

Libertarian Municipalism: A Politics of Direct Democracy

Perhaps the greatest single failing of movements for social reconstruction—I refer particularly to the Left, to radical ecology groups, and to organizations that profess to speak for the oppressed—is their lack of a politics that will carry people beyond the limits established by the status quo.

Politics today primarily means duels between top-down bureaucratic parties for electoral office that offer vacuous programs for “social justice” to attract a nondescript “electorate.” Once in office, their programs usually turn into a bouquet of “compromises.” In this respect, many Green parties in Europe have been only marginally different from conventional parliamentary parties. Nor have socialist parties, with all their various labels, exhibited any basic differences from their capitalist counterparts. To be sure, the indifference of the Euro-American public—its “apoliticism”—is understandably depressing. Given their low expectations, when people do vote, they normally turn to established parties if only because, as centers of power, they can produce results, of sorts, in practical matters. If one bothers to vote, most people reason, why waste a vote on a new marginal organization that has all the characteristics of the major ones and will, if it succeeds, eventually become corrupted? Witness the German Greens, whose internal and public life increasingly approximates that of traditional parties.

That this “political process” has lingered on with almost no basic alteration for decades now is due in great part to the inertia of the process itself. Time wears expectations thin, and hopes are often reduced to habits as one disappointment is followed by another. Talk of a “new politics,” of upsetting tradition, which is as old as politics itself, is becoming unconvincing. For decades, at least, the changes that have occurred in radical politics are largely changes in rhetoric rather than structure. The German Greens are only the most recent of a succession of “nonparty parties” (to use their original way of describing their organization) that have turned from an attempt to practice grassroots politics—ironically, in the Bundestag, of all places!—into a typical parliamentary party. The Social Democratic Party in Germany, the Labor Party in Britain, the New Democratic Party in Canada, the Socialist Party in France, and others, despite their original emancipatory visions, barely qualify today as even liberal parties in which a Franklin D. Roosevelt or a Harry Truman would have found a comfortable home.

Whatever social ideals these parties may have had generations ago has been eclipsed by the pragmatics of gaining, holding, and extending their power in their respective parliamentary and ministerial bodies.

It is precisely such parliamentary and ministerial objectives that we call “politics” today. To the modern political imagination, “politics” is a body of techniques for holding power in representative bodies—notably the legislative and executive arenas—not a moral calling based on rationality, community, and freedom.

Libertarian municipalism represents a serious, indeed a historically fundamental project to render politics ethical in character and grassroots in organization. It is structurally and morally different from other grassroots efforts, not merely rhetorically different. It seeks to reclaim the public sphere for the exercise of authentic citizenship while breaking away from the bleak cycle of parliamentarism and its mystification of the “party” mechanism as a means for public representation. In these respects, libertarian municipalism is not merely a “political strategy.” It is an effort to work from latent or incipient democratic possibilities toward a radically new configuration of society itself—a communal society oriented toward meeting human needs, responding to ecological imperatives, and developing a new ethics based on sharing and cooperation. That it involves a consistently independent form of politics is a truism. More important, it involves a redefinition of politics, a return to the word’s original Greek meaning as the management of the community, or polis, by means of direct face-to-face assemblies of the people in the formulation of public policy and based on an ethics of complementarity and solidarity.

In this respect, libertarian municipalism is not one of many pluralistic techniques that is intended to achieve a vague and undefined social goal. Democratic to its core and nonhierarchical in its structure, it is a kind of human destiny, not merely one of an assortment of political tools or strategies that can be adopted and discarded with the aim of achieving power. Libertarian municipalism, in effect, seeks to define the institutional contours of a new society even as it advances the practical message of a radically new politics for our day.

