The Politics of Social Ecology

Libertarian Municipalism

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with
Murray Bookchin

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raised with Bookchin some of the questions that in my ten-year association with him, I have heard most frequently asked in discussions of these ideas.

I am grateful to Bookchin for his support for this project and for the interview. Let me emphasize that the ideas that appear in these pages are all Bookchin's; only their articulation is mine. In the interview that appears in the second part of the book, I have raised with Bookchin some of the questions that in my ten-year association with him, I have heard most frequently asked in discussions of these ideas. He read the manuscript in draft and commented on it, to its immense benefit. Cindy Milstein and Gary Sisco also read an early draft and made invaluable suggestions, for which they have my warm thanks. Dimitri Roussopoulos of Black Rose Books has my deep gratitude for his unflagging support for this project.

I have tried to present these ideas in the simplest possible terms, for the benefit of readers who are wholly unfamiliar with them. Bookchin's own writings contain philosophical and historical nuances that are absent here. Readers who are interested in learning more about libertarian municipalism and should of course consult the writings listed at the end of this book. In no way should this book be considered a substitute for Bookchin's original works, only a summary introduction to them.

It is my hope that libertarian municipalism will become a touchstone for the resuscitation of the left, in a time of its weakness and disarray. I believe that these ideas could be fruitful for the left on an international scale. Probably inevitably, my presentation is refracted through the prism of the culture in which I live and write; I hope that readers outside the United States will be able to interpret the main principles in the context of their own cultures.

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Chapter 1

Politics versus Statecraft

Libertarian municipalism is one of many political theories that concern themselves with the principles and practices of democracy. In contrast to most such theories, however, it does not accept the conventional notion that the State and governmental systems typical of Western countries today are truly democracies. On the contrary, it considers them republican States with pretensions of being democratic. Republican States, to be sure, are more "democratic" than other kinds of States, like monarchies and dictatorships, in that they contain various kinds of representative institutions.

But they are nonetheless States—overarching structures of domination in which a few people rule over the great majority. A State, by its very nature, is structurally and professionally separated from the general population—in fact, it is set over and above ordinary men and women. It exercises power over them, making decisions that affect their lives. Its power in the last instance rests on violence, over whose legal use the State has a monopoly, in the form of its armies and police forces. In a structure where power is distributed so unevenly, democracy is impossible. Far from embodying rule by the people, even a republican State is incompatible with popular rule.

Libertarian municipalism advances a kind of democracy, by contrast, that is no mere fig leaf for State rule. The democracy it advances is direct democracy—in which citizens in communities manage their own affairs through face-to-face processes of deliberation and decision-making, rather than have the State do it for them.

In contrast to theories of representative "democracy," libertarian municipalism makes a sharp distinction between politics and Statecraft. In conventional use, to be sure, these concepts are nearly synonymous. Politics, as we normally think of it, is an essential component of representative systems of government. It is the set of procedures and practices by which "the people" choose a small group of individuals—politicians—to speak for them and represent them in a legislative or executive body.

These politicians, in politics-as-we-know-it, are affiliated with political parties, which are supposed to be associations of people who share a commitment to a particular political agenda or philosophy; the politicians who belong to a party, in theory, speak for its agenda and advance its philosophy. As an election for governmental office approaches, various parties put forth politicians as candidates and, assisted by many consultants, wage electoral campaigns to try to persuade citizens to vote for them. Each party touts its own candidate's suitability for office and disparages that of its rivals. During the campaign the candidates express their respective positions on the important issues of the day, which clarifies their differences, in order that voters may grasp the full range of choices that they have.

Hopefully, after carefully weighing the issues and soberly judging the positions of each candidate, the voters—who have now become an "electorate"—make their choice. The contenders whose positions accord most fully with those of the majority are rewarded by being granted the office they covet. Upon entering the corridors of government, such is the belief, these new officeholders will labour tirelessly on behalf of those who voted for them (who by now have gained yet another appellation, "constituents"). Scrupulously they adhere to the commitments they avowed during their electoral campaigns, or so we are told. Indeed, as they cast their votes on legislation or otherwise make decisions, their primary loyalty is allegedly to

the positions supported by their "constituents." As a result, when a piece of legislation or an executive order or any other type of action is taken, it reflects the will of the majority of citizens.

It should be clear to any sensate reader that this sketch is a civics class illusion, and that its "democratic" nature is chimerical. Far from embodying the will of the people, politicians are actually professionals, whose career interests lie in obtaining power precisely through being elected or appointed to higher office. Their electoral campaigns, which only partly or even trivially reflect the concerns of ordinary men and women, more often use the mass media to sway and manipulate their concerns, or even generate spurious concerns as distractions. The manipulative nature of this system has been particularly egregious in recent U.S. elections, where, financed by big money, political campaigns focus increasingly on trivial but emotionally volatile issues, diverting the attention of the "electorate" and masking the deep-seated problems that have real effects on their lives. The programs the candidates run on are ever more vacuous, loaded with ever more pabulum—and by general acknowledgment, have less and less connection to the candidate's future behaviour in office.

Once they have gained office, indeed, politicians quite commonly renege on their avowed campaign commitments. Instead of attending to the needs of those who cast their ballots for them or advancing the policies they supported, they usually find it more rewarding to serve the monied interest groups that are eager to enhance their careers. Vast sums of money are required in order to wage an electoral campaign in the first place, and candidates are therefore dependent upon big donors to get themselves into office. To one degree or another, then, those who are elected to represent the people are likely to end up advancing policies that protect the interests of established wealth rather than those of the group they supposedly represent.

Politicians make such choices not because they are "bad people"—indeed, many of them originally enter public service with idealistic motivations. Rather, they make these choices because they have become part of a system of power interactions whose imperatives have come to rule over them. This system of power interactions, let it be said candidly, is the State itself, dominated by big money. By functioning in the framework of this system, they come to share its aims of securing and maintaining a monopoly of power for an elite group of professionals, and of protecting and advancing the interests of the wealthy, rather than the more popular aims of empowering the many and redistributing wealth.

The political parties with which "politicians" are associated, in turn, are not necessarily groups of high-minded citizens who share like political views. They are essentially hierarchically structured, top-down bureaucracies that are seeking to gain State power for themselves through their candidates. Their main concerns are the practical exigencies of faction, power, and mobilization, not the social well-being of the officeholders' "constituents," except insofar as professions of concern for the well-being of ordinary men and women attracts votes. But in no sense are these kinds of political parties either derivative of the body politic or constituted by it. Far from expressing the will of citizens, parties function precisely to contain the body politic, to control it and to manipulate it—indeed, to prevent it from developing an independent will.

However much political parties may be in competition with each other and however much they may genuinely disagree on some specific issues, all of them share in assenting to the existence of the State and operating within its magisterial parameters. Every party that is out of power is in effect a "shadow" State waiting to take power—a State-in-waiting.

To label this system politics is a gross misnomer; it should more properly be called Statecraft. Professionalized, manipulative, and immoral, these systems of elites and masses

impersonate democracy, making a mockery of the democratic ideals to which they cynically swear fealty in periodic appeals to the "electorate." Far from empowering people as citizens, Statecraft presupposes the general abdication of citizen power. It reduces citizens to "taxpayers" and "voters" and "constituents," as if they were too juvenile or too incompetent to manage public affairs themselves. They are expected to function merely passively and let elites look out for their best interests. They are to participate in "politics" mainly on election days, when "voter turnout" gives legitimacy to the system itself—and on tax days, of course, when they finance it. The rest of the year, the masters of Statecraft would prefer that people tend to their private affairs and disregard the activities of "politicians." Indeed, insofar as people slough off their passivity and begin to take an active interest in political life, they may create problems for the State by calling attention to the discrepancies between social reality and the rhetoric that it espouses.

Politics as Direct Democracy

Despite their interchangeability in conventional usage, politics is not at all the same thing as Statecraft; nor is the State its natural domain. In past centuries, before the emergence of the Nation-State, politics was understood to mean the activity of citizens in a public body, empowered in shared, indeed participatory institutions. In contrast to the State, politics, as it once was and as it could be again, is directly democratic. As advanced by libertarian municipalism, it is the direct management of community affairs by citizens through face-to-face democratic institutions, especially popular assemblies.

In today's mass society the prospect that people could manage their own affairs in such assemblies may seem woefully remote. Yet the times in history when people did so are nearer to us than we may think. Direct democracy was essential to

the political tradition that Western societies claim to cherish—it lies at its very fountainhead. For the democratic political tradition originated not with the Nation-State but with the face-to-face democracy of ancient Athens, in the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. Politics, as it was first described in the writings of Aristotle, originally denoted a direct democracy—the very word *politics* is etymologically derived from *polis*, the ancient Greek word (commonly mistranslated as "city-state") for the public, participatory dimension of a community.

In the Athenian polis, direct democracy attained a remarkable degree of realization. During one of the most astonishing periods in European, indeed world history—between the eighth and fifth centuries B.C.E.—Athenian men and their spokesmen, like Solon, Cleisthenes, and Pericles (all three, ironically, renegade aristocrats), gradually dismembered the traditional feudal system that had been endemic to Homeric times and created institutions that opened public life to every adult Athenian male. Power ceased to be the prerogative of a small, aristocratic stratum and became instead a citizen activity. At high water the body politic of ancient Athens probably consisted of some forty thousand adult male citizens. (Unfortunately, it excluded women, slaves, and resident aliens, including Aristotle himself, from political participation.)

The ancient Athenians had a strikingly different concept of political life from the one to which most people in today's Western "democracies" are accustomed. Today we most often regard individuals as essentially private beings who sometimes find it necessary or expedient to enter public life, perhaps against their will, in order to protect or advance their private concerns. In the common present-day view, political participation is a (usually) unpleasant but nonetheless unavoidable extraneous burden that must be borne stoically before one returns to one's "real life" in the private sphere.

By contrast, the ancient Athenians thought that adult Greek men are inherently political beings, that it is in their

nature to consociate with one another in order to organize and manage their shared community life. Although their nature has both political and private components, the Athenians believed, their distinctive humanity lies in the political component. As political beings, then, Greek men cannot be fully human unless they participate in organized community life; without their participation there is no community life, indeed no organized community—and no freedom.

Unlike the professionals who run the citadels of State power today and perform the machinations of Statecraft, the ancient Athenians maintained a system of self-governance that was consciously amateur in character. Its institutions—especially its almost-weekly meetings of the citizens' assembly and its judicial system structured around huge juries—made it possible for political participation to be broad, general, and ongoing. Most civic officials were selected from among the citizens by lot and were frequently rotated. It was a community in which citizens had the competence not only to govern themselves but to assume office when chance summoned them to do so.

The direct democracy of Athens waned in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian war, and during the Roman Empire and afterward the idea of democracy itself received a bad name as congruent with "mob rule," especially from political theorists and writers who served imperial, kingly, or ecclesiastical masters. But the notion of politics as popular self-management was never wholly extinguished; to the contrary, both the idea and its reality have persisted in the centuries that span those eras and ours. In the town centres of many medieval European communes, in colonial New England, and in revolutionary Paris, among many other places, citizens congregated to discuss and manage the community in which they lived. Popes, princes, and kings, to be sure, often developed overarching structures of power, but at the local level, in villages, towns, and neighbourhoods, people controlled much of their own

community life well into modern times.

It must be conceded at the outset that history affords us no example of an ideal direct democracy. All of the notable instances of it, including ancient Athens, were greatly flawed by patriarchal and other oppressive features. Nevertheless, the best features of these instances can be culled and assembled to form a composite political realm that is neither parliamentary nor bureaucratic, neither centralized nor professionalized, but democratic and political.

