens. The authentic unit of political life, in effect, is the municipality, whether as a whole, if it is humanly scaled, or in its various subdivisions, notably the neighborhood. . . .

A new political agenda can be a municipal agenda only if we are to take our commitments to democracy seriously. Otherwise we will be entangled with one or another variant of statecraft, a bureaucratic structure that is demonstrably inimicable to a vibrant public life. The living cell that forms the basic unit of political life is the municipality, from which everything--such as citizenship, interdependence, confederation, and freedom--emerges. There is no way to piece together any politics unless we begin with its most elementary forms: the villages, towns, neighborhoods, and cities in which people live on the most intimate level of political interdependence beyond private life. It is on this level that they can begin to gain a familiarity with the political process, a process that involves a good deal more than voting and information. It is on this level, too, that they can go beyond the private insularity of family life--a life that is currently celebrated for its inwardness and seclusion--and improvise those public institutions that make for broad community participation and consociation.

In short, it is through the municipality that people can reconstitute themselves from isolated monads into an innovative body politic and create an existentially vital, indeed protoplasmic civic life that has continuity and institutional form as well as civic content. I refer here to the block organizations, neighborhood assemblies, town meetings, civic confederations, and the public arenas for discourse that go beyond such episodic, single-issue demonstrations and campaigns, valuable as they may be to redress to redress social injustices. But protest alone is not enough; indeed, it is usually defined by what protestors oppose, not by the social changes they may wish to institute. To ignore the irreducible civic unit of politics and democracy is to play chess without a chessboard, for it is on this civic plane that the long-range endeavor of social renewal must eventually be played out. . . .

All statist objections aside, the problem of restoring municipal assemblies seems formidable if it is cast in strictly structural and spatial terms. New York City and London have no way of "assembling" if they try to emulate ancient Athens, with its comparatively small citizen body. Both cities, in fact, are no longer cities in the classical sense of the term and hardly rate as municipalities even by nineteenth-century standards of urbanism. Viewed in strictly macroscopic terms, they are sprawling urban belts that suck up millions of people daily from communities at a substantial distance from their commercial centers.

But they are also made up of neighborhoods--that is to say, of smaller communities that have a certain measure of identity, whether defined by a shared cultural heritage, economic interests, a commonality of social views, or even an aesthetic tradition such as Greenwich Village in New York or Camden Town in London. However much their administration as logistical, sanitary, and commercial artifacts requires a high degree of coordination by experts and their aides, they are potentially open to political and, in time, physical decentralization. Popular, even block assemblies can be formed irrespective of the size of a city, provided its cultural components are identified and their uniqueness fostered.

At the same time I should emphasize that the libertarian municipalist (or equivalently, communalist) views I propound here are meant to be a changing and formative perspective--a concept of politics and citizenship to ultimately transform cities and urban megalopolises ethically as well as spatially, and politically as well as

economically. Insofar as these views gain public acceptance, they can be expected not only to enlarge their vision and embrace confederations of neighborhoods but also to advance a goal of physically decentralizing urban centers. To the extent that mere electoral "constituents" are transformed by education and experience into active citizens, the issue of humanly scaled communities can hardly be avoided as the "next step" toward a stable and viable form of city life. It would be foolhardy to try to predict in any detail a series of such "next steps" or the pace at which they will occur. Suffice it to say that as a perspective, libertarian municipalism is meant to be an ever-developing, creative, and reconstructive agenda as well as an alternative to the centralized nation-state and to an economy based on profit, competition, and mindless growth.

Minimally then, attempts to initiate assemblies can begin with populations that range anywhere from a modest residential neighborhood to a dozen neighborhoods or more. They can be coordinated by strictly mandated delegates who are rotatable, recallable, and above all, rigorously instructed in written form to either support or oppose whatever issue that appears on the agenda of local confederal councils composed of delegates from several neighborhood assemblies.

There is no mystery involved in this form of organization. The historical evidence for their efficacy and their continual reappearance in times of rapid social change is considerable and persuasive. The Parisian sections of 1793, despite the size of Paris (between 500,000 and 600,000) and the logistical difficulties of the era (a time when nothing moved faster than a horse) functioned with a great deal of success on their own, coordinated by sectional delegates in the Paris Commune. They were notable not only for their effectiveness in dealing with political issues based on a face-to-face democratic structure; they also played a major role in provisioning the city, in preventing the hoarding of food, and in suppressing speculation, supervising the maximum for fixed prices, and carrying out many other complex administrative tasks. Thus, from a minimal standpoint, no city need be considered so large that popular assemblies cannot start, least of all one that has definable neighborhoods that might interlink with each other on ever-broader confederations.

The real difficulty is largely administrative: how to provide for the material amenities of city life, support complex logistical and traffic burdens, or maintain a sanitary environment. This issue is often obscured by a serious confusion between the formulation of policy and its administration. For a community to decide in a participatory manner what specific course of action it should take in dealing with a technical problem does not oblige all its citizens to execute that policy. The decision to build a road, for example, does not mean that everyone must know how to design and construct one. That is a job for engineers, who can offer alternative designs--a very important political function of experts, to be sure, but one whose soundness the people in assembly can be free to decide. To design and construct a road is strictly an administrative responsibility, albeit one that always open to public scrutiny.

If the distinction between policy making and administration is kept clearly in mind, the role of popular assemblies and the people who administer their decisions easily distinguishes logistical problems from political ones, which are ordinarily entangled with each other in discussions on decentralistic politics. Superficially, the assembly system is "referendum" politics: it is based on a "social contract" to share decision making with the population at large, and abide by the rule of the majority in dealing with problems that confront a municipality, a regional confederation of municipalities, or for that matter, a national entity. . . .