Here, means and ends meet in a rational unity. The word politics now expresses direct popular control of society by its citizens through achieving and sustaining a true democracy in municipal assemblies—this, as distinguished from republican systems of representation that preempt the right of the citizen to formulate community and regional policies. Such politics is radically distinct from statecraft

and the state—a professional body composed of bureaucrats, police, military, legislators, and the like that exists as a coercive apparatus, clearly distinct from and above the people. The libertarian municipalist approach distinguishes statecraft—which we usually characterize as “politics” today—and politics as it once existed in precapitalist democratic communities.

Moreover, libertarian municipalism also involves a clear delineation of the social realm—as well as the political realm—in the strict meaning of the term social: notably, the arena in which we live our private lives and engage in production. As such, the social realm is to be distinguished from both the political and the statist realms. Enormous harm has been caused by the interchangeable use of these terms—social, political, and the state. Indeed, the tendency has been to identify them with one another in our thinking and in the reality of everyday life. But the state is a completely alien formation, a thorn in the side of human development, an exogenous entity that has incessantly encroached on the social and political realms. In fact, the state has often been an end in itself, as witness the rise of Asian empires, ancient imperial Rome, and the totalitarian state of modern times. More than this, it has steadily invaded the political domain, which, for all its past shortcomings, had empowered communities, social groupings, and individuals.

Such invasions have not gone unchallenged. Indeed, the conflict between the state on the one hand and the political and social realms on the other has been an ongoing subterranean civil war for centuries. It has often broken out into the open—in modern times in the conflict of the Castilian cities (*Comuñeros*) against the Spanish monarchy in the 1520s, in the struggle of the Parisian sections against the centralist Jacobin Convention of 1793, and in endless other clashes both before and after these encounters.

Today, with the increasing centralization and concentration of power in the nation-state, a “new politics”—one that is genuinely new—must be structured institutionally around the restoration of power by municipalities. This is not only necessary but possible even in such gigantic urban areas as New York City, Montreal, London, and Paris. Such urban agglomerations are not, strictly speaking, cities or municipalities in the traditional sense of those terms, despite being designated as such by sociologists. It is only if we think that they are cities that we become mystified by problems of size and logistics. Even before we confront the ecological imperative of physical decentralization (a necessity anticipated by Friedrich Engels and Peter Kropotkin alike), we need feel no problems about decentralizing them institutionally. When François Mitterand tried to decentralize Paris with local city halls some years ago, his reasons were strictly tactical—he wanted to weaken the authority of the capital’s right-wing mayor. Nonetheless, he

failed not because restructuring the large metropolis was impossible but because the majority of affluent Parisians supported the mayor.

Clearly, institutional changes do not occur in a social vacuum. Nor do they guarantee that a decentralized municipality, even if it is structurally democratic, will necessarily be humane, rational, and ecological in dealing with public affairs. Libertarian municipalism is premised on the struggle to achieve a rational and ecological society, a struggle that depends on education and organization. From the beginning, it presupposes a genuinely democratic desire by people to arrest the growing powers of the nation-state and reclaim them for their community and region. Unless there is a movement—hopefully an effective Left Green movement—to foster these aims, decentralization can lead to local parochialism as easily as it can lead to ecological, humanist communities.

But when have basic social changes ever been without risk? The case that Marx's commitment to a centralized state and planned economy would inevitably yield bureaucratic totalitarianism could have been better made than the case that decentralized libertarian municipalities will inevitably be authoritarian and have exclusionary and parochial traits. Economic interdependence is a fact of life today, and capitalism itself has made parochial autarchies a chimera. While municipalities and regions can seek to attain a considerable measure of self-sufficiency, we have long since left the era when it was still possible for self-sufficient communities to indulge their prejudices.

