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Reason, creativity and freedom: The communalist model

Eleanor Finley

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Whether the twenty-first century will be the most radical of times or the most reactionary ... will depend overwhelmingly upon the kind of social movement and program that social radicals create out of the theoretical, organizational, and political wealth that has accumulated during the past two centuries... The direction we select ... may well determine the future of our species for centuries to come.

— **Murray Bookchin**, *The Communalist Project* (2002)



In the aftermath of Donald Trump’s election, devastating images and memories of the First and Second World Wars flood our minds. Anti-rationalism, racialized violence, scapegoating, misogyny and homophobia have been unleashed from the margins of society and brought into the political mainstream.

Meanwhile, humanity itself runs in a life-or-death race against time. The once-unthinkable turmoil of climate change is now becoming reality, and no serious attempts are being undertaken by powerful actors and institutions to holistically and effectively mitigate the catastrophe. As the tenuous and paradoxical era of American republicanism comes to an end, nature’s experiment in such a creative, self-conscious creature as humanity reaches a perilous brink.

Precisely because these nightmares have become reality, now is the time to decisively face the task of creating a free and just political economic system. For the sake of humanity — indeed for the sake of all complex life on earth as we know it — we must countervail the fascism embodied today in nation-state capitalism and unravel a daunting complex of interlocking social, political, economic and ecological problems. But how?

As a solution to the present situation, a growing number of people in the world are proposing “communalism”: the usurpation of capitalism, the state, and social hierarchy by the way of town, village, and neighborhood assemblies and federations. Communalism

is a living idea, one that builds upon a rich legacy of political history and social movements.

The commune from Rojava to the Zapatistas

The term communalism originated from the revolutionary Parisian uprising of 1871 and was later revived by the late-twentieth century political philosopher Murray Bookchin (1931-2006). Communalism is often used interchangeably with “municipalism”, “libertarian municipalism” (a term also developed by Bookchin) and “democratic confederalism” (coined more recently by the imprisoned Kurdish political leader Abdullah Öcalan).

Although each of these terms attempt to describe direct, face-to-face democracy, communalism stresses its organic and lived dimensions. Face-to-face civic communities, historically called communes, are more than simply a structure or mode of management. Rather, they are social and ethical communities uniting diverse social and cultural groups. Communal life is a good in itself.

There are countless historical precedents that model communalism’s institutional and ethical principles. Small-scale and tribal-based communities provide many such examples. In North America, the Six Nations Haudenasanee (Iroquois) Confederacy governed the region east of the Great Lakes by confederal direct democracy for over 800 years. In coastal Panama, the Kuna continue to manage an economically vibrant island archipelago. Prior to the devastation of colonization and slavery, the Igbo of the Niger Delta practiced a highly cosmopolitan form of communal management. More recently, in Chiapas, Mexico, the Zapatista Movement have reinvented pre-Columbian assembly politics through hundreds of autonomous *municipios* and five regional capitals called *caracoles* (snails) whose spirals symbolize the joining of villages.

While even a brief sketch of all the social changes needed today far exceed the scope of a short essay, the many works of Murray Bookchin and other social ecologists provide rich discussions about the meaning of a directly democratic and ecological society. From the Green Movement, the Anti-Globalization Movement, Occupy Wall Street, to Chile and Spain’s Indignados Movements, communalist ideals have also played a growing role in social and political struggles throughout the world. It is a growing movement in its own right.

Communalism is not a hard and rigid ideology, but rather a coherent, unfolding body of ideas built upon a core set of principles and institutions. It is, by definition, a process — one that is open and adaptable to virtually infinite cultural, historical and ecological contexts. Indeed, communalism’s historical precedents in tribal democracy and town/village assemblies can be found in nearly every corner of the earth.

The era of professional-driven, state “politics” has come to an end. Only grassroots democracy