That a municipality can be as parochial as a tribe is fairly obvious--and is no less true today than it has been in the past. Hence any municipal movement that is not confederal--that is to say, that does not enter into a network of mutual obligations to towns and cities in its own region--can no more be regarded as a truly political entity in any traditional sense than a neighborhood that does not work with other neighborhoods in the city in which it is located. Confederation--based on shared responsibilities, full accountability of confederal delegates to their communities, the right to recall, and firmly mandated representatives--forms an indispensable part of a new politics. To demand that existing towns and cities replicate the nation-state on a local level is to surrender any commitment to social change as such. . . .

What is confederalism as conceived in the libertarian municipalist framework, and as it would function in a free ecological society? It would above all be a network of councils whose members or delegates are elected from popular face-to-face democratic assemblies, in the various villages, towns, and even neighborhoods of large cities. These confederal councils would become the means for interlinking villages, towns, neighborhoods, and cities into confederal networks. Power thus would flow from the bottom up instead of from the top down, and in confederations the flow of power from the bottom up would diminish with the scope of the federal council, ranging territorially from localities to regions and from regions to ever-broader territorial areas.

The members of these confederal councils would be strictly mandated, recallable, and responsible to the assemblies that choose them for the purpose of coordinating and administering the policies formulated by the assemblies themselves. The functions of the councils would be purely administrative and practical, unlike representatives in republican systems of government, who have policy-making powers. Indeed, the confederation would make the same distinction that is made on the municipal level, between policy-making and administration. Policy-making would remain exclusively the right of the popular community assemblies based on the practices of participatory democracy. Administration--the coordination and execution of adopted policies--would be the responsibility of the confederal councils. Wherever policy-making slips from the hands of the people, it is devoured by its delegates, who quickly become bureaucrats.

A crucial element in giving reality to confederalism is the interdependence of communities for an authentic mutualism based on shared resources, produce, and policy-making. While a reasonable measure of self-sufficiency is desirable for each locality and region, confederalism is a means for avoiding local parochialism on the one hand and an extravagant national and global division of labor on the other. Unless a community is obliged to count on others generally to satisfy important material needs and realize common political goals, interlinking it to a greater whole, exclusivity and parochialism become a genuine possibilities. Only insofar as confederation is an extension of participatory administration--by means of confederal networks--can decentralization and localism prevent the communities that compose larger bodies of association from parochially withdrawing into themselves at the expense of wider areas of human consociation.

Confederalism is thus a way of perpetuating interdependence among communities and regions--indeed, it is a way of democratizing that interdependence without surrendering the principle of local control. Through confederation, a community can retain its identity and roundedness while participating in a sharing way with the larger whole that makes up a balanced ecological society. . . .

Thus libertarian municipalism is not an effort simply to "take over" city councils to construct a more "environmentally friendly" city government. These adherents--or opponents--of libertarian municipalism, in effect, look at the civic structures that exist before their eyes now and essentially (all rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding) take them as they exist. Libertarian municipalism, by contrast, is an effort to transform and democratize city governments, to root them in popular assemblies, to knit them together along confederal lines, to appropriate a regional economy along confederal and municipal lines.

In fact, libertarian municipalism gains its life and its integrity precisely from the dialectical tension it proposes between the nation-state and the municipal confederation. Its "law of life," to use an old Marxian term, consists precisely in its struggle with the State. Then tension between municipal confederations and the State must be clear and uncompromising. Since these confederations would exist primarily in opposition to statecraft, they cannot be compromised by the State, provincial or national elections, much less achieved by these means. Libertarian municipalism is formed by its struggle with the State, strengthened by this struggle, indeed, defined by this struggle. Divested of this dialectical tension with the State, of this duality of power that must ultimately be actualized in a free "Commune of communes," libertarian municipalism becomes little more than sewer socialism.

Why is the assembly crucial to self-governance? Is it not enough to use the referendum, as the Swiss do today, and resolve the problem of democratic procedure in a simple and seemingly uncomplicated way? Why can't policy

decisions be made electronically at home--as "Third Wave" enthusiasts have suggested--by "autonomous" individuals, each listening to debates and voting in the privacy of his or her home?

A number of vital issues, involving the nature of citizenship and the recovery of an enhanced classical vision of politics, must be considered in answering these questions. The "autonomous" individual qua "voter" who, in liberal theory, forms the irreducible unit of the referendum process is a fiction. Left to his or her own private destiny in the name of "autonomy" and "independence," the individual becomes an isolated being whose very freedom is denuded of the living social and political matrix from which his or her individuality acquires its flesh and blood. . . . The notion of independence, which is often confused with independent thinking and freedom, has been so marbled by pure bourgeois egoism that we tend to forget that our individuality depends heavily on community support systems and solidarity. It is not by childishly subordinating ourselves to the community on the one hand or by detaching ourselves from it on the other that we become mature human beings. What distinguishes us as social beings, hopefully with rational institutions, from solitary beings who lack any serious affiliations, is our capacities for solidarity with one another, for mutually enhancing our self-development and creativity and attaining freedom within a socially creative and institutionally rich collectivity.

"Citizenship" apart from community can be as debasing to our political selfhood as "citizenship" in a totalitarian state. In both cases, we are thrust back to the condition of dependence that characterizes infancy and childhood. We are rendered dangerously vulnerable to manipulation, whether by powerful personalities in private life or by the state and by corporations in economic life. In neither case do we attain individuality or community. Both, in fact, are dissolved by removing the communal ground on which genuine individuality depends. Rather, it is interdependence within an institutionally rich and rounded community--which no electronic media can produce--that fleshes out the individual with the rationality, solidarity, sense of justice, and ultimately the reality of freedom that makes for a creative and concerned citizen.