Equally important is the need for confederation—the networking of communities with one another through recallable deputies mandated by municipal citizens' assemblies and whose sole functions are coordinative and administrative. Confederation has a long history of its own that dates back to antiquity, which surfaced as a major alternative to the nation-state. From the American Revolution, through the French Revolution and the Spanish Revolution, confederalism has challenged state centralism. Nor has it disappeared in our own time, when the breakup of existing twentieth-century empires raises the issue of enforced state centralism or the relatively autonomous nation. Libertarian municipalism adds a radically democratic dimension to the contemporary discussions of confederation (as, for example, in the former Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia) by calling for confederations not of nation-states but of municipalities and of the neighborhoods of giant megalopolitan areas as well as towns and villages.

In the case of libertarian municipalism, parochialism can thus be checked not only by the compelling realities of economic interdependence but by the commitment of municipal minorities to defer to the majority wishes of participating communities. Do these interdependencies and majority decisions

guarantee us that a majority decision will be a correct one? Certainly not; but our chances for a rational and ecological society are much better in this approach than in those that ride on centralized entities and bureaucratic apparatuses. I cannot help but marvel that no municipal network has emerged among the German Greens, who have hundreds of representatives in city councils around Germany but who carry on a local politics that is largely conventional and self-enclosed within particular towns and cities.

Many arguments against libertarian municipalism—even with its strong confederal emphasis—derive from a failure to understand its distinction between policymaking and administration. This distinction is fundamental to libertarian municipalism and must always be kept in mind. Policy is made by a community or neighborhood assembly of free citizens; administration is performed by confederal councils composed of mandated, recallable deputies of wards, towns, and villages. If particular communities or neighborhoods (or a minority grouping of them) choose to go their own way to a point where human rights are violated or where ecological mayhem is permitted, the majority in a local or regional confederation has every right to prevent such malfeasances through its confederal council. This is not a denial of democracy but the assertion of a shared agreement by all to recognize civil rights and maintain the ecological integrity of a region. These rights and needs are not asserted so much by a confederal council as by the majority of the popular assemblies conceived as one large community that expresses its wishes through confederal deputies. Thus, policymaking still remains local, but its administration is vested in the confederal network as a whole. In effect, the confederation is a Community of communities, based on distinct human rights and ecological imperatives.

If libertarian municipalism is not to be totally warped of its form and divested of its meaning, it is a desideratum that must be fought for. It speaks to a time (hopefully, one that will yet come) when disempowered people actively seek empowerment. Existing in growing tension with the nation-state, it is a process as well as a struggle to be fulfilled, not a bequest granted by the summits of the state. It is a dual power that contests the legitimacy of existing state power. Such a movement can be expected to begin slowly, perhaps sporadically, in communities that initially may demand only the moral authority to alter the structure of society before enough interlinked confederations exist to demand the outright institutional power to replace the state. The growing tension created by the emergence of municipal confederations represents a confrontation between the state and the political realms. This confrontation can be resolved only after libertarian municipalism forms the new politics of a popular movement and ultimately captures the imagination of millions.

Certain points, however, should be obvious. The people who initially enter into the duel between confederalism and statism will not be the same human beings as those who eventually achieve libertarian municipalism. The movement that tries to educate them and the struggles that give libertarian municipalist principles reality will turn them into active citizens rather than passive “constituents.” No one who participates in a struggle for social restructuring emerges from that struggle with the prejudices, habits, and sensibilities with which he or she entered it. Hopefully, such prejudices, like parochialism, will increasingly be replaced by a generous sense of cooperation and a caring sense of interdependence.

It remains to emphasize that libertarian municipalism is not merely an evocation of traditional antistatist notions of politics. Just as it redefines politics to include face-to-face municipal democracies graduated to confederal levels, so it includes a municipalist and confederal approach to economics. Minimally, a libertarian municipalist economics calls for the municipalization of the economy, not its centralization into state-owned “nationalized” enterprises on the one hand or its reduction to “worker-controlled” forms of collectivistic capitalism on the other. Trade-union-directed “worker-controlled” enterprises, that is, syndicalism, has had its day. This should be evident to anyone who examines the bureaucracies that even revolutionary trade unions spawned during the Spanish Civil War of 1936. Today, corporate capitalism is increasingly eager to bring workers into complicity with their own exploitation by means of “workplace democracy.” Nor was the revolution in Spain and in other countries spared the existence of competition among worker-controlled enterprises for raw materials, markets, and profits. Even more recently, many Israeli kibbutzim have been failures as examples of nonexploitative, need-oriented enterprises, despite the high ideals with which they were initially founded.