Here at the base of society rich political cultures flourished. Daily public discussions bubbled up in squares and parks, on street corners, in schools, cafés, and clubs, wherever people gathered informally. Many of the neighbourhood plazas in ancient, medieval, and Renaissance cities were places where citizens spontaneously congregated, argued out their problems, and decided on courses of action. These lively political cultures encompassed cultural aspects as well as explicitly political ones, with civic rituals, festivals, celebrations, and shared expressions of joy and mourning. In villages, towns, neighbourhoods, and cities political participation was a self-formative process, in which citizens, by virtue of their ability to manage their community's pursuits, developed not only a rich sense of cohesion as a political body but a rich individual selfhood.

The Recreation of Politics

With the rise and consolidation of Nation-States, centralized power began to stifle this public participation, subjecting even distant localities to State control and terminating whatever autonomy they had hitherto enjoyed. At first this invasion was carried out in the name of monarchs claiming a divinely sanctioned privilege to rule, but even after the concept of democracy became an object of passionate popular aspiration in the early nineteenth century, builders of republican States appropriated it as a gloss for their "representative" institutions—parliaments and congresses—and at the same time as a mantle to cloak their elitist, paternalistic, and coercive nature. So it is that Western Nation-States today are routinely referred to as "democracies" without a murmur of objection. With the creation of the welfare or Social State, the State's powers—as well as its acceptability to the unwary—were even further expanded, assuming many of the social tasks for which communities had once been responsible on their own account.

Still, in most parts of the European and American world, political life remained to some degree alive at the local level, as it does to this day. Direct democracy, of course, no longer exists in the ancient Athenian sense. Yet even in communities that have been stripped of their former proud powers, formal and informal political arenas still abide—civic associations, town meetings, forums, issue-oriented initiatives, and the like—as venues for face-to-face public processes. That is, even if direct democracy no longer exists, local public spheres do persist.

To be sure, those remnant public spheres are themselves being gravely undermined today, as larger social forces corrode neighbourhood and community life. Economic pressures are forcing people to spend ever more of their time earning a livelihood, which leaves them with less time to devote even to socializing or to family life, let alone to community affairs. The ethos of consumption in capitalist society draws men and women to give over much of what free time that they do have to shopping, even as a form of recreation, or else to television-watching, which primes them for more shopping. As family life becomes by necessity a "haven in a heartless world," political life comes to recede ever further from their grasp. In such a situation neither political life nor family life can flourish.

Thus, the very meaning of politics is gradually being forgotten. People in Western societies are losing their memory of politics as an active, vital process of self-management, while the enervated concept of citizenship—as voting and tax-paying

and the passive receipt of State-provided services—is mistaken for citizenship itself. Deracinated from community, the individual is isolated and powerless, alone in a mass society that has little use for him or her as a political being.

But if people lack apparent interest in public life, as so many commentators today lament, it may be because public life lacks meaning—that is, because it lacks substantial power. Instead of residing in local political realms, most decision-making power lies in the hands of the State. It did not get there by accident, or an act of God, or a force of nature. It was placed there by human agency. Builders of States appropriated it, compelling or seducing people to surrender their power to the larger edifice.

But power, having been taken from the people, can also be recovered by them once again. It should come as no surprise that in all parts of the Euro-American world today men and women are increasingly rejecting the existing party system and the paltry political role that has been doled out to them by the State. Alienation from what passes for "political" processes has become widespread—witness massive voting abstentions—while "politicians" are distrusted far and wide. Even when pandered to extravagantly, citizens increasingly react with disgust and even hostility to electoral manipulation. Such revulsion against the processes of Statecraft is a salutary trend, one on which a libertarian municipalist politics can build.

The project of libertarian municipalism is to resuscitate politics in the older sense of the word—to construct and expand local direct democracy, such that ordinary citizens make decisions for their communities and for their society as a whole. It is not, it should be understood, an attempt to expand citizen involvement in the processes of the republican State. It is not a call for greater voter turnout at the next election, or for citizen mobilization in influencing legislation ("write your representative"), or even for expanding the use of tools like the initiative, referendum, and recall with the intention of "democratizing" the Nation-State. Nor is it an attempt to replace winner-take-all voting systems (typical of the United States, Britain, and Canada) with proportional representation, to allow members of small or third parties to gain office in accordance with the votes they receive. In short, it does not seek to embroider upon the "democratic" veils of the State, by working for "democratic reforms." Least of all does it encourage men and women to actively participate in a structure that, all its masquerades to the contrary, is geared to control them. Libertarian municipalism, in fact, is antithetical to the State since the State as such is unassimilable with community self-management and a thriving civic sphere.

It is the aim of libertarian municipalism, rather, to revive the public sphere that is being precipitately lost, and to transform it into a political realm. It is to engender active citizens out of passive constituents and endow them with a political context in which they have meaningful choices. It aims to create this context by institutionalizing their power in neighbourhood assemblies and town meetings. In a very radical sense, libertarian municipalism goes back to the very roots of politics, to revive direct democracy and expand it, along with the rational and ethical virtues and practices that support it.

Chapter 2

The Historical City

Before we discuss the specific libertarian municipalist project of reviving the political realm, we must spend a few chapters examining the nature of that realm, to clarify just what we mean when we refer to it. The political realm, it should be understood, has a social context, even an anthropological and historical context, as well as specific traditions that have developed over the centuries.

Perhaps most crucially, the political realm must be understood as one of three realms that are endemic to human societies generally: the political realm, the social realm, and the State.*

The Social Realm

The social realm (not to be confused with society as a whole) is the private realm, encompassing production and economic life. More anciently, it is also the personal arena of family life, of care and friendship, of self-maintenance and reproduction, and of consangineal obligation. The existence of family groups as such is constant across human cultures; despite the disparate forms that societies take, it is in family groups that individuals fraternize in the greatest degree of intimacy. The social realm may thus be demarcated as a cross-cultural phenomenon, inherent in human communities.

The social realm is by far the oldest of the three realms. From their earliest emergence in prehistory as bands and tribes, human communities were structured around the social realm; indeed, it constituted the largest part of those societies. At the

band or tribe's core the social realm was rooted in the domestic world of women. It was complemented by a nascent civil world inhabited by men, but since this civil realm was very limited and the State did not yet exist at all, group life in the earliest societies was virtually coeval with the social realm.

In keeping with their familistic nature, band and tribal societies were organized according to the ostensibly "natural" biological principle of kinship. The blood tie, the principle of consanguinity, was the shared bond that held a tribe together; all members of a given tribe were said to be related by blood, to be descended from a common ancestor—that common descent was what made them all members of the same tribe. The blood tie did not have to be literal; when necessary, a tribe could willfully expand it beyond actual kinship to the point of fiction—for example, when strangers were coopted into the tribe, or in the case of intertribal marriages. Such alliances were legitimated by virtue of being pronounced in kinship terms. Still, even if it often had to be stretched, kinship was the customary principle that defined and ideologically undergirded a unitary tribe.

Nor was kinship the only "natural" biological principle around which tribal society was organized. The biological fact of sex marked the various responsibilities of tribal life as either male or female, producing gendered divisions of labour and even of culture. The biological fact of age became still another touchstone for social organization: members who had lived longer, especially in preliterate societies, were honoured as the repositories of a tribe's customs and wisdom, a status that allowed some older members even to claim supernatural powers, as shamans. All of these "natural" principles had large fictional components and were often honoured in the breach; yet since they were rooted in what seemed to be inalterable biological facts, they bound these communities together.

*Bookchin makes this tripartite distinction in contrast to many other social theorists who posit only a duality. For example, Aristotle thought in terms of the social and political realms, but not the State (since Athens had none). Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition* and other works, essentially followed Aristotle in discussing the social and political realm—but what she called the political realm is actually the State, a misidentification that has generated a certain amount of confusion.

In the earliest communities, these biologistic divisions most likely were not rationales for status and rank, let alone for domination and submission. But subsequently male culture came to be considered not only different from women's but of greater value and therefore entitled to dominate it. The elderly's knowledge of tribal wisdom became a warrant for gerontocracy, while kinship became a rationale for belief in the superiority of one tribe over another, giving rise to ethnic chauvinism and racism.

Indeed, an antipathetic relationship between different tribes must have been rooted in tribal society nearly from the outset. Tribes often claimed for themselves the label "the people," in contrast to members of other tribes, whom they essentially regarded as of a different taxonomical order, essentially as nonhuman. This self-identification of a tribe as an effectively distinct species generated a strong ethos of solidarity among its own members—but very often it also gave rise to a vigorous hostility toward members other tribes, who putatively constituted a threat.

Thus bands and tribes dealt warily and often hostilely with outsiders. They might consider strangers who intruded on them to be their deceased ancestors and propitiate them accordingly; or they might regard them as spirit beings, or as spirits of the dead, or as malevolent beings who bore ill intentions toward the tribe—and eliminate them accordingly. To be sure, a tribe might also treat a stranger with hospitality, but that benign attitude usually depended upon the tribe's goodwill in a particular case, or upon its traditional canons of behaviour—or upon its need to build support networks through marriage alliances and to gain adult males to act as its warriors.

The Rise of the City

As their primary means of subsistence, band and tribal soci-

eties generally foraged—that is, they hunted animals and gathered vegetation to gain the food, clothing, and shelter that supported their existence; sometimes they engaged in the more transient, swidden forms of horticulture, burning forests to create temporary planting areas for garden crops until the fertility of the soil was exhausted. But at the beginning of the Neolithic period, probably in the Middle East between 10,000 and 7000 B.C.E., a momentous change occurred: Tribal societies gradually shifted their basic means of subsistence away from food gathering and swidden gardening and toward the cultivation of cereal crops. That is, instead of moving around to obtain food from relatively transient sources, tribespeople settled down into stable, even permanent villages and systematically cultivated grains and domesticated animals.

This transition to Neolithic culture—to farming and animal husbandry—spread quickly and widely throughout Eurasia and had repercussions in many aspects of social life, transforming tribal society into a new dispensation altogether. Grain being less perishable than meat and vegetation, supplies of food could now be held in reserve, in storage, which made it possible for some members of the tribe to control the distribution of the food supply. A fraction of the members thus became owners of property and ultimately of wealth, giving rise to class formations. Classes, in turn, exacerbated the hierarchical stratifications that had already existed: As large-scale farming, particularly with animal husbandry, emerged, it was largely men's work and its fruits were their property, creating patriarchal societies that gave supremacy to men and "male" values. The priests that replaced shamans, in turn, demanded grain as tribute to the gods and added institutional muscle to their predecessors' less formal and more ephemeral spiritualistic claims.

But for our purposes the most important consequence of the shift to farming was what V. Gordon Childe called the *urban revolution*. Some of the village settlements established by Neolithic farmers grew larger to become towns, and some of

these towns developed further into cities—large permanent settlements in which the residents did not provide their own food but depended on grain imported from the countryside. For the residents of these cities, life was structured less around kinship than around residential propinquity and shared vocational activities. People lived alongside each other without necessarily being kin—ultimately without even knowing each other. In time, an outsider or stranger could join a community in a city simply by living there and bringing his or her labour to it, without having to marry into it or be recruited as a warrior. In fact, from a tribal viewpoint, a city was a place where nearly everyone whom a person encountered might well be a stranger.

To be sure, within early cities as in cities today, many people who were related to one another by clan affiliation chose to live in the same neighbourhoods as their kin or as a result of ethnic discrimination, were forced to do so regardless of their will. But the crucial point is that slowly, as city living became a way of life, kinship ties diminished as a principle of social organization and gave way to new ones. Lacking a shared ethnicity, people who were living side by side gradually came to see each other, not through the prism of tribal membership but through prisms of residence and vocation, status and property: as craftspeople or wealthy vendors, as nobles or priests.