Paradoxical as it may seem, the authentic elements of a rational and free society are communal, not individual. Conceived in more institutional terms, the municipality is not only the basis for a free society; it is the irreducible ground for genuine individuality as well. The significance of the municipality is all the greater because it constitutes the discursive arena in which people can intellectually and emotionally confront one another, indeed, experience one another through dialogue, body language, personal intimacy, and face-to-face modes of expression in the course of making collective decisions. I speak, here, of the all-important process of communizing, of the ongoing intercourse of many levels of life, that makes for solidarity, not only the "neighborliness" so indispensable for truly organic interpersonal relationships.

The referendum, conducted in the privacy of one's voting booth or, as some "Third Wave" enthusiasts would have it, in the electronic isolation of one's home, privatizes democracy and thereby subverts it. Voting, like registering one's preferences for a particular soap or detergent in a opinion poll, is the total quantification of citizenship, politics, individuality, and the very formation of ideas as a mutually informative process. The mere vote reflects a preformulated "percentage" of our perceptions and values, not their full expression. It is the technical debasing of views into mere preferences, of ideals into mere taste, of overall comprehension into quantification such that human aspirations and beliefs can be reduced to numerical digits.

Finally, the "autonomous individual," lacking any community context, support systems, and organic intercourse, is disengaged from the character-building process--the paideia--that the ancient Athenians assigned to politics as one of its most important educational functions. True citizenship and politics entail the ongoing formation of personality, education, and a growing sense of public responsibility and commitment that render communizing and an active body politic meaningful, indeed that give it existential substance. It is not in the privacy of the school, any more than in the privacy of the voting booth, that these vital personal and political attributes are formed. They require a public presence, embodied by vocal and thinking individuals, a responsive and discursive public sphere, to achieve reality. "Patriotism," as the etymology of the word indicates, is the nation-state's conception of the citizen as a child, the obedient creature of the nation-state conceived as a paterfamilias or stern father, who orchestrates belief and commands devotion. To the extent that we are the "sons" and "daughters" of a "fatherland," we place ourselves in an infantile relationship to the state.

Solidarity or philia, by contrast, implies a sense of commitment. It is created by knowledge, training, experience, and reason--in short, by a political education developed during the course of political participation. Philia is the result of the educational and self-formative process that paedeia is meant to achieve. In the absence of a humanly scaled, comprehensible, and institutionally accessible municipality, this all-important function of politics and its embodiment in citizenship is simply impossible to achieve. In the absence of philia or the means to create it, we gauge "political involvement" by the "percentage" of "voters" who "participate" in the "political process"--a degradation of words that totally denatures their authentic meaning and eviscerates their ethical content. . . .

Be they large or small, the initial assemblies and the movement that seeks to foster them in civic elections remain the only real school for citizenship we have. There is no civic "curriculum" other than a living and creative political realm that can give rise to people who take management of public affairs seriously. What we must clearly do in an era of commodification, rivalry, anomie, and egoism is to consciously create a public sphere that will inculcate the values of humanism, cooperation, community, and public service in the everyday practice of civic life. Grassroots citizenship goes hand in hand with grassroots politics.

The Athenian polis, for all its many shortcomings, offers us remarkable examples of how a high sense of citizenship can be reinforced not only by systematic education but by an etiquette of civic behavior and an artistic culture that adorns ideals of civic service with the realities of civic practice. Deference to opponents in debates, the use of language to achieve consensus, ongoing public discussion in the agora in which even the most prominent of the polis's figures were expected to debate public issues with the least known, the use of wealth not only to meet personal needs but to adorn the polis itself (thus placing a high premium on the disaccumulation rather than the accumulation of wealth), a multitude of public festivals, dramas, and satires largely centered on civic affairs and the need to foster civic solidarity--all of these and many other aspects of Athens's political culture created the civic solidarity and responsibility that made for actively involved citizens with a deep sense of civic mission.

For our part, we can do no less--and hopefully, in time, considerably more. The development of citizenship must become an art, not merely an education--and a creative art in the aesthetic sense that appeals to the deeply human desire for self-expression in a meaningful political community. It must be a personal art in which every citizen is fully aware of the fact that his or her community entrusts its destiny to his or her moral probity and rationality. If the ideological authority of state power and statecraft today rests on the assumption that the "citizen" is an incompetent being, the municipalist conception of citizenship rests on precisely the opposite. Every citizen would be regarded as competent to participate directly in the "affairs of state"--indeed, what is more important, he or she would be encouraged to do so.

Every means would be provided, whether aesthetic or institutional, to foster participation in full as an educative and ethical process that turns the citizen's latent competence into an actual reality. Social and political life would be consciously orchestrated to foster a profound sensitivity, indeed an active sense of concern for the adjudication of differences without denying the need for vigorous dispute when it is needed. Public service would be seen as a uniquely human attribute, not a "gift" that a citizen confers on the community or an onerous task that he or she must fulfill. Cooperation and civic responsibility would become expressions of acts of sociability and philia, not ordinances that the citizen is expected to honor in the breach and evade where he or she can do so.

Put bluntly and clearly, the municipality would become a theater in which life in its most meaningful public form is the plot, a political drama whose grandeur imparts nobility and grandeur to the citizenry that forms the cast. By contrast, our modern cities have become in large part agglomerations of bedroom apartments in which men and women spiritually wither away and their personalities become trivialized by the petty concerns of amusement, consumption, and small talk.

