

Communalism: A Means and a Goal

From: "*Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview*"

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(Abridged by Adam Denker)

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 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" ... 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 that will eventually become corrupted if it succeeds?'

...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 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 have been eclipsed by the pragmatics of gaining, holding, and extending their power in their respective parliamentary and ministerial bodies. ...To the modern political imagination, "politics" is precisely 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.

A Civic Ethics

Libertarian municipalism [a.k.a. Communalism] 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. ...oriented toward meeting human needs, responding to ecological imperatives, and developing a new ethics based on sharing and cooperation. ...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.

Means and Ends

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 pre-capitalist democratic communities.

...Enormous mischief 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. Often, in fact, the state has been an end in itself, as witness the rise of Asian empires, ancient imperial Rome, and the totalitarian state of modern times.

...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.

...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. ...But when have basic social changes ever been without risk?

Confederalism

...Economic interdependence is a fact of life today, and capitalism itself has made parochial autarkies a chimera. While municipalities and regions can seek to attain a considerable measure of self-sufficiency, we have long left the era when self-sufficient communities that can indulge their prejudices are possible. [Thus], Equally important is the need for *confederation* -- the interlinking of communities with one another through recallable deputies mandated by municipal citizens' assemblies, and whose sole functions are coordinative and administrative. ...Libertarian municipalism adds a radically democratic dimension to the contemporary discussions of confederation 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.

...Many arguments against libertarian municipalism -- even with its strong confederal emphasis derive from a failure to understand its distinction between policy-making 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 its confederal deputies. Thus policy-making still remains local, but its

administration is vested in the confederal network *as a whole*. The confederation in effect is a Community of communities based on distinct human rights and ecological imperatives.

Municipalizing the Economy

It remains to emphasize that libertarian municipalism is not merely an evocation of all traditional anti-statist 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. ...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 to be sure 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.

...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.

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 be seen as "utopian."

Is it too much, it is fair to ask, to take such demands one step further and call for institutional and economic changes that are no less drastic and that in fact are based on traditions that are deeply sedimented in American -- indeed, the world's -- noblest democratic and political traditions?

...If a new politics is going to develop today, it must be unflinchingly public, in contrast to the alternative-cafe "politics" advanced by many radicals today. It must be electoral on a municipal basis, confederal in its vision, and revolutionary in its character.

For more information on Libertarian-Municipalism, and further writings by Murray Bookchin, check us out at:

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