Regardless of the specific category, the particularistic fetters that had locked people's forebears into tribal parochialism and intertribal feuds had been loosened. No longer were people of a shared genealogical background constrained to think of themselves as "the human beings" and of others as real or potentially hostile strangers. Ethnic prejudices persisted, to be sure, but in ever more diluted form than in tribal times, when ethnic difference alone could be a licence even to murder an outsider. The new social order transformed people from tribal folk into heterogeneous and potentially cosmopolitan city dwellers. The city, in effect, nudged aside genealogy in favor of a more ecumenical *humanitas*, or common humanity, as a

basic principle of social organization and initiated the momentous process of creating human universality. As such, the transition to city life was as revolutionary as the agricultural revolution had been and as, several millennia later, the industrial revolution would prove to be.

The Emergence of the Political Realm

To be sure, these heterogeneous cities were anything but egalitarian paradises. On the contrary, the social relations that first replaced kinship were based on status groups, classes, and military and religious hierarchies as well as gender stratification. Ruling elites dominated the ordinary people who laboured to provide them with goods as well as mandatory military service. Priesthoods gained vast powers as a result of the era's ignorance of natural phenomena; early cities were often temple cities. Nor were cities—any more than tribes—immune to brutal periods of warfare.

Despite these tyrannies, the urban revolution opened to history the startling possibility that free and egalitarian communities could also exist and that people, once they recognized their common humanity, could order themselves according to rational and ethical standards. The rise of the city, in effect, inaugurated the development of the political realm.

It was the existence of shared concerns and public spaces held in common by interethnic communities in a city that made this development possible. Once they passed outside the walls of their private homes—that is, once they left the social realm—the stranger-residents of a city entered streets, squares, commons, and places of public accommodation—all of them places where they could interact with one another. Here buying and selling took place—and here also men and women could socialize. They could exchange news of general interest and discuss common concerns. The surfaces of walls could become places for public announcements and news.

Pageants and religious festivals could line the streets. Thus, public spaces came into being with the city—spaces that could potentially be set aside for civic purposes and political activity.

The Athenian polis made the earliest leap of transforming such public spaces into political arenas. Despite the persistence of ethnic fictions, slavery, and gender domination there, the polis defined and concretized the political realm as the arena of direct-democratic self-management. It also opened the historical possibility for political freedom—that is, the positive freedom of a community as a whole, with which individual liberties are tightly interwoven.

We will have more to say about the polis presently; suffice it to observe here that after its demise, direct democracy was submerged by the Alexandrian and Roman empires. Some of its features were appropriated for imperial propaganda, but its substance as a self-conscious program was all but destroyed. Centuries after the fall of Rome, however, the idea of civic freedom was revived when a number of towns in the Po valley and Flanders began to seek local autonomy from their ecclesiastical and temporal masters. These medieval communes shortly demanded civic liberties, including freedoms to make their own laws and create their own secular courts and forms of civic administration.

As in the Athenian polis, citizens in these communes came to manage their affairs according to their own secular criteria, not those of the elites that would rule them. In so doing, they revived the Hellenic tradition of the city as a locus of self-management and freedom. Embedded in an authoritarian feudal society, it is no wonder that one medieval Germanic adage had it, "city air makes free" (*Stadtluft macht frei*).

By no means, of course, did social inequality and ethnic hostility vanish with the rise of the political realm, any more than it had vanished with the rise of the city. From ancient times to the present, political elites have exercised authority over political life, even legitimating their rule by making quasi-

tribalistic claims to ancient noble ancestry. In ancient Athens, as we have already seen, the polis was poisoned by slavery, patriarchalism, class rule, and imperialism. As for the medieval communes, even the most democratic were partly oligarchical, based on the rule of patrician merchants as well as master artisans; they were quasi-republics rather than democracies. The New England towns—another important chapter in the history of direct democracy—initially excluded nonchurchmembers from their town meetings, not to speak of women; moreover, the white freemen who populated those democratic meetings captured Indians and sold them into chattel slavery. Even during the most radical and democratic periods of the French Revolution, the assemblies of Paris were rife with xenophobic fears of foreign conspiracies.

Yet many of these failings were characteristic not merely of a given democratic moment in history but of the entire era of which it was part. Looking back from a distance of 2,400 years, we may now judge patriarchy and slavery to be repellent and inhuman, but Athens could hardly be expected to have risen above those basic features of ancient Mediterranean society as a whole. What is remarkable is that it did rise above monarchical authority and repressive custom, which were also typical of that Mediterranean world, and innovate a new political realm. Even as municipal democracies throughout history were mired in the hierarchical features of their eras, their liberatory moments sustained and furthered the tradition of direct democracy against ever greater odds. It is to these emancipatory moments that we now turn.

Chapter 3

Municipal Democracy *Ancient and Medieval*

Let us examine some of the pivotal episodes in the tradition of direct democracy.*

The Athenian Polis

In the seventh century B.C.E., Attica—the city of Athens and its surrounding territory—was a scene of bitter class enmity. A tiny group of aristocratic families ruled the area, while the large number of small farmers lived as virtual serfs. These oppressed peasants were required to pay their overlords a large proportion of their annual crop, an obligation that often drove them into debt and bitter material want. As Plutarch tell us, the "common people were weighed down with debts they owed to a few rich men." For nonpayment of the debt, the consequences were often dire. "Many parents were even forced to sell their own children, or to go into exile because of the harshness of their creditors." In this intolerable situation the *demos*—a word that is used variously to mean "the common people" and "the people as a whole"—neared the brink of revolution. Despair impelled them to find someone who would "set all enslaved debtors free, redistribute the land and make a complete reform of the constitution."[1]

Attica nearly exploded into bitter civil war, but eventually, in 594 B.C.E., all the contending clans agreed to elect Solon as their *archon*, or chief magistrate, to bring order to the polis.

*The accounts of the democratic moments given in this chapter and the next are necessarily brief, for reasons of space and proportion. In no sense are they intended to be full or complete; they do not claim to examine the causes of either their emergence or their decline. Rather, they are presented here to establish that this tradition exists and to describe some of its features. Readers who are interested in learning more about these episodes may care to examine the works listed in "For Further Reading" at the end of this book.

Solon proceeded to cancel all outstanding debts and make debt slavery illegal. Upon his election, in fact, he was given an extraordinary commission to alter the Athenian constitution and prevent new crises from arising, but the laws he promulgated changed the city's political structure so radically that, in effect, he forged a new constitution entirely.

Most consequentially, Solon revived the *ecclesia*, a popular assembly whose existence dated back to tribal days but had paled to insignificance in the intervening centuries. Under his regime, the ecclesia was not only resuscitated but its functions were expanded—as it gained the authorization to enact the community's laws, elect its magistrates, and meet regularly, at its own instigation. Finally, the new *archon* gave the common people the right not only to attend the ecclesia's meetings but to vote on the issues that were deliberated there, a crucial step toward empowering the *demos*.

In addition to the ecclesia, Solon created a new Council of Four Hundred—called the Boule–to handle the administrative side of Athenian self-government. To be sure, Solon was not an unalloyed democrat: he retained a certain elitism in the Boule by allowing only propertied men to belong to it. This elite prepared the ecclesia's agenda and supervised its deliberations. But Solon's Boule served at least to check the power of the aristocratic Areopagus council, through which the wealthy families had once ruled Attica as they pleased.

Other Solonic reforms expanded individual rights and established a popular court to hear appeals. In a further blow at oligarchy, the wealthy families were obliged to relinquish their hereditary claim to provide Athens with its archons, opening the door to executive power for the demos. But perhaps the most striking maxim imputed to Solon was his belief that any citizen who, as Plutarch put it, "in the event of revolution, does not take one side or the other," should be disenfranchised. It affronted the Hellenic concept of citizenship for a man to selfishly wait to see which side would prevail in a conflict.

Athenians were expected to be politically involved, to take sides during civic disputes.

Having made these constitutional reforms, Solon went into voluntary exile for ten years. Despite recurrences of considerable civil unrest, the citizens of Athens nevertheless absorbed his changes and grew accustomed to the ecclesia that he had expanded and empowered. They infused it with political vitality and developed a political etiquette that fostered civic commonality. Gradually the ecclesia came to be accepted in most quarters as the ultimate decision-making body in the polis, paving the way for a general democracy.

In the half century after 561, the "tyrannies" (not a pejorative word in those days) of Peisistratus and his son Hippias further reduced the power of the Attic nobility. In fact, many of Athenian democracy's features must be seen as institutionalized efforts to prevent the resurgence of the aristocracy. Although the aristocracy repeatedly tried to restore its old clannish oligarchy, it failed to eliminate the reforms of Solon and the Peisistradae; indeed, recalcitrant nobles were forced into exile and their estates were divided among the landless poor.

Meanwhile, precisely through their participation in the structures of Solon's constitution, the political level of the Athenian citizens was raised enormously, making them ever more sure of themselves and of their capacity to govern their own affairs.

The extraordinary opening of political life that created this self-confidence reached its apogee between Cleisthenes's archonship (beginning in 506) and the outbreak of the Peloponnesian war in 431. Cleisthenes, in fact, launched the democratization of Athens in earnest. Although he kept the Areopagus council intact, he struck at the social basis of aristocratic rule—the traditional kinship network of the Attic nobility—by divesting the clans of their powers and eliminating the traditional Ionian system of four ancestral tribes. In place of

the old system, he created about 170 *demes*, units based not on kinship but on residence. In so doing, of course, he recapitulated the urban revolution in situ, replacing tribalism with propinquity as the criterion for membership and making citizenship inseparable from territory. The demes soon became vibrant multiple centers of local democracy, each one with its own popular assembly and its own council and other officials, all chosen annually.

This new institutional structure (which consisted of the demes and some larger units that the demes composed called *trittyes*, as well as a quasi-tribal unit that Cleisthenes kept in order to make the transition easier) revolutionized political life in Attica. The ecclesia—the citizens' assembly—was now indisputably the seat of all political authority. All male Athenian citizens were enfranchised and could participate and vote, free of property qualifications, regardless of class and status limitations. Their political rights were entirely equal, rich and poor alike, such that Pericles could declare: "Neither is poverty a bar, but a man may benefit his polis whatever this obscurity of his condition."[2]

Further constitutional changes made in 462 removed the last remaining traces of privilege from Athenian democracy. The Areopagus council lost much of its former weight when many of its powers were distributed among the Boule, the ecclesia, and the newly established popular democratic courts, where citizens sat in large juries, like miniature assemblies, for almost all civil and criminal cases.

In its prime, the ecclesia was an outdoor mass meeting of many thousands of male Athenian citizens, convening at least forty times each year, in meetings that usually lasted a single day. All could participate in open but orderly debates, according to the principle of *isegonia*, or the universal right to speak in the assembly; and all could vote, which was done by majority rule. Their decisions affected all matters of public policy, including war and peace, diplomatic treaties, finance, and

public works.

Insofar as the polis had leaders, like the *strategos* Pericles, their terms were brief—usually one year—and their actions were constantly supervised and judged by the assembly, which held them to a level of accountability that prevented a self-perpetuating elite from emerging. But most positions were chosen by lot. In fact, sortition, rather than appointment or even election, became most widespread means of choosing officials in nearly all political institutions. The head of the assembly, who presided over meetings of the ecclesia, was not only chosen by lot but held office for only a single day. Boule members were chosen by lot for terms of one or two years, while even archons were chosen by lot (from members of the Boule), as were members of juries and other functionaries. That sortition could be used so extensively presupposed a high level of political competence on the part of ordinary citizens.