The last and one of the most intractable problems we face is economic. Today, economic issues tend to center on "who owns what," "who owns more than whom," and, above all, how disparities in wealth are to be reconciled with a

sense of civic commonality. Nearly all municipalities have been fragmented by differences in economic status, pitting poor, middle, and wealthy classes against each other often to the ruin of municipal freedom itself, as the bloody history of Italy's medieval and Renaissance cities so clearly demonstrates.

These problems have not disappeared in recent times. Indeed, in many cases they are as severe as they have ever been. But what is unique about our own time--a fact so little understood by many liberals and radicals in North America and Europe--is that entirely new transclass issues have emerged that concern environment, growth, transportation, cultural degradation, and the quality of urban life generally--issues that have been produced by urbanization, not by citification. Cutting across conflicting class interests are such transclass issues as the massive dangers of thermonuclear war, growing state authoritarianism, and ultimately global ecological breakdown. To an extent unparalleled in American history, an enormous variety of citizens' groups have brought people of all class backgrounds into common projects around problems, often very local in character, that concern the destiny and welfare of their community as a whole.

Issues such as the siting of nuclear reactors or nuclear waste dumps, the dangers of acid rain, and the presence of toxic dumps, to cite only a few of the many problems that beleaguer innumerable American and British municipalities, have united an astonishing variety of people into movements with shared concerns that render a ritualistic class analysis of their motives a matter of secondary importance. Carried still further, the absorption of small communities by larger ones, of cities by urban belts, and urban belts by "standard metropolitan statistical areas" or conurbations has given rise to militant demands for communal integrity and self-government, an issue that surmounts strictly class and economic interests. The literature on the emergence of these transclass movements, so secondary to internecine struggles within cities of earlier times, is so immense that to merely list the sources would require a sizable volume.

I have given this brief overview of an emerging general social interest over old particularistic interests to demonstrate that a new politics could easily come into being--indeed one that would be concerned not only with restructuring the political landscape on a municipal level but the economic landscape as well. The old debates between "private property" and "nationalized property," are becoming threadbare. Not that these different kinds of ownership and the forms of exploitation they imply have disappeared; rather, they are being increasingly overshadowed by new realities and concerns. Private property, in the traditional sense, with its case for perpetuating the citizen as an economically self-sufficient and politically self-empowered individual, is fading away. It is disappearing not because "creeping socialism" is devouring "free enterprise" but because "creeping corporatism" is devouring everyone-- ironically, in the name of "free enterprise." The Greek ideal of the politically sovereign citizen who can make a rational judgment in public affairs because he is free from material need or clientage has been reduced to a mockery. The oligarchical character of economic life threatens democracy, such as it is, not only on a national level but also on a municipal level, where it still preserves a certain degree of intimacy and leeway.

We come here to a breakthrough approach to a municipalist economics that innovatively dissolves the mystical aura surrounding corporatized property and nationalized property, indeed workplace elitism and "workplace democracy." I refer to the municipalization of property, as opposed to its corporatization or its nationalization. . . . Libertarian municipalism proposes that land and enterprises be placed increasingly in the custody of the community--more precisely, the custody of citizens in free assemblies and their deputies in confederal councils. . . . In such a municipal economy--confederal, interdependent, and rational by ecological, not simply technological, standards--we would expect that the special interests that divide people today into workers, professionals, managers, and the like would be melded into a general interest in which people see themselves as citizens guided strictly by the needs of their community and region rather than by personal proclivities and vocational concerns. Here, citizenship would come into its own, and rational as well as ecological interpretations of the public good would supplant class and hierarchical interests.

As for the workplace, public democracy would be substituted for the traditional images of productive management and operation, "economic democracy" and "economic collectivization." Significantly, "economic democracy" in the workplace is no longer incompatible with a corporatized or nationalized economy. Quite to the contrary: the effective use of "workers' participation" in production, even the outright handing over of industrial operations to the workers who perform them, has become another form of time-studied, assembly-line rationalization, another systematic abuse of labor, by bringing labor itself into complicity with its own exploitation.

Many workers, in fact, would like to get away from their workplaces and find more creative types of work, not simply participate in planning their own misery. What "economic democracy" meant in its profoundest sense was free, democratic access to the means of life, the guarantee of freedom from material want--not simply the involvement of workers in onerous productive activities that could better be turned over to machines. It is a blatant bourgeois trick, in which many radicals unknowingly participate, that "economic democracy" has been reinterpreted to mean "employee ownership" or that "workplace democracy" has come to mean workers' "participation" in industrial management rather than freedom from the tyranny of the factory, rationalized labor, and planned production.

A municipal politics, based on communalist principles, scores a significant advance over all of these conceptions by calling for the municipalization of the economy--and its management by the community as part of a politics of self-management. Syndicalist demands for the "collectivization" of industry and "workers' control" of individual industrial units are based on contractual and exchange relationships between all collectivized enterprises, thereby indirectly reprivatizing the economy and opening it to traditional forms of private property--even if each enterprise is collectively owned. By contrast, libertarian municipalism literally politicizes the economy by dissolving economic decision-making into the civic domain. Neither factory nor land becomes a separate or potentially competitive unit within a seemingly communal collective.

Nor do workers, farmers, technicians, engineers, professionals, and the like perpetuate their vocational identities as separate interests that exist apart from the citizen body in face-to-face assemblies. "Property" is integrated into the municipality as the material component of a civic framework, indeed as part of a larger whole that is controlled by the citizen body in assembly as citizens--not as workers, farmers, professionals, or any other vocationally oriented special-interest groups.