Libertarian municipalism proposes a radically different form of economy—one that is neither nationalized nor collectivized according to syndicalist precepts. It 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. How work should be planned, what technologies should be used, how goods should be distributed are questions that can only be resolved in practice. The maxim “from each according to his or her ability, to each according to his or her needs” would seem a bedrock guide for an economically rational society, provided that goods are of the highest durability and quality, that needs are guided by rational and ecological standards, and that the ancient notions of limit and balance replace the bourgeois marketplace imperative of “grow or die.”

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.

This is the moral basis of a moral economy for moral communities. But of overarching importance is the general social interest that potentially underpins all moral communities, an interest that must ultimately cut across class, gender, ethnic, and status lines if humanity is to continue to exist as a viable species. In our times, this common interest is posed by ecological catastrophe. Capitalism's grow-or-die imperative stands radically at odds with ecology's imperative of interdependence and limit. The two imperatives can no longer coexist with each other; nor can any society founded on the myth that they can be reconciled hope to survive. Either we will establish an ecological society or society will go under for everyone, irrespective of his or her status.

Will this ecological society be authoritarian, or possibly even totalitarian, a hierarchical dispensation that is implicit in the image of the planet as a "spaceship"? Or will it be democratic? If history is any guide, the development of a democratic ecological society, as distinguished from a command ecological society, must follow its own logic. One cannot resolve this historical dilemma without getting to its roots. Without a searching analysis of our ecological problems and their social sources, the pernicious institutions that we have now will lead to increased centralization and further ecological catastrophe. In a democratic ecological society, those roots are literally the "grassroots" that libertarian municipalism seeks to foster.

For those who rightly call for a new technology, new sources of energy, new means of transportation, and new ecological lifeways, can a new society be anything less than a Community of communities based on confederation rather than statism? We already live in a world in which the economy is overglobalized, overcentralized, and overbureaucratized. Much that can be done locally and regionally is now being done—largely for profit, military needs, and imperial appetites—on a global scale with a seeming complexity that can actually be easily diminished.

If this seems too "utopian" for our time, then so must the present flood of literature that asks for radically sweeping shifts in energy policies, far-reaching reductions in air and water pollution, and the formulation of worldwide plans to

arrest global warming and the destruction of the ozone layer. Is it too much to take such demands one step further and call for institutional and economic changes that are no less drastic and that, in fact, are deeply sedimented in the noblest democratic political traditions of both America and, indeed, the world?

Nor are we obliged to expect these changes to occur immediately. The Left long worked with minimum and maximum programs for change, in which immediate steps that can be taken now were linked by transitional advances and intermediate areas that would eventually yield ultimate goals. Minimal steps that can be taken now include initiating Left Green municipalist movements that propose popular neighborhood and town assemblies—even if they have only moral functions at first—and electing town and city councillors that advance the cause of these assemblies and other popular institutions. These minimal steps can progressively lead to the formation of confederal bodies and the increasing legitimation of truly democratic bodies. Civic banks to fund municipal enterprises and land purchases, the fostering of new ecologically oriented enterprises owned by the community, and the creation of grassroots networks in many fields of endeavor and the public weal—all these can be developed at a pace appropriate to changes being made in political life.

That capital will likely “migrate” from communities and confederations that are moving toward libertarian municipalism is a problem faced by every community, every nation, whose political life has become radicalized. Capital, in fact, normally “migrates” to areas where it can acquire high profits, irrespective of political considerations. Overwhelmed by fears of capital flight, a good case could be established for not rocking the political boat at any time. More to the point, municipally owned farms and enterprises could provide new ecologically valuable and health-nourishing products to a public becoming increasingly aware of the low-quality goods and staples being foisted on it now.