Such a presupposition, in fact, was eminently justified, for under this system a large proportion of the male citizens of Athens gained direct experience in democratic self-government. It was under this system that the city's cultural life flourished, begetting the well-known flowering of philosophy, drama, art, history writing, physics, and biology that constituted "the glory that was Greece."

The Medieval Commune

A millennium later, long after the demise of the Athenian polis, the Roman Empire had fallen and the feudal system lay like a dead weight over most of Europe. Although the Romans had founded many towns in Europe, they were no longer places of political activity. The church physically preserved many towns, but mainly as centres of ecclesiastical power. After A.D. 1000, however, in northern Italy, the Rhone valley, the Rhineland, and Flanders, a new merchant class began to emerge in the interstices of feudalism, and these innovators began to breathe new

life into the medieval towns. Between the late tenth century and the first half of the thirteenth, the towns—or communes—that they revived became centres of lucrative commerce and craft production.

Initially the commercial and craft towns remained under the sovereignty of the older authority in whose domain they were located—usually the church or a count—and continued to be subject to external rule. But gradually the ecclesiastical and noble authorities were less and less able to address the local needs of the commune residents. Church laws, in particular, were irrelevant to commerce, when they were not restrictive of it. Ever more averse to complying with external control, the communes arrived at their own ways of handling taxation, marriage and inheritance, among other things, and developed their own legal systems, guaranteeing their inhabitants' personal liberties and limiting their princes' rights in fiscal, judicial, and other matters, until they were eventually managing their own local affairs de facto if not de jure.

Inevitably, the communes demanded that their sovereigns recognize their local liberties—demands that normally met with refusal from the ecclesiastical and princely powers. In turn, during the twelfth century, many communes began to free themselves from their sovereigns. In northern Italy a group of towns calling themselves the Lombard League rebelled against the Holy Roman Empire to gain their liberties. By the Peace of Constance, signed in 1183, the Empire granted recognition to the several towns of the league, permitting them to elect their own officials, to make their own local laws, and essentially to govern themselves.

What were the communes? They were essentially associations of burghers—merchants, professionals, and artisans—who swore an oath, or *conjuratio*, to respect one another's individual liberties and to defend and promote their common interests. The conjuratio was, in effect, an expression of citizenship in a distinct civic community.

The earliest communal institution of the Italian towns, in fact, was a general assembly of "all the members of the commune." This assembly approved statutes and chose a executive and judicial magistrate who, for a term of one year, was charged with the administration of town affairs.

As the communes grew in population and size, more artisans were needed to craft goods necessary for local use and regional trade, such as barrels and vehicles, and service workers were required to supply food and lodging. Rural people who gravitated toward the towns to seek refuge from feudal duties and to improve their living conditions took up this work, but before 1200 they usually did not share in the commune's political liberties. For the most part, the communes were not complete democracies; membership was restricted to the founding families and their descendants. Although all resident adults were subject to rule by the commune—they were required to pay taxes and to serve in the militia-not all of them were permitted to be politically active citizens. Active citizenship depended on property qualification, length of residence, and social connections, as did the right to hold public office, a right enjoyed by only a tiny fraction of the male population.

Indeed, in the twelfth century political power was developing along patrician lines, so that by 1160, in most communes, certain families were preeminent in civic affairs. Even as the communes as a whole were fighting for their autonomy from feudal lords and bishops, these patricians dominated the magistracy, manipulated the assembly, and basically ruled the city, with the result that the civic assemblies steadily atrophied.

This situation did not last long, however. Around 1200 democratic sentiments began to stir in many communes; at Nîmes, for example, in 1198 the entire people elected their magistrates. In the Italian communes the *popolo*—the master craftsmen, shopkeepers, professionals, notaries, tradesmen, financiers, commercial bourgeoisie (but not the weavers and labourers)—confronted the aristocracy with demands that

communal political life be expanded to include their participation.

In various communes the *popolo* formed neighborhood movements of vocational guilds that interlinked men of the same occupation. These guilds were soon supplemented by armed popular societies, also organized by neighbourhood. The mobilized popolo now clashed with the nobility in towns such as Brescia, Milan, Piacenza, Cremona, Assisi, and Lucca, among many others. To a remarkable extent their revolts succeeded in radically democratizing communal political life. Between 1200 to 1260, in a number of communes including major towns like Bologna and Florence, the popolo actually took over reins of power. Pavia's council expanded from 150 to 1,000 members in the same years, and Milan's grew from 400 to 900, while at Montpellier the guild organizations actually fused with the municipal government itself. This dramatic process of democratization was reflected in the writings of the Aristotelian philosopher Marsilio of Padua, who wrote, "The legislator, or prime and proper effective cause of law, is the people or body of citizens, or its more weighty part, through its choice or will orally expressed in the general assembly of citizens."[3]

In the northern cities, by contrast, democratization of communal life occurred more slowly than it did in Italy. In Freiburg, after a popular revolt, the commune mutated its oligarchy into a board of twenty-four magistrates, elected annually, while Liège created a guild-type city republic and after 1313 made the issuance of new laws contingent upon approval by a popular assembly, composed of all citizens regardless of status. However, in Flanders, in cloth-manufacturing Ghent and Ypres, civic self-government was shaped by the weavers and fullers. Organized into so-called "lesser guilds," these working people—virtual proletarians—waged a veritable class war against their patrician exploiters and ultimately triumphed over them, establishing a civic structure that gave considerable rights both to themselves and to "low degree" guildsmen—and excluding

most patricians.

Even at their most democratic, however, the popular communes of Flanders, the Rhone valley, and Italy still did not give equal political rights to all male citizens. They excluded the unskilled, the poor, field workers, and most immigrants, who, they felt, were dependent people and therefore easily controlled by wealthy merchants and aristocrats. Nor was the democratizing process long-lasting: In time these early democracies yielded to republican forms of governance, and political power reverted to the influential families, with the result that the communes later ended up with rule by oligarchical councils or by elites such as the Medici in Florence.

However incomplete the medieval communes' democratization may have been, it aroused the dormant political realm from its slumber and set it in motion for several centuries in piazzas and other public spaces. As such, these communes constitute an important moment in the developing tradition of direct democracy.

Notes

1. Plutarch, "Solon," in *The Rise and Fall of Athens* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), p. 54.

2. Pericles quoted in Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 2.37.1.

3. Marsilio of Padua, *Defensor Pacis* (1324), dictio 1, chap. 23, sec. 3; in John H. Mundy and Peter Riesenberg, *The Medieval Town* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1958), p. 125.

Chapter 4

Municipal Democracy
Colonial and Revolutionary

The New England Town Meeting

The Puritans who settled colonial New England were neither willing nor conscious bearers of the tradition of direct democracy. The original generation who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1629 thought democracy was quite frankly immoral. John Winthrop, the colony's first governor, and his fellow congregants much preferred rule by the elect, by the "visible saints," as they were called, who had supposedly enjoyed an epiphany of divine "grace." Scripture seemed to them to dictate that the elect should rule through aristocracy or monarchy.

Nevertheless the New England Puritans practiced a religion, called Congregationalism, that was remarkably democratic. A form of English Protestantism that championed the autonomy of the individual congregation against all priests and bishops, Congregationalism was based on the idea that each congregation of worshippers was an autonomous compact unto itself, subordinate to no mortal person, that was to be guided only by Scripture. Thus Congregationalist Puritanism rejected all liturgical and ecclesiastical aspects of the Christian religion—that is, it rejected not only the Roman church but the Anglican, which shared many of the hierarchical features of Catholicism. Congregationalists relied instead on scripture, on their own private relationship with the divine, and on one another, unmediated by clergy, for the salvation of their souls. Binding themselves into covenanted communities in the New World, they promised to obey God and to look out for one another's souls in a spirit of

mutual fellowship.

As they settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s, the Congregational Puritans formed fairly autonomous towns, structured around their own self-gathered churches. Each congregation governed itself by a covenant that its members wrote together as a community. An embryonic democratic ideal thus informed the ethos of each congregation: That the entire congregation participated in group decisions implied democratic rule, and just as each congregation had made its own religious covenant, so too did each town make a town covenant by which it handled its temporal affairs.

Their town-planning practices reflected this orientation toward democratic community. The original group who founded a town would collectively receive from the colony itself a deed to the land, which they divided among themselves. Each male inhabitant was given a one-to-ten-acre plot of land as a freehold, on which he could support himself and his family. Land ownership was thus kept roughly egalitarian, and extremes of wealth and poverty were avoided for a considerable period of time. The town militias, to which all able-bodied male members of the community belonged, were products of the same egalitarian spirit, as they mustered in drills on the town green.

As for town government, the New Englanders established town meetings—general assemblies—that met on a regular basis to conduct the town's affairs. The town meeting was essentially the religious congregation—with its insistence on a self-generated, autonomous covenant—reconstituted for dealing with civil affairs. Although the town meeting lacked any underpinning in democratic theory, it was astonishingly democratic in practice.

In theory only adult male churchmembers—those who had received "grace" and become "visible saints"—were eligible to vote in town meetings. Nonchurchmembers could attend meetings and participate in the deliberations, but they were not

permitted to share in actual decision-making. But the towns quickly found that it was simply not feasible to allow only a minority to occupy the political realm, and the religious qualification for voting became a dead letter. The franchise was widened to include all adult male inhabitants who had some property or a regular income (20 pounds sterling, a relatively small sum), then finally any man who simply swore an oath to the effect that he possessed the right amount of property. The New England political realm was thus increasingly opened to men who would have been excluded in almost every English borough and town—that is, to most male heads of household. Moreover, anyone who could vote was also eligible to hold office. Contrary to the oligarchical prerogatives of England, officeholding in Massachusetts Bay was broadly elective rather than narrowly appointive.

The first town meeting, held in Cambridge in 1632, was a monthly meeting called in order to make decisions about local problems. Soon other towns were holding similar meetings, and they were doing so as often as they deemed necessary. In 1635 the General Court—the government of the whole colony—statutorily recognized the town meeting as the supreme governing body in each town.

At first, the townspeople themselves were fairly passive about exercising the broad sovereign powers granted them both by the 1635 statute and by their existing situation. Their town meetings assembled infrequently, only a few times a year, and transacted only routine business when they did. Townspeople preferred to delegate their power to the selectmen—the handful of officials who made up the select board, the administrative arm of the town meeting.

Nothing in the colony's legal code gave the selectmen greater or more powers than the town meeting itself—they were only supposed to carry out the decisions of the town meeting in between sessions. But in the first generation of settlement, the selectmen were religious elders or their secular

equivalent—actually constituting a de facto aristocracy of "visible saints." As a small group of seven to nine members, the select board could meet more frequently and more informally than the larger and hence more cumbersome town meetings, and they could make decisions more expeditiously, without having to consult many different individual points of view. The townspeople could have voted the selectmen out of office easily—their terms of office lasted only one year but in the early years the people were still deferential to the venerable men who had guided them to the new land and formed their religious covenant. Holding the selectmen in awe, they reelected them indefinitely year after year and allowed them to exercise the primary governing power, while the town meetings themselves acted as mere rubber stamps, out of reverence for their higher wisdom and experience.