What is equally important, the famous "contradiction" or "antagonism" between town and country, so crucial in social theory and history, is transcended by the township, the traditional New England jurisdiction, in which an urban entity is the nucleus of its agricultural and village environs--not a domineering urban entity that stands opposed to them. A township, in effect, is a small region within still larger ones, such as the county and larger political jurisdictions.

So conceived, the municipalization of the economy should be distinguished not only from corporatization but also from seemingly more "radical" demands such as nationalization and collectivization. Nationalization of the economy invariably has led to bureaucratic and top-down economic control; collectivization, in turn, could easily lead to a privatized economy in a collectivized form with the perpetuation of class or caste identities. By contrast, municipalization would bring the economy as a whole into the orbit of the public sphere, where economic policy could be formulated by the entire community--notably its citizens in face-to-face relationships working to achieve a general interest that surmounts separate, vocationally defined specific interests. The economy would cease to be merely an economy in the conventional sense of the term, composed of capitalistic, nationalized, or "worker-controlled" enterprises. It would become the economy of the polis or the municipality. The municipality, more precisely, the citizen body in face-to-face assembly, would absorb the economy into its public business, divesting it of a separate identity that can become privatized into a self-serving enterprise.

. . . The municipalization of the economy would not only absorb the vocational differences that could militate against a publicly controlled economy; it would also absorb the material means of life into communal forms of distribution. "From each according to his ability and to each according to his needs"--the famous demand of various nineteenth-century socialisms--would be institutionalized as part of the public sphere. This traditional maxim, which is meant to assure that people will have access to the means of life irrespective of the work they are capable of performing, would cease to be merely a precarious credo: it would become a practice, a way of functioning politically--one that is structurally built into the community as a way of existing as a political entity.

Moreover, the enormous growth of the productive forces, rationally and ecologically employed for social rather than private ends, has rendered the age-old problem of material scarcity a moot issue. Potentially, all the basic means for living in comfort and security are available to the populations of the world, notwithstanding the dire--and often

fallacious--claims of present-day misanthropes and antihumanists such as Garrett Hardin, Paul Ehrlich, and regrettably, advocates of "simple living," who can barely be parted from their computers even as they deride technological developments of almost any kind. It is easily forgotten that only a few generations ago, famine was no less a plague than deadly infectious diseases like the Black Death, and that the life-span of most people at the turn of the last century in the United States and Europe seldom reached fifty years of age.

No community can hope to achieve economic autarky, nor should it try to do so. Economically, the wide range of resources that are needed to make many of our widely used goods preclude self-enclosed insularity and parochialism. Far from being a liability, this interdependence among communities and regions can well be regarded as an asset-- culturally as well as politically. Interdependence among communities is no less important than interdependence among individuals. Divested of the cultural cross-fertilization that is often a product of economic intercourse, the municipality tends to shrink into itself and disappear into its own civic privatism. Shared needs and resources imply the existence of sharing and, with sharing, communication, rejuvenation by new ideas, and a wider social horizon that yields a wider sensibility to new experiences.

The recent emphasis in environmental theory on "self-sufficiency," if it does not mean a greater degree of prudence in dealing with material resources, is regressive. Localism should never be interpreted to mean parochialism; nor should decentralism ever be interpreted to mean that smallness is a virtue in itself. Small is not necessarily beautiful. The concept of human scale, by far the more preferable expression for a truly ecological policy, is meant to make it possible for people to completely grasp their political environment, not to parochially bury themselves in it to the exclusion of cultural stimuli from outside their community's boundaries.

Given these coordinates, it is possible to envision a new political culture with a new revival of citizenship, popular civic institutions, a new kind of economy, and a countervailing dual power, confederally networked, that could arrest and hopefully reverse the growing centralization of the state and corporate enterprises. Moreover, it is also possible to envision an eminently practical point of departure for going beyond the town and city as we have known them up to now and for developing future forms of habitation as communities that seek to achieve a new harmonization between people and between humanity and the natural world. I have emphasized its practicality because it is now clear that any attempt to tailor a human community to a natural "ecosystem" in which it is located cuts completely against the grain of centralized power, be it state or corporate. Centralized power invariably reproduces itself in centralized forms at all levels of social, political, and economic life. It not only is big; it thinks big. Indeed, this way of being and thinking is a condition for its survival, not only its growth.

As for the technological bases for decentralized communities, we are now witnessing a revolution that would have seemed hopelessly utopian only a few decades ago. Until recently, smaller-scale ecotechnologies were used mainly by individuals, and their efficiency barely compared with that of conventional energy sources, such as fossil fuels and nuclear power plants. This situation has changed dramatically in the past fifteen to twenty years. In the United States, wind turbines have been developed and are currently in use that generate electric power at a cost of 7 to 9 cents per kilowatt-hour, compared with 20 cents only a decade earlier. This figure is very close to the 4-to-6-cent cost of power plants fueled by natural gas or coal. These comparisons, which can be expected to improve in favor of wind power in the years to come, have fostered the expansion of this nonfossil-fuel source throughout the entire world, particularly in India, where there has been "a major wind boom" in 1994, according to the Worldwatch Institute.[1]

A similar "boom" seems to be in the making in a variety of solar power devices. New solar collectors have been designed that increasingly approximate the costs of conventional energy sources, particularly in heating water for domestic uses. Photovoltaic cells, in which silicon is used to convert solar energy into electrons, have been developed to a point where "thousands of villagers in the developing world [are] using photovoltaic cells to power lights, televisions, and water pumps, needs that are otherwise met with kerosene lamps, lead-acid batteries, or diesel engines." In fact, more than 200,000 homes in Mexico, Indonesia, South Africa, and some 2,000 in the Dominican Republic have been "solarized," probably with a good many more to come.[2] It can be said with reasonable confidence that this increasingly sophisticated technology will become one of the most important--if not the most important--sources of electrical energy in the years to come, yet one that is eminently suitable for humanly scaled communities.