Libertarian municipalism is a politics that can excite the public imagination, appropriate for a movement direly in need of a sense of direction and purpose. Libertarian municipalism offers ideas, ways, and means not only to undo the present social order but to remake it drastically, expanding its residual democratic traditions into a rational and ecological society.

Thus, libertarian municipalism is not merely an effort simply to take over city councils to construct a more environmentally friendly city government. Such an approach, in effect, views the civic structures that exist now and essentially (all rhetoric to the contrary aside) takes 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. The 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 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, libertarian municipalism becomes little more than “sewer socialism.”

Many comrades who are prepared to one day do battle with the cosmic forces of capitalism find that libertarian municipalism is too thorny, irrelevant, or vague and opt instead for what is basically a form of political particularism. Such radicals may choose to brush libertarian municipalism aside as “a ludicrous tactic,” but it never ceases to amaze me that revolutionaries who are committed to the “overthrow” of capitalism find it too difficult to function politically, including electorally, in their own neighborhoods for a new politics based on a genuine democracy. If they cannot provide a transformative politics for their own neighborhood—a relatively modest task—or diligently work at doing so with the constancy that used to mark the left movements of the past, I find it very hard to believe that they will ever do much harm to the present social system. Indeed, by creating cultural centers, parks, and good housing, they may well be improving the system by giving capitalism a human face without diminishing its underlying “unfreedom” as a hierarchical and class society.

A range of struggles for “identity” has often fractured rising radical movements since SDS in the 1960s, ranging from foreign to domestic nationalisms. Because these identity struggles are so popular today, some critics of libertarian municipalism invoke “public opinion” against it. But when has it been the task of revolutionaries to surrender to public opinion—not even the public opinion of the oppressed, whose views can often be very reactionary? Truth has its own life, regardless of whether the oppressed masses perceive or agree on what is true. Nor is it elitist to invoke truth, in contradiction to even radical public opinion, when that opinion essentially seeks a march backward into the politics of particularism and even racism. We must challenge the existing society on behalf of our shared common humanity, not on the basis of gender, race, age, and the like.

Critics of libertarian municipalism dispute even the very possibility of a “general interest.” If the face-to-face democracy advocated by libertarian municipalism and the need to extend the premises of democracy beyond mere

justice to complete freedom do not suffice as a general interest, it would seem to me that the need to repair our relationship with the natural world is certainly a general interest that is beyond dispute—and it remains the general interest advanced by social ecology. It may be possible to co-opt many dissatisfied elements in the present society, but nature is not co-optable. Indeed, the only politics that remains for the Left is one based on the premise that there is a “general interest” in democratizing society and preserving the planet. Now that traditional forces such as the workers’ movement have ebbed from the historical scene, it can be said with almost complete certainty that without a politics akin to libertarian municipalism, the Left will have no politics whatever. A dialectical view of the relationship of confederalism to the nation-state; an understanding of the narrowness, introverted character, and parochialism of identity movements; and a recognition that the workers’ movement is essentially dead—all illustrate that if a new politics is going to develop today, it must be unflinchingly public, in contrast to the alternative café “politics” advanced by many radicals today. It must be electoral on a municipal basis, confederal in its vision, and revolutionary in its character.

Indeed, confederal libertarian municipalism is precisely the “Commune of communes” for which anarchists have fought over the past two centuries. Today, it is the “red button” that must be pushed if a radical movement is to open the door to the public sphere. To leave that button untouched and slip back into the worst habits of the post-1968 New Left, when the notion of “power” was divested of utopian or imaginative qualities, is to reduce radicalism to yet another subculture that will probably live more on heroic memories than on the hopes of a rational future.

October 1991