Between 1680 and 1720, however, the town meetings gained the upper hand over the select boards, transforming town polities from de facto oligarchies into de facto democracies. After the original generation of selectmen died off, the second generation did not command the level of veneration that their predecessors had enjoyed; merely by virtue of their relative youth the new selectmen were less experienced and less awe-inspiring. Thenceforth the townspeople gradually took the policy-making initiative back from the select boards. Instead of meeting only a few times a year to ratify the selectmen's decisions, the town meetings met more frequently—as often as they themselves felt was necessary, and they freely exercised their veto over the selectmen's proposals instead of accepting them docilely. They now claimed in practice the power that they already possessed legally.

Ultimately the town meetings came completely into their own as decision-making bodies. They imposed taxes, spent money, authorized land divisions, settled title and land use disputes, approved immigrants, granted economic concessions, and gave permission for creating various economic

enterprises, functioning as the towns' economic planning boards. With the exercise of these expanding powers, debate and contention grew, and a new spirit of action and pride pervaded the meetings.

As for the colonywide government of Massachusetts Bay, each town sent delegates to the assembly in Boston. Early in the colony's history, the delegates, like the selectmen, had been elders, and their actions in the capital had been above public scrutiny. But in later generations the town meetings took an acute interest in making certain that their delegates voted in Boston the way the public at home had instructed them: An elected committee in the town would draw up a set of instructions to the delegate, then debate and vote on them in the town meeting, whereupon the meetings would bind the delegate to vote accordingly. Under the injunction of such mandates, a deputy became a mere agent of citizens in their towns.

As a result of popular pressure after around 1700, the delegates to the Boston assembly were required to bring an account of each session back to their respective town meetings. In fact, at least one town even sent a guardian along with the delegate to make sure he behaved in accordance with the public's mandate, and journals of the assembly were printed up precisely to publicize how delegates had voted. Finally, the election of deputies was annual—another powerful constraint on their power. (As John Adams would declare in 1776, "Where annual elections end, slavery begins.") By virtue of the towns' strong control over the assembly, the Boston assembly was less a legislative body than a confederal council or congress.

For much of the eighteenth century the Massachusetts towns enjoyed an extraordinary degree of freedom, a degree of sovereignty remarkable for their era or any other, by any standard. Although the "confederal congress" in Boston passed laws that affected the towns, most towns obeyed them mainly at their own discretion. In fact, disobedience was flagrant: in eighteenth-century Massachusetts the towns were supreme,

not only on paper but in practice.

This experience with local power gave the townspeople an entirely new orientation toward authority. Long before the Declaration of Independence, the Massachusetts towns were operating on the principle that the only legitimate government derives from the consent of the governed—indeed, that the only legitimate government was self-government. It was the direct democracy of the Massachusetts towns, with what became their radical political views, that the British crown found most intolerable, and after the Boston Tea Party one of London's first acts was to pass a law shutting down the town meetings. It was an "intolerable act" that, given the self-sovereignty of the towns, could not supress their political practices, and their open defiance became a flashpoint for the revolt of all the American colonies against British rule.

In one of the ironies of history, the town meetings did not survive intact the revolution they did so much to generate; their power was eviscerated first by the State constitutions drawn up during the war and subsequently by the federal constitution. Although town meetings exist today, mainly in New England, the days when they were sovereign have long since passed into history.

The Parisian Sections

In France, the Parisian sectional assemblies of 1793 were the most democratic and radical political institutions to emerge during the course of the Great Revolution.

In preparation for the epochal meeting of the Estates General in Versailles in 1789, the French monarchy was obliged to establish electoral districts throughout France, where commoners could gather in assemblies to choose their deputies for the Third Estate—or rather, to choose an intermediate set of electors, who in turn would choose the deputies, so disinclined was the monarchy to allow even propertied commoners to vote

directly. Sixty district assemblies were constituted in Paris, where they duly carried out their task. But once they chose their deputies, the Parisian assemblies persisted in meeting—even though they had lost their legal reason for existence. Thus, even as the Estates General—soon renamed the National Assembly—was meeting in Versailles, the Parisian district assemblies kept meeting regularly as quasi-legal bodies, acting as guardians of their limited freedoms in the fast-moving political situation.

After December 1789 such assemblies became the legal basis for municipal government in all the large French cities. The National Assembly, and later the Constituent Assembly that followed it, reconfigured Paris's sixty districts into forty-eight sections; all the other large French cities—Lyons and Marseilles, Bordeaux and Toulouse—were divided into sections as well, with assemblies to look after community affairs. Collectively the various sectional assemblies in a city exercised control over that city's central municipal authority, or commune.

As the revolution unfolded, about 44,000 autonomous local communes—the large ones controlled by sectional assemblies—occupied much of the political realm in France, concerning themselves not only with local but with national issues. They acquired the power to call out their own branches of the National Guard, and in both structure and political content, they became increasingly democratic and radical. In Paris the sectional assemblies even opened their doors to all adult males—and in some cases to women—regardless of property or status qualifications. Indeed, the Parisian sections themselves formed the basis for an extremely radical direct civic democracy.

This sectional movement, which matured in Paris in 1792 and 1793, was a self-conscious direct-democratic phenomenon. Regardless of whether its members were politically radical, each popular assembly formed the fundamental deliberative and decision-making body of its section. Ideologically,

the *sectionnaires* regarded popular sovereignty as an inalienable right to be enjoyed by all citizens, one that could not to be preempted by representatives to national assemblies. Meeting in expropriated chapels and churches, each sectional assembly elected six deputies to the Paris Commune, one of whose major functions was to coordinate all the sections in the city.

Each section was also possessed of a variety of committees that performed such functions as police, supply, finance, and neighbourhood surveillance. Of paramount importance, each section also had its own battalion of the National Guard, including an artillery unit, over which it exercised complete control and whose movements it alone could authorize. The *sectionnaires* interested themselves passionately in these military units: assembly meetings in which National Guard officers were elected drew the greatest attendance, greater even than those in which civilian officials were elected.

In 1793, during the height of the Parisian radical democracy, sectional life was vibrant, disputatious, and earthy. Periods of crisis might attract a thousand citizens or more to an assembly meeting, often crowding the hall to the bursting point, while debates were often vigorous, the various factions contending with one another heatedly. Some sectional assemblies were genuine political battlegrounds. Within a particular section, citizens' interests might vary widely according to economic status, ideology, and social background—during even the most militant periods of the revolution, royalists and moderates still turned out for meetings, as well as extreme radicals. Furious confrontations often exploded into threats, shouts, and mutual recrimination, not to speak of fistfights.

The radical *sectionnaires* who occupied this political realm were the same people who invaded the Tuileries in August 1792 and deposed the king, leading to his execution; and who teetered on the brink of a radical insurrection against the Convention in June 1793. (Had it been successful, this insurrection might have given full power to a national confederation

of sectional assemblies.) It was during this last period of ferment that the radical democrat Jean Varlet, whose political home was the section called Droits de l'Homme, tried to organize delegates from each section into a counterpower that would constitute a "Commune of communes," a confederation of cities and towns (communes) over all of France, to supplant the National Convention. In effect, the radical *sectionnaires* stood at forefront of the revolutionary movement in France. It was no doubt for this reason that their leaders were among the first to be arrested by the Jacobin regime when it came to power in June 1793.

Derived from the district assemblies, the sectional assemblies had elbowed their way into existence in flat defiance of the Nation-State that created them. They went on to provide the institutional structure for an extraordinary direct democracy, and as such they constitute yet another important moment in that abiding tradition. For libertarian municipalism they have a particular importance, since they were not only situated in the largest city on the European continent but played a driving role in radicalizing one of the great revolutions in history.

Chapter 5

The State and Urbanization

As familiar as the State is in modern life, its functions well known to every schoolchild, and as unmistakable as it is as a vehicle for domination, the State is nonetheless a phenomenon that is misunderstood across the political spectrum. Liberals and conservatives alike applaud its manifest custody of power, rationalizing it as necessary for maintaining orderly social arrangements, since human nature is, in their view, evidently flawed. Some go further to commend the State as beneficent, a civilizing force, even, in optimistic moments, culminating as "the end of history."

Leftists, for their part, have no illusions about the State as an instrument of domination. But they err in reading its specific features. Marxists tend to think of it as a mere reflex of class domination and at the same time as a tool suitable for appropriation and use in the interests of the working class—a substitution that merely perpetuates domination. Left-libertarians, for their part, rightfully reject the State altogether, but they commonly think of the State in ahistorical terms, as if it had materialized in the mundane world fully formed, a monolith without antecedents.

Like the city, however, and like the political and social realms themselves, the State has had a specific historical development. From a primal matrix of hierarchical relationships it issued gradually, taking a multiplicity of forms and undergoing degrees of development over the course of social evolution. Far from being monolithic, "the State" as a rubric encompasses germinal States, partly formed and unstable quasi-States, empires, monarchies, feudal States, theocracies, republics, social welfare States, autocracies, dictatorships, and totalitarian States. Like all

will themselves have been transformed into more politically mature beings by the time they complete their work.

Note

1. Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 135.

Chapter 10

Localism and Interdependence

In the minds of many thoughtful people, the prospect of a profusion of municipal assemblies dotting the landscape, each of them making decisions autonomously, raises questions. Direct democracy and participatory citizenship sound very good on paper, they would concede, but the result of such fragmentation would most likely be not popular empowerment but chaos. Each assembly would probably try to advance its own interests at the expense of all the others.

Moreover, they further object, modern industrial societies are too large and too complex to be run by political entities as small as towns and neighbourhoods. Economic life in particular is interlinked and globalized; local communities could scarcely be expected to make informed decisions with the efficiency that production and commerce demand. By their very nature, our societies require government on a broad scale, lest they collapse altogether. The State is the perfect instrument for this purpose, we are assured—it permits policies to be made and enforced over a wide area.

Even those thinkers of a socialistic or utopistic bent who wish to replace the competitive market economy of the present society with cooperative ones may have doubts about municipal democracy. No lone municipality, they demur, however democratic, would ever be able to resist the pressures of large economic and class interests on its own. To arrive at a cooperative society, they maintain, a State would be indispensable—indeed, one with a great deal of power—to restrain the unbounded drive for profit of capitalist enterprises.

Still other critics object that small communities, by

virtue of their insularity, tend to become parochial. Even in today' s interlinked society, localities become complacent about their distinctive and cherished customs; but if their range of political vision were narrowed from the national level, where it rests today, to the comparatively minuscule town or neighbourhood level, then they might well withdraw into themselves at the expense of wider consociation. They might become reactionary guardians of local customs that are actually unfair or discriminatory. If challenged, they might become defensive of them, or even chauvinistic. A kind of municipal tribalism could spring up, one that shelters injustices or even tyrannies within.

The citizens of a chauvinistic municipality could even decide—democratically, in a citizens' assembly, voting by majority rule—that only white people could live in their community. They could decide openly to discriminate against people of colour. They could decide to exclude women from public life, or gays and lesbians, or any other group. Without the power of a Nation-State to enforce anti-discrimination laws, these critics contend, civil rights wouldn't stand a chance. In traditional American politics it has often been the "decentralizing" tendencies—calling for "states' rights"—that have stood for white supremacy and the exclusion of blacks from political life.

Finally, those who object to municipalist localism contend, environmental problems recognize no man—made, political boundaries. Suppose a town is dumping its untreated wastes into a river from which towns downstream draw their drinking water. Such a problem must be handled at a level of jurisdiction broader than the municipality. Only the overarching State, we are told, with the instruments of coercion it has at its disposal, could prevent the upstream town from ruining the common water supply.

Rather than chase after hopelessly utopian schemes of direct democracy, these various arguments all conclude, people who are seeking to create a better society should work to

improve the existing system—they should try to enhance popular representation in the State. To be sure, the Nation-State doesn't give decision-making power directly to ordinary people, we are told, but at least it gives it to their representatives. In general, even if the State is guilty of some abuses, it is necessary in order to prevent wider abuses.