To view technological advances as intrinsically harmful, particularly nonpolluting sources of energy and automated machinery that can free human beings of mindless toil in a rational society, is as shortsighted as it is arrogant. Understandably, people today will not accept a diet of pious moral platitudes that call for "simple means" that presumably will give them "rich ends," whatever these may be, especially if these platitudes are delivered by well-paid academics and privileged Euro-Americans who have no serious quarrel with the present social order apart from whether it affords them access to "wilderness" theme parks.

For the majority of humanity, toil and needless shortages of food are an everyday reality. To expect them to become active citizens in a vital political, ecologically oriented community while engaging in arduous work for most of their lives, often on empty bellies, is an unfeeling middle-class presumption. Unless they can enjoy a decent sufficiency in the means of life and freedom from mindless, often involuntary toil, it is the height of arrogance to degrade their humanity by calling them "mouths," as many demographers do, or "consumers," as certain very comfortable environmentalists do.

Indeed, it is the height of elitism and privilege to deny them the opportunity and the means for choosing the kind of lifeways they want to pursue. Nor have the well-to-do strata of Euro-American society deprived themselves of that very freedom of choice--a choice, in fact, that they take for granted as a matter of course. Without fostering promising advances in technology that can free humanity as a whole from its subservience to the present, irrational--and, let me emphasize, anti-ecological--social order, we will almost certainly never achieve the free society whose existence is a precondition for harmony between human and human and between humanity and the natural world.

Which is not to say that we can ignore the need for a visionary ethical ideal. Ironically, it has been the Right's shrewd emphasis on ethics and matters of spirit in an increasingly meaningless world that has given it a considerable edge over the forces of progress. Nazism achieved much of its success among the German people a half century ago not because of any economic panaceas it offered but because of its mythic ideal of nationhood, community, and moral regeneration. In recent times, reactionary movements in America have won millions to their cause on such values as the integrity of the family, religious belief, the renewal of patriotism, and the right to life--a message, I may add, that has been construed not only as a justification for anti-abortion legislation but as a hypostatization of the individual's sacredness, unborn as well as born.

Characteristically, liberal and radical causes are still mired in exclusively economistic and productivistic approaches to political issues. Their moral message, once a heightened plea for social justice, has given way increasingly to strictly material demands. Far more than the Right, which practices egoism and class war against the poor even as it emphasizes community virtues, the political middle ground and the Left take up the eminently practical issue of bread on the table and money in the bank but offer few values that are socially inspirational. Having emphasized the need to resolve the problems of material scarcity, it is equally necessary to emphasize the need to address the moral emptiness that a market society produces among large numbers of people today.

Morality and ethics, let me add, cannot be reduced to mere rhetoric to match the claims of reactionaries but must be the felt spiritual underpinnings of a new social outlook. They must be viewed not as a patronizing sermon but as a living practice that people can incorporate into their personal lives and their communities. The vacuity and triviality of life today must be replaced precisely by radical ideals of solidarity and freedom that sustain the human side of life as well as its material side, or else the ideals by which a rational future should be guided will disappear in the commodity-oriented world we call the "marketplace of ideas."

The most indecent aspect of this "marketplace" is that ideals tend to become artifacts--mere commodities--that lack even the value of the material things we need to sustain us. They become the ideological ornaments to garnish an inherently antihuman and anti-ecological society, one that threatens to undermine moral integrity as such and the simple social amenities that foster human intercourse.

Thus a municipal agenda that is meant to countervail urbanization and the nation-state must be more than a mere electoral platform, such as we expect from conventional parties. It must also be a message, comparable to the great

manifestos advanced by various socialist movements in the last century, which called for moral as well as material and institutional reconstruction. Today's electoral platforms, whether "green" or "red," radical or liberal, are generally shopping lists of demands, precisely suited for that "marketplace of ideas" we have misnamed "politics."

Nor can a municipal agenda be a means for effacing serious differences in outlook. The need for thinking out ideas and struggling vigorously to give them coherence, which alone renders an agenda for a new municipal politics intelligible, is often sacrificed to ideological confusion in the name of achieving a specious "unity." A cranky pluralism is replacing an appreciation of focused thinking; a shallow relativism is replacing a sense of continuity and meaningful values; a confused eclecticism is replacing wholeness, clarity, and consistency. Many promising movements for basic social change in the recent past were plagued by a pluralism in which totally contradictory views were never worked out or followed to their logical conclusions, a problem that has grown even worse today due to the cultural illiteracy that plagues contemporary society. . . .

A serious political movement that seeks to advance a libertarian municipalist agenda, in turn, must be patient--just as the Russian populists of the last century (one of whom is cited in the dedication to this book) were. The 1960s upsurge, with all its generous ideals, fell apart because young radicals demanded immediate gratification and sensational successes. The protracted efforts that are so direly needed for building a serious movement--perhaps one whose goals cannot be realized within a single lifetime--were woefully absent. Many of the radicals of thirty years ago, burning with fervor for fundamental change, have since withdrawn into the university system they once denounced, the parliamentary positions they formerly disdained, and the business enterprises they furiously attacked.

A libertarian municipalist movement, in particular, would not--and should not--achieve sudden success and wide public accolades. The present period of political malaise at best and outright reaction at worst renders any sensational successes impossible. If such a libertarian municipalist movement runs candidate for municipal councils with demands for the institution of public assemblies, it will more likely lose electoral races today rather than win even slight successes. Depending upon the political climate at any give time or place, years may pass before it wins even the most modest success.

In any very real sense, however, this protracted development is a desideratum. With rapid success, many naïve members of a municipal electorate expect rapid changes--which no minority, however substantial, can ever hope to achieve at once. For an unpredictable amount of time, electoral activity will primarily be an educational activity, an endeavor to enter the public sphere, however small and contained it may be on the local level, and to educate and interact with ever larger numbers of people.

Even where a measure of electoral success on the local level can be achieved, the prospect of implementing a radically democratic policy is likely to be obstructed by the opposition of the nation-state and the weak position of municipalities in modern "democratic" nation-states. Although it is highly doubtful that even civic authorities would allow a neighborhood assembly to acquire the legal power to make civic policy, still less state and national authorities, let me emphasize that assemblies that have no legal power can exercise enormous moral power. A popular assembly that sternly voices its views on many issues can cause considerable disquiet among local authorities and generate a widespread public reaction in its favor over a large region, indeed even on a national scale.

An interesting case in point is the nuclear freeze resolution that was adopted by more than a hundred town meetings in Vermont a decade ago. Not only did this resolution resonate throughout the entire United States, leading to ad hoc "town meetings" in regions of the country that had never seen them, it affected national policy on this issue and culminated in a demonstration of approximately a million people in New York City. Yet none of the town meetings had the "legal" authority to enforce a nuclear freeze, nor did the issue fall within the purview of a typical New England town meeting's agenda. Historically, in fact, few civic projects that resemble libertarian municipalism began with a view toward establishing a radical democracy of any sort.

The forty-eight Parisian sections of 1793 actually derived from the sixty Parisian electoral districts of 1789. These districts were initially established through a complicated process (deliberately designed to exclude the poorer people of

Paris) to choose the Parisian members of the Third Estate when the king convoked the Estates General at Versailles. Thereafter the districts, having chosen their deputies, were expected to disband. In fact, the sixty districts refused to desist from meeting regularly, despite their lack of legal status, and a year later became an integral part of the city's government. With the radicalization of the French Revolution, the fearful city and national authorities tried to weaken the power of the districts by reducing their number of forty-eight--hence, the mutation of the old districts into sections. Finally, the sections opened their doors to everyone, some including women, without any property or status qualifications. This most radical of civic structures, which produced the most democratic assemblies theretofore seen in history, thus slowly elbowed its way into authority, initially without any legal authority whatever and in flat defiance of the nation-state. For all their limitations, the Parisian sections remain an abiding example of how a seemingly nonlegal assembly system can be transformed into a network of revolutionary popular institutions around which a new society can be structured. . . .

What is of immense practical importance is that prestatist institutions, traditions, and sentiments remain alive in varying degrees throughout most of the world. Resistance to the encroachment of oppressive states has been nourished by village, neighborhood, and town community networks, witness such struggles in South Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. The tremors that are now shaking Soviet Russia are due not solely to demands for greater freedom but to movements for regional and local autonomy that challenge its very existence as a centralized nation-state. To ignore the communal basis of this movement would be as myopic as to ignore the latent instability of every nation-state; worse would be to take the nation-state as it is for granted and deal with it merely on its own terms. Indeed, whether a state remains "more" of a state or "less"--no trifling matter to radical theorists as disparate as Bakunin and Marx-- depends heavily upon the power of local, confederal, and community movements to countervail it and hopefully to establish a dual power that will replace it. The major role that the Madrid Citizens' Movement played nearly three decades ago in weakening the Franco regime would require a major study to do it justice.

The problem of dealing with the growing power of nation-states and of centralized corporations, property ownership, production, and the like is precisely a question of power--that is to say, who shall have it or who shall be denied any power at all. Michel Foucault has done our age no service by making power an evil as such. Foucauldian postmodernist views notwithstanding, the broad mass of people in the world today lack what they need most--the power to challenge the nation-state and arrest the centralization of economic resources, lest future generations see all the gains of humanity dissipated and freedom disappear from social discourse.

Minimally, if power is to be socially redistributed so that the ordinary people who do the real work of the world can effectively speak back to those run social and economic affairs, a movement is vitally needed to educate, mobilize, and, using the wisdom of ordinary and extraordinary people alike, initiate local steps to regain power in its most popular and democratic forms. Power of this kind must be collected, if we are to take democracy seriously, in newly developed institutions such as assemblies that allow for the direct participation of citizens in public affairs. Without a movement to work toward such a democratic end, including educators who are prepared, in turn, to be educated, and intellectually sophisticated people who can develop and popularize this project, efforts to challenge power as it is now constituted will simply sputter out in escapades, riots, adventures, and protests. . . .

Power that is not retained by the people is power that is given over to the state. Conversely, whatever power the people gain is power that must be taken away from the state. There can be no institutional vacuum where power exists: it is either invested in the people or it is invested in the state. Where the two "share" power, this condition is extremely precarious and often temporary. Sooner or later, the control of society and its destiny will either shift toward the people and their communities at its base or toward the professional practitioners of statecraft at its summit. Only if the whole existing pyramidal social structure is dismembered and radically democratized will the issue of domination as such disappear and be completely replaced by participation and the principle of complementarity.

Power, however, must be conceived as real, indeed solid and tangible, not only as spiritual and psychological. To ignore the fact that power is a muscular fact of life is to drift from the visionary into the ethereal and mislead the public as to its crucial significance in affecting society's destiny.