On the surface, the Statist case may seem compelling. For one thing, it is true that today' s world is complex. But society' s complexity is not such as to require State control. Much of it is generated by the State itself, as well as by capitalist forms of enterprise. Eliminating the Nation-State and capitalism would immensely simplify society by eliminating their vast bureaucratic "complexities."

Second, while discrimination and other human rights abuses may indeed arise in Stateless societies, they may also arise in Statist societies—and have done so quite often. Nation-States have enforced abuses ranging from racial segregation to apartheid, from slavery to genocide, from child labour to patriarchalism to the persecution of sexual minorities. Indeed, human rights abuses have most often been perpetrated by States.

Finally, it is surely true that many social and environmental problems do transgress municipal boundaries, and that no single municipality can address them meaningfully on its own. And it is true that some municipalities may become parochial and transgress on the freedoms of others. Small is not necessarily beautiful at all, and municipal autonomy in itself does not guarantee that municipalities will be enlightened or free. Finally, it is true that the municipality is relatively powerless to challenge broad social forces—fighting in isolation, it would scarcely pose any threat at all.

The Statist critics, that is, are correct in their objection to localism as such. But although libertarian municipalism emphasizes enhancing local political power, it is not strictly a localist philosophy. It recognizes that some kind of transmu-

nicipal form of organization is needed if citizens are to create and manage a free, democratic society. A thoroughgoing localism and decentralism, has consequences at least as unsavoury as those raised by Statists.

Localism and Decentralism

When most current radical-environmental political thinkers, for their part, turn to the problem of how to create an alternative society, they think of simplifying lifestyles and constructing simpler habitats at the local level that suit those simpler lifestyles. We should give up the pattern of insatiable consumption that society impresses upon us today, they argue, and reconceive ourselves as members of a bioregion—that is, a natural place bounded by a natural boundary, like a watershed or a mountain range. We should reduce the number of possessions we think we need, and society should cast off the technology that is (presumably) ruining the natural world. People in the wealthier nations in particular should drastically cut their levels of consumption and dismantle the technological base of economic production.

Instead of the shopping-mall society, we should frame a decentralized society, one in which our own "home," our own locality, becomes as self-sufficient as we can make it. We should build up local manufactures, using humble tools; we should create local cooperatives, like food coops; we should cultivate as much of our own food as possible; we should dispense with money if we can and adopt barter or an alternative currency. Local communities that are self-sufficient might then be able to survive on their own, outside the mainstream of society. Gradually such communities would multiply, creating a more humanly scaled and ecologically friendly society.

Such bioregionalist appeals share some points of resemblance with libertarian municipalism, especially in their objections to the competitive economy, to commodification,

and to the creation of artificial needs, and in their wish to reconstruct society along more ecologically benign lines. And both bioregionalism and libertarian municipalism place great importance on enhancing the importance of localities, in that both call for the decentralization of society.

But many of these resemblances are superficial. While libertarian municipalism does seek to reinvigorate the local level, it regards local self-reliance as woefully incomplete as a principle by which to remake society and our relationship with the natural world. No locality—not even a municipality that practices direct democracy—can be sufficient unto itself. While we may strive to decentralize production, complete self-sufficiency is not only impossible but undesirable. Municipalities of all sorts are dependent upon one another, as well they should be, and share many common issues. Least of all should individual communities ever be autonomous in their economic life. Any given individual community needs far more resources, raw materials, than it could derive from its own lands. Economic interdependence is simply a fact; it is a function not of the competitive market economy, of capitalism, but of social life as such, at least since the Neolithic era. Even farmers and craftspeople are interdependent: farmers depend on mines, factories, and smithies for the manufacture of ploughs, hoes, shovels, and the like, while craftspeople need tools and raw materials from a wide variety of sources.

Nor would libertarian municipalism eliminate many existing technologies of production. In fact, it takes issue with the popular eco-mystical belief that technology is the cause of the ecological crisis. Most technologies are morally neutral (nuclear power of any kind is an obvious exception); it is not they that cause ecological destruction but the social arrangements, especially capitalism, that use them for destructive ends. Most technologies may be used for ends that are either noble or base; they merely magnify the consequences of the social relations in which they are embedded.

Certainly one noble end for which many technologies are used today is the reduction or elimination of toil. Those who advocate simple living, using only the simplest of technologies, seem unaware that if a "simplified" community were to try to produce everything its inhabitants needed, using only craft hand tools and simple farming technologies, the days of those community members would be filled with backbreaking toil, of the kind that was prevalent before the industrial revolution. Such toil not only prematurely aged preindustrial people, especially women; it allowed them little time to participate in political life.

Indeed, if people are to be able to fully participate as citizens in political life, as proposed, they must have a economic and technological base that will afford them sufficient free time to do so; otherwise the demands of survival and personal security in the private realm will overtake political participation.

Fortunately, creating an ecologically benign and decentralized society would not require a return to relentless toil. Social ecology (the body of ideas of which libertarian municipalism is the political dimension) recognizes that the enormous growth of productive forces in modern times has rendered moot the age-old problem of material scarcity. Today, technology has been developed sufficiently to make possible an immense expansion of free time, through the automation of tasks once performed by human labour. As far as production is concerned, the basic means for eliminating toil and drudgery, for living in comfort and security, rationally and ecologically, for social rather than merely private ends, are potentially available to all peoples of the world.

In today's societies, unfortunately, this promise of post-scarcity—of a sufficiency in the means of life and the expansion of free time—has not been fulfilled, again, not because the technology is base but because the social arrangements that use it are base. In the present society automation has more

often than not created hardships rather than free time: it usually results either in unemployment, in which people are unable to gain the means of life at all, or else long hours of work at low-paying service jobs. An ecological society, by eliminating the social arrangements that create both these problems, would fulfil the potentiality of technology to create a post—scarcity society. It would retain much of today's technological infrastructure—including automated industrial plants—and use it for production to meet the basic needs of life. (Those plants, at a minimum, would be converted so that they were powered by clean, renewable energy rather than by fossil fuels.) Machinery would produce sufficient goods to meet individual needs and remove most onerous toil, so that men and women would have sufficient free time to participate in political life as well as enjoy rich and meaningful personal lives.

If the potentiality for ending material scarcity has been partially fulfilled by virtue of the development of production, that potentiality would be brought to fulfilment by making the necessary changes in the area of distribution. That is, the fruits of the productive forces would not be appropriated by one group, who then make them available to the rest of the world by selling them, as they are today. Rather, the fruits of production would be shared—they would be distributed according to people' s need for them, guided by an ethos of public responsibility as well as by reason.

Such sharing implies the existence of communication, tolerance, rejuvenating ideas, a wider social horizon, and cultural cross-fertilization—which would also help prevent the appearance of chauvinism and bigotry. But in an ecological society, sharing—equitable distribution—would not only be a moral principle. In order for the promise of post-scarcity to be fulfilled, it would have to be institutionalized; it would have to gain concrete social form through a broad principle of organized cooperation.

This organized cooperation would emanate from the

very interdependence of the democratized municipalities themselves, especially in their economic life, on ecological questions, and on issues of human rights. That is, not only would democratized municipalities be interdependent, they would institutionalize their interdependence in a direct-democratic way.

Chapter 11

Confederalism

The broad principle of political and social organization that can institutionalize interdependence without resorting to a State and at the same time preserve the power of municipal assemblies is confederalism.

A confederation is a network in which several political entities combine to form a larger whole. Although a larger entity is formed in the process of confederating, the smaller entities do not dissolve themselves into it and disappear. Rather, they retain their freedom and identity and their sovereignty even as they confederate.

In an ecological society, the municipalities that have undergone democratization—that is, whose charters have been changed so that citizens' assemblies hold the supreme political power within the municipality—would form confederations on a regional basis to address transmunicipal or regional concerns. These confederations would institutionalize the inherent interdependence of communities, without depriving them of their freedom and sovereignty.

Instead of a central government, with a legislature voting to approve or reject laws, a confederation is typically embodied in a congress of delegates that coordinates policies and practices of the member communities. In a libertarian municipalist polity, the municipalities would form such confederations by sending delegates to them. These delegates would not be representatives; that is, their purpose would not be to make policies or laws on behalf of their supposedly benighted constituents, in ways that they imagine to be beneficial to them. Instead, the delegates

would be mandated by the people in their municipal assemblies to carry out their wishes.

The delegates' functions would be to convey the wishes of the municipality to the confederal level. In conjunction with the other delegates in the confederation, they would coordinate policies to meet common ends that the several member communities have agreed upon and adjudicate any differences that may arise among themselves. All delegates would be accountable to the assemblies that have mandated them as their agents.

Confederations in History

Confederal structures, it should be emphasized, are not historically novel. To the contrary, early cities at the dawn of recorded history established confederal associations, as they did in the ancient Mediterranean and medieval European worlds. In early modern times confederations gained notable importance as a major viable alternative to the Nation-State, before the Nation-State attained the prevalence that it has today.

Insofar as cities have resisted the encroachments of the State, they have often done so by joining together to form confederations. We saw several examples of cities forming leagues and confederacies in Chapter 5, but two important cases that have not yet been mentioned are those of Switzerland and Castile, in Spain.

Today Switzerland, because it is still a confederation, seems anomalous among the relatively more unitary Nation-States of Europe. But in earlier times, in central Europe especially, it was confederations that were the norm and States that were the anomaly. Confederations abounded in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, like the Rhenish and Swabian leagues. Switzerland merely preserved much of this older confederal trend, while its neighbours underwent centralization to become more modern States. Its governmental structure is still

relatively decentralized, made up of twenty-two cantons, which still have a good deal of autonomy from the federal level; in turn the three thousand communes still have some autonomy from the cantons in which they are located.

But Switzerland today also has many State features (as well as attitudes, institutions, and social features that are not at all enlightened). Swiss confederalism is far more interesting historically. Most strikingly, in the country's easternmost territory—which was once called Raetia by the Romans and is now called the canton of Graubünden—the Swiss communes formed confederations for their common welfare and safety.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century in Raetia, three confederal leagues (the Gotteshausbund, the Oberbund or Grauer Bund, and the Zehngerichtenbund) coexisted. In 1524 these three leagues allied to form the Free State of the Three Leagues, which despite its "Statist" name was a confederation. The Free State confederation lasted for almost three centuries, until Napoleon forced it into the Swiss Confederation in 1803.

All three of its component leagues, in turn, were made up of communes that were remarkably democratic and free. Indeed, the ultimate sovereignty in the Free State reposed with the communes, which held assemblies much like "town meetings" and would give their assent or opposition to a proposed course of action by referendum. They controlled their own judicial and economic affairs, as well as the local police and military forces. And they functioned along surprisingly communistic lines, using local resources in ways that approximated collective ownership. For example, they privileged the right to graze cattle communally. In a pastoral economy, common grazing such as they practised amounted to overriding private property and negating private land ownership.

The only central "government" in the Free State confederation was a commission consisting of the respective heads of each of the three leagues and an elective assembly, which

together proposed referenda and carried out the will of the communes. The commissioners had the right to handle foreign affairs and to prevent the component leagues from making foreign alliances on their own. But the communes themselves decided upon matters of war and peace, as well as domestic issues.

The central "government" thus had almost no power, while the communes—that is, the citizens themselves, in assembly—had a great deal. In effect, the commissioners were merely attendants upon the people. Ultimately they lost to the communes even the power to handle diplomacy and make treaties. In general, the history of Raetia for these three centuries is a striking testimony to the ability of direct-democratic communities to govern themselves in confederal union.[1]

In sixteenth-century Castile, confederalism was part of a revolutionary struggle. In 1520 Toledo's city council called upon all the cities represented in the Cortes to establish a common front against the royal government, which had made an unfavourable change in its tax policy. City after city in Castile went into a full-scale revolt. They organized civic militias and democratized their municipal governments.

A national junta—the equivalent of a confederal council—was established, with delegates from all the Cortes cities, constituting a dual power in opposition to the royal administration. Mustering an army of citizens and adding to it professional solders, this *comunero* junta won military victories that threatened to replace the monarchical State with the municipal confederation.

The concrete aims of the *comunero* movement were municipal democracy and a Cortes composed of city delegations that would greatly limit royal authority. The movement's so-called Vallidolid articles demanded that Cortes delegates be chosen with the consent of the parishes—that is, by assemblies of the people—rather than by city councils. These delegates, in turn, were to be guided by the mandate of their electors and

were obliged to take their instructions from their home cities. The Cortes was expected to meet regularly and address all grievances before closing.[2]

Had these demands been realized, Castile would have seen the emergence of a broadly based local democracy, one deeply rooted in city neighbourhoods as well as towns. After a demanding conflict, however, that included a siege of Toledo, the State prevailed over the confederation when the king militarily defeated the very popular *comuneros*.

Confederal Organization

In an ecological society, the direct-democratic municipal assemblies would elect their delegates to serve on a confederal council. This council would be a congress of the delegates from the various municipal assemblies. Like the commission in the Swiss example, the council would have little power of its own but would merely carry out the will of the municipalities.

Moreover, the delegates would be strictly mandated to vote according to the wishes of their home municipalities, which would give them rigourous instructions in writing. They would not be permitted to make policy decisions without their home municipality's specific instructions. Entirely responsible to the citizens' assemblies, the delegates would be recallable in the event that they violated a mandate.

Rather than making policy decisions in its own right, the confederal council would exist primarily for administrative purposes—that is, for the purpose of coordinating and executing policies formulated by the assemblies.

Policy-making versus Administration

Fundamental to libertarian municipalism is the distinction between policy-making and the execution of those policies, or between policy-making and administration.

At the municipal level, the citizens in their democratic assemblies would make policy. They would deliberate on the various courses of action open to them on a particular issue, then decide which one to take. Suppose an assembly was debating whether to build a road. After weighing the pros and cons of building the road, the citizens might vote that the road was necessary. Their decision to build it is an example of policy-making.

The road could be built over any of several routes. The engineers in the community would devise plans for the various possibilities, solving any technical problems that might arise with each, then bring those plans to the assembly. There the engineers would lay the alternatives before the citizens, explaining each one clearly. Few of the citizens in the community would likely know how to build a road, but then, such expertise would not be necessary for them to have. It would merely be necessary that they understand clear explanations and the differences among the plans.

Most important, the engineers would not be the ones to decide which road to build (except in their capacity as citizens). They would simply function as a panel of experts. After debating the strengths and weaknesses of each plan, it is the citizens (including the experts in their capacity as citizens) who would choose their preference. This choice is another example of policy-making.

Finally, the road itself would have to be constructed. Unlike the other stages of the process, the construction of the road would be strictly an administrative responsibility—it would require no deliberation, no voting. The road-builders would carry out the decision made by the assembly, building the road according to the chosen plan. This strictly technical process of execution is an example of administration—in which no policy-making is involved.

In a libertarian municipalist polity, as in our world today, many decisions require that the decision-makers consider a multitude of complex and difficult factors. But then as now, technical knowledge is usually not necessary for making political choices. Few parliamentarians today would be able to design a nuclear power plant or even explain how one works, but that does not bar them from making policy decisions about the use of nuclear energy. In a libertarian municipalist society the knowledge that is needed would be disseminated as widely as possible among the citizenry. Technical issues should be presented clearly and accessibly, so that ordinary citizens of reasonable competence can make policy decisions concerning them. Guaranteeing that all matters of policy are the province of reasonable, competent citizens will help to preserve a clear and institutionalized distinction between policy-making and administration, thereby making direct democracy feasible.

Karl Marx, in his analysis of the Paris Commune of 1871, did radical social theory a considerable disservice when he celebrated the fact that the Commune had combined delegated policy-making with the execution of policies by its own administrators. In fact, this merging of the two functions was actually a major failing of that body. When the people who are administrators come to make policy decisions as well, the groundwork for a State has been laid: An elite is in the process of usurping the citizens' decision-making power.

As we have seen, in the early period of the Massachusetts Bay Colony the select boards—which were supposed to perform only administrative functions—actually made policy decisions as well, arrogating for themselves the powers that rightfully belonged to the town meetings. When such administrative bodies are permitted to function outside public scrutiny, they can make policy decisions surreptitiously and cloak them as administrative or "practical" matters. Articulating and preserving the distinction between the two functions, however, will assure—as much as is humanly possible—that administrators make only administrative decisions, not policies.

Confederal Referenda

In the new city as envisaged here, policy-making would be the exclusive privilege of the municipal assemblies, of free citizens voting in a direct democracy. The functions of the confederal council would be purely administrative and coordinative, executing the policies that the municipalities have adopted.

One process that the confederation council would coordinate would be confederation-wide voting. Suppose again that one member community of the confederation was wreaking ecological mayhem (dumping its wastes in the river) or violating human rights (excluding people of colour). One or more of its fellow municipalities could propose that the all the member municipalities vote on whether that community may persist in its noxious practice. The confederation council would coordinate what amounted to a confederal referendum in which, if they so chose, the municipalities could vote that that community desist from its malfeasances.

The voting, by majority rule, would be tallied according to the popular vote, not by municipal jurisdiction: that is, each delegate to the confederal council would carry a tally of the positive and negative votes from his or her municipality. The aggregate votes of all the citizens of all the municipalities in the confederation would be added together to determine the final outcome.

Such a process would represent not a denial of democracy but the assertion of a shared agreement by the majority of citizens within the confederation that the ecological integrity of a region or human rights must be maintained. It would not be the confederal council that made this decision, but the cumulative majority of all the citizens in all the assemblies, conceived in the aggregate as one large community that expressed its wishes through the confederation.

On many issues, referenda need not demand an answer

of either yes or no. In today's referenda conducted by and for the Nation-State, people have a very limited choice: they may vote either yes or no on a referendum, as it has been formulated in advance. But in the confederation of municipalities, an assembly may decide, during its period of deliberation and debate, that it cares for neither option and prefers to formulate its own. In such a case, the confederated municipalities may eventually choose from a range of options presented rather than voting to accept or reject only one.

Assembly Supremacy

Even as they possessed the power to prevent a particular municipality from inflicting moral or physical damage on its own members or on other towns or cities, the municipalities would have the ultimate power within the confederation. It is they, collectively, that would reign supreme as the formulators of policy.

The principle of assembly sovereignty is what distinguishes the libertarian municipalist approach from Statism. A radical, anticapitalist party that captured the existing apparatus of a Nation-State but merely went on to reconstitute another State might well abolish private property and take over the means of production, but such a State would not constitute a direct democracy. Its power over people would undoubtedly grow and, if recent experience is any guide, become all-encompassing, reinforcing its State power with economic power. It would undoubtedly develop a large bureaucracy to administer its comprehensive controls. Whatever its success in restraining capitalism, such a Statist trajectory could well prove disastrous.

Consciously formed to accommodate interdependencies, by contrast, a confederation of municipalities would be based on the full accountability of confederal delegates, the right to recall, and firm mandates. As such, the confederation

would unite municipal democratic decision-making with trans-municipal administration. Most significantly, the confederation of municipalities could fulfil the longstanding dream of revolutionary movements past, to achieve "the Commune of communes."

Notes

1. For a fine account of this history, see Benjamin Barber, *The Death of Communal Liberty: A History of Freedom in a Swiss Mountain Canton* (Princeton University Press, 1974).

2. See Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), chap. 2.

Chapter 12

A Municipalized Economy

The movement to create a libertarian municipalist society will face many social adversaries as it grows and spreads over ever wider areas. One of these adversaries, of course, is the Nation-State, that coercive power structure that substitutes a system of elites and masses for direct democracy yet has the insolence to label itself democratic. Another foe is urbanization, that warping of the city that further lays waste to the political realm by replacing the city and the community with the megalopolis. Still another foe is hierarchy, the various institutionalized divisions of humanity according to gender, ethnicity, race, age, and status, in which one group is endowed with the right to dominate others, often by invoking a mythic biological superiority as justification.

But perhaps the most pernicious and intractable enemy that the movement for fundamental change will face is of another order altogether. That enemy is capitalism itself, and the social devastation that it has wrought on human societies around the world.

To many people today, it seems incongruous to speak of capitalism as inimical to a good life, let alone as wreaking devastation. After all, at the end of the cold war, the demise of the Soviet Union supposedly proved that any quest for a socialistic or communistic alternative to capitalism is dangerously misguided, that it will inevitably lead to totalitarianism and environmental blight. Out of the historic struggle between the "free" market and its enemies, capitalism emerged triumphant, in this view; therefore, capitalism is morally right.

This attitude is in itself an indication of the scope of the problem that a libertarian municipalist movement faces. Today capitalism is increasingly perceived, as Marx once feared it would be, as synonymous with "the economy"—that is, as the economic order that best suits human nature, that comes as naturally to human activity as eating and breathing because it expresses an allegedly "natural" human drive to grow, compete, and win. So decisive, in many minds, was the victory of capitalism over all alternatives that defenders of the market no longer feel compelled to devise apologias for it as, say, social Darwinists did in an earlier generation. Capitalism is self-evidently the "natural" economic order, and by this logic, its moral rightness is also self-evident.

Yet a system is hardly moral when it allows a scant few to live in exquisite privilege and comfort by exploiting the labour of others. It is hardly moral if it requires those others, together with their spouses, to work ever longer hours for ever shrinking recompense. It is hardly moral if it demands that they labour for their livelihood, then fails to make work available—or makes it available primarily to those who are willing to perform it for inadequate wages. (Social ecologists would argue that the wage system itself, not to speak of the reduction of human beings to mere labourers, is immoral.) Further, a society is hardly moral if it makes nutrition, housing, and health care the privileges of wealth rather than the prerogatives of membership in the community. It is hardly moral if it reduces the aims of life to mere survival rather than encouraging individual sense and sensibility and the attainment of positive social freedom. Yet these immoral conditions are the sequelae of capitalism even in many of the wealthiest countries today, let alone the poorest.

The market existed, to be sure, in earlier periods of Western history, but in those days it was disparate and marginal, consisting of pockets of commerce scattered in the interstices of a society whose values and traditions were otherwise

largely noneconomistic in any modern sense. Labour was exploited in precapitalist societies, to be sure; as we have seen, before the advent of more sophisticated productive technologies, toil not only existed but was usually backbreaking. Feudal and ecclesiastical tyrannies, too, could crush the human spirit.

Yet integral even to ancient and feudal lifeways was a base of village traditions and communal customs that were life-enhancing and that could provide individuals with a measure of emotional and physical sustenance. Even if people engaged in arduous labour, their work was not reduced to a commodity, or to a capacity that had merely exchange value; nor were their surroundings structured in terms of buying and selling. Rather, the market and its values were sequestered into limited areas of social life. Precapitalist mores of mutual aid and moral responsibility offered refuge from truck and barter and, where necessary, a degree of resistance to it. Even as recently as the mid-twentieth century, capitalism was still merely one component—albeit a basic one—of many social relations in Europe and North America; it was still possible to find a refuge from it in precapitalist social and political formations, including a community life that vitally sustained nonmarket pursuits and mores.

But today capitalism is permeating and colonizing even those once commerce-free domains of society. Today it is primarily for their participation in the capitalist system—that is, for their economic productivity and their purchasing power—that people are valued, rather than for their contributions to civilization, or for their public or community service, or even for their moral decency. Commodity relationships, competition, and the values of gain are infiltrating into every pore of society, into familial, educational, personal, and even spiritual relationships, resulting not merely in a capitalist economy but in a capitalist society. Where the commodity is so ubiquitous, capitalism might well be perceived as "natural."

It is not by accident, it should be understood, that commodification is becoming so deep-seated, so ubiquitous. The capitalist system has expanded because it is organized around a law of "grow or die," an imperative of rivalry and expansion that compels businesses to compete in pursuit of ever greater profits. The commodification of ever more aspects of life, which today has reached extraordinary proportions, is merely one outcome of this competitive process. The market economy is interlocking economic life ever more tightly on a global basis, seeking cheap labour and friendly authoritarian governments willing to discipline the labour process, for the purpose of generating ever more profits for the owners of capital. Far from restraining capitalist expansion, Nation-States facilitate its operations, doing its bidding and catering to its imperatives. Driven by this "grow or die" dynamic, capitalism is tearing apart both human societies and the natural world, turning people into wretched drudges and soil into sand, rendering the planet less and less hospitable to complex life-forms.

Cooperatives

Horrified by the rapacity of these developments, many left-libertarian and ecologically concerned people today argue for breaking up the large corporations and replacing them with smaller, alternative economic units. Their aim is, understandably, to reduce the scale of economic life and to lessen the toll that predatory corporations take on people and on the environment.

The type of alternative unit they advocate varies, but it is usually a collectively owned and operated enterprise of some sort. It may be a producers' cooperative or some other worker-controlled enterprise, such as the collectivized and self-managed enterprises advocated by anarcho-syndicalists. Or it may

be a purchasers' cooperative, such as a food coop, as advocated by many environmentalists. But whatever specific form it takes, those who advance it do so with the intention of creating a cooperative alternative society, of restoring economic life to a human scale, putting it directly into the hands of the men and women who are vitally involved with it.

Unfortunately, the competitive marketplace makes it difficult for any such alternative economic units to remain alternatives for long. For a hundred and seventy-odd years now, ever since the first socialistic cooperatives were essayed in Europe, cooperative enterprises have in the end been obliged to conform to marketplace dictates, regardless of the intentions of their advocates and founders.

This conforming process has followed a fairly standard pattern. First, a cooperative becomes entangled in the web of exchanges and contracts typical of all enterprises. Then it finds that its strictly commercial rivals are offering the same goods it offers, but at lower prices. Like any enterprise, the cooperative finds that if it is to stay in business, it must compete by lowering its prices in order to win customers. One way to lower prices is to grow in size, in order to benefit from economies of scale. Thus, growth becomes necessary for the cooperative—that is, it too must "grow or die."

In short, even the most idealistically motivated cooperative finds that it must absorb or undersell its competitors or close down. Ultimately, if it is to survive, it will have to seek profits at the expense of humane values (although making outward professions of humane values can be an effective marketing strategy). Little by little, the imperatives of competition will refashion the cooperative into a capitalistic enterprise, albeit a collectively owned and managed one. This development took place even under revolutionary circumstances in Spain in 1936, when enterprises that had been taken over by syndicalist workers for idealistic purposes ended up competing with one anoth-

er for raw materials and resources, leading to takeovers by union bureaucracies or the State.*

In this fashion even the best-intentioned cooperative experiments are, lamentably, driven into the acquisitive embrace of capitalism. Of those that have lasted more than two or three years, the great majority have simply metamorphosed, under the pressure of competition, into ordinary businesses, or else perished, casualties of market-driven competitive forces. What they decidedly have not done is become more democratic; least of all have they posed a threat to the capitalist system. Even the celebrated Mondragon cooperative experiment, in the Basque country of Spain, is coming into conformity with the imperatives of the market.

Despite their poor record as a force for social change, cooperatives still hold an appeal for many well-intentioned people, who continue to look to them as a viable alternative to capitalism. Although cooperation is unquestionably a necessary part of the solution, cooperatives by themselves are insufficient to challenge the capitalist system.

Public Ownership

Any privately owned economic unit, then, whether it is managed cooperatively or by executives, whether it is owned by workers or by shareholders, is not only susceptible to assimilation by the capitalist system but will definitely be assimilated eventually, whether its members like it or not. As long as capitalism exists, competition will always require the enterprises within it to look for lower costs (including the cost of labour), greater markets, and advantages over their rivals, in order to maximize their profits. They will tend ever more to value human beings by their levels of productivity and consumption rather than by any other criteria.

*This Spanish history is explained more fully by Murray Bookchin in the interview at the end of this book.

If we are to create an alternative, cooperative society, profit seeking must be restrained or, better, eliminated. Since economic units are incapable of restraining their own profit seeking from within, they must be subjected to restraint from without. Thus an alternative economic unit that is to avoid assimilation must exist in a social context that curtails its profit seeking externally. It must be embedded in a larger community that has the power to bridle not only to bridle a specific enterprise's pursuit of profit but to control economic life generally.

No social context in which capitalism is permitted to exist will ever successfully curtail profit seeking. The expansionist imperatives of capitalism will always try to overturn external controls, will always compete, will always press for expansion. The simple fact, in the last analysis, is that capitalism itself must be eliminated. The present system must be replaced with a system that has both the desire and the ability to curtail or eliminate profit seeking in favour of humanistic values, practices, and institutions.

Such a society must be one that "owns" the economic units itself. That is, it must be one in which socially significant property—the means of production—is placed under public control or, insofar as ownership still exists, public ownership.

The notion of public ownership is not popular today. Its recent history has been nothing if not dismal, most notably in the case of the former Soviet Union. But in that and similar instances in which property has been nationalized, "public ownership" is something of a misnomer. "Public ownership" through nationalization means ownership by the Nation-State. Although the phrase "public ownership" implies ownership by the people, State ownership is not public ownership because the State, as we have seen, is an elite structure set over the people; it is not the people itself. "Public ownership" in the sense of the nationalization of property does not give the people control over economic life; it merely reinforces State power with

economic power.

The Soviet State, for example, took over the means of production and used it to enhance its power, but it left the hierarchical structures of authority intact. The greater part of the public had little or nothing to do with making decisions about their economic life. Calling such nationalization "public ownership" is as obfuscatory, indeed as fraudulent, as calling Statecraft "politics" or calling a bourgeois republic a "democracy." Real public ownership would be ownership by the people themselves, in their communities not by the State.

The Municipalization of the Economy

Libertarian municipalism advances a form of public ownership that is truly public. The political economy it proposes is one that is neither privately owned, nor broken up into small collectives, nor nationalized. Rather, it is one that is municipalized—placed under community "ownership" and control.

This *municipalization of the economy* means the "ownership" and management of the economy by the citizens of the community. Property—including both land and factories—would no longer be privately owned but would be put under the overall control of citizens in their assemblies. The citizens would become the collective "owners" of their community's economic resources and would formulate and approve economic policy for the community. It is they, and not bureaucrats or capitalists, who would make decisions about economic life.

Citizens would make those decisions regardless of their occupation or their workplace. Indeed, they would ultimately make decisions for the entire economic life of their community. Those who worked in a factory would participate in formulating policies not only for that factory but for all other factories—and for farms as well. They would participate in this decision-making not as workers, farmers, technicians, engineers, or professionals, but as citizens. The decisions they made would be guided by the needs of their community as a whole, not by those of a specific enterprise or occupation or trade; they would serve the best interests of the community.

It has long been understood, in the history of political thought, that neither democracy nor political freedom can exist in a society where there are vast inequalities of wealth and income. Aristotle knew, as did Thomas Jefferson, that popular rule could not be sustained where resources were distributed very unevenly. Without a rough economic egalitarianism, democracy of any sort would most likely be ephemeral, giving way sooner rather than later to oligarchy or despotism.

Jefferson foresaw that a general and pervasive equality of condition would be necessary if even the American republic were to endure. Not long after his death, however, the relative economic equality of his day had already begun to yield to concentrations of private economic power. Today the disparities of wealth and income in the United States are so wide that the future even of the "democratic" masquerade at the national level is cast in doubt, let alone the potential reality of democracy at the municipal level. Economic inequality threatens to render a mockery of the Athenian ideal of the politically sovereign citizen who can make a rational judgment in public affairs because he or she is materially free from need or clientage.

In a rational anarchist society, economic inequality would be eliminated by turning wealth, private property, and the means of production over to the municipality. Through the municipalization of the economy, the riches of the possessing classes would be expropriated by ordinary people and placed in the hands of the community, to be used for the benefit of all.

Economic life as such would be absorbed by the community and brought under the control of the political realm, which would absorb economic decision-making as part of public business, the responsibility of the assembly. Neither factory nor land could ever again become a separate, competitive unit with its own interests.

The assembly's decisions, it is to be hoped, would be guided by rational and ecological standards. Indeed, the economy would become a moral economy. Classical notions of limit and balance would replace the capitalist imperative to expand and compete in the pursuit of profit. The community would value people for their positive contributions to community life, not for their level of production and consumption. Acting through their assemblies, the citizens would consciously and deliberately prevent economic entities from obeying capitalist imperatives of profit seeking rather than ethical strictures of cooperation and sharing.

The assembly would make decisions not only about production but about the distribution of the material means of life, fulfilling the promise of post-scarcity. "From each according to ability and to each according to needs"—the demand of all nineteenth-century communist movements—would become a living practice, an institutionalized responsibility of the political realm. Everyone in the community would have access to the means of life, regardless the work he or she was capable of performing; the community would see that a rough economic equality, based on morally and rationally formulated criteria of needs, would exist among all its citizens.

Over the wider geographical range, economic life would be controlled by the confederation of municipalities. The wealth expropriated from the property-owning classes would be redistributed not only within a municipality but among all the municipalities in a region. At the confederal level individual municipalities would share resources with one another and make decisions about production and distribution. If one municipality tried to engross itself at the expense of others, its fellow confederates would have the right to prevent it. A thorough politicization of the economy would take place, extending the moral economy to a broad regional scale.

Chapter 13

Dual Power

The "feeling of empowerment" is a sensation that is much sought—after in many religious, psychotherapeutic, and sometimes even political groups today. After participating in a certain activity, members of a group may remark enthusiastically that it made them "feel empowered." Members of a spiritual group, for example, may say that they "feel empowered" after participating in a religious ritual. People in twelve-step groups come away from talking about their addictions "feeling empowered." Members of an affinity group may "feel empowered" after expressing their rage in a protest action of one kind or another. Even individuals who use spiritual self-help nostrums will "feel empowered" after chanting "affirmations" to themselves, or after lying down, closing their eyes, and daydreaming through exercises in "guided imagery."

Power, however, cannot be obtained through daydreaming, or through rituals, or even through direct actions whose purpose is limited merely to protest. One may gain a pleasant sensation from such exercises, or even an illusory "feeling" of empowerment, but one will gain no actual social or political power whatsoever.

Power is not merely a spiritual or psychological feeling. It is a solid and tangible social fact and must be understood as such; the force and violence exerted by Nation-States and by corporations are today precisely matters of institutional power, backed up by police, courts, and armies. To ignore power's factuality is to bid farewell to reality and drift into an ethereal or psychological nirvana.