What this means is that if power is to be regained by the people from the state, the management of society must be deprofessionalized as much as possible. That is to say, it must be simplified and rendered transparent, indeed, clear, accessible, and manageable such that most of its affairs can be run by ordinary citizens. This emphasis on amateurism as distinguished from professionalism is not new. It formed the basis of Athenian democratic practice for generations. Indeed, it was so ably practiced that sortition rather than election formed the basis of the polis's democracy. It resurfaced repeatedly, for example, in early medieval city charters and confederations, and in the great democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century.

Power is also a solid and tangible fact to be reckoned with militarily, notably in the ubiquitous truth that the power of the state or the people eventually reposes in force. Whether the state has power ultimately depends upon whether it exercises a monopoly of violence. By the same token, whether the people have power ultimately depend upon whether they are armed and create their own grassroots militia, to guard not only themselves from criminals or invaders but their own power and freedom from the ever-encroaching power of the state itself. Here, too, the Athenian, British, and American yeomen knew only too well that a professional military was a threat to liberty and the state was a vehicle for disarming the people.

A true civicism that tries to create a genuine politics, an empowered citizenry, and a municipalized economy would be a vulnerable project indeed if it failed to replace the police and the professional army with a popular militia--more specifically, a civic guard, composed of rotating patrols for police purposes and well-trained citizen military contingents for dealing with external dangers to freedom. Greek democracy would never have survived the repeated assaults of the Greek aristocracy without its militia of citizen hoplites, those foot soldiers who could answer the call to arms with their own weapons and elected commanders. The tragic history of the state's ascendancy over free municipalities, even the rise of oligarchy within free cities of the past, is the story of armed professionals who commandeered power from unarmed peoples or disarmed them presumably (as so many liberals would have it today) from the "hazards" of domestic and neighborhood "shootouts." Typically, this is the cowboy or "gunslinger" image of the "American Dream," often cynically imposed on its more traditional yeoman face.

Beyond the municipal agenda that I have presented thus far lies another, more long-range, one: the vision of a political world in which the state as such would finally be replaced completely by a confederal network of municipal assemblies; all socially important forms of property would be absorbed into a truly political economy in which municipalities, interacting with each other economically as well as politically, would resolve their material problems as citizens in open assemblies, not simply as professionals, farmers, and blue- or white-collar workers; and humanly scaled and physically decentralized municipalities.

Not only would people then be able to transform themselves from occupational beings into communally oriented citizens; they would create a world in which all weapons could indeed be beaten into plowshares. Ultimately, it would be possible for new networks of communities to emerge that would be exquisitely tailored--psychologically and spiritually as well as technologically, architecturally, and structurally--to the natural environments in which they exist.

This agenda for a more distant future embodies the "ultimate" vision I have elaborated in greater detail in my previous writings. Its achievement can no longer be seen as a sudden "revolution" that within a brief span of time will replace the present society with a radically new one. Actually, such revolutions never really happened in history. Even the French Revolution, which radicals have long regarded as a paradigm of sudden social change, was generations in making and did not come to its definitive end until a century later, when the last of the sans culottes were virtually exterminated on the barricades of the Paris Commune of 1871.

Nor can we afford today the myth today that barricades are more than a symbol. What links my minimal agenda to my ultimate one is a process, an admittedly long development in which the existing institutions and traditions of freedom are slowly enlarged and expanded. For the present, we must try increasingly to democratize the republic, a call that consists of preserving--and expanding--freedoms we have earned centuries ago, together with the institutions that give them reality. For the future it means that we must radicalize the democracy we create, imparting an even more creative content to the democratic institutions we have rescued and tried to develop.

Admittedly, at that later point we will have moved from a countervailing position that tries to play our democratic institutions against the state into a militant attempt to replace the state with municipally based confederal structures. It is to be devoutly hoped that by that time, too, the state power itself will have been hollowed out institutionally by local or civic structures, indeed that its very legitimacy, not to speak of its authority as a coercive force, will simply lead to its collapse in any period of confrontation. If the great revolutions of the past provide us with examples of how so major a shift is possible, it would be well to remember that seemingly all-powerful monarchies that the republics replaced two centuries ago were so denuded of power that they crumbled rather than "fell," much as a mummified corpse turns to dust after it has been suddenly exposed to air.

Another future prospect also faces us, a chilling one, in which urbanization so completely devours the city and the countryside that community becomes an archaism; in which a market society filters into the most private recesses of our lives as individuals and effaces all sense of personality, let alone individuality; in which a state renders politics and citizenship not only a mockery but a maw that absorbs the very notion of freedom itself.

This prospect is still sufficiently removed from our most immediate experience that its realization can be arrested by those countervailing forces--that dual power--that I have outlined. Given the persistent destructuring of the natural world as well as the social, more than human freedom is in the balance. The rise of reactionary nationalisms and proliferation of nuclear weapons are only two reminders that we may be reaching a point of cosmic finality in our affairs on the planet. Thus the recovery of a classical concept of politics and citizenship is not only a precondition for a free society; it is also a precondition for our survival as a species. Looming before us is the image of a completely destructured and simplified natural world as well as a completely destructured and simplified urban world--a natural and social world so divested of its variety that we, like all other complex life-forms, will be unable to exist as viable beings.

Notes

This article consists of excerpts from *From Urbanization to Cities* (1987; London: Cassell, 1995), with revisions.

1. Lester Brown et al., *State of the World*: 1995 (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1995), pp. 60-70.

2. Ibid., p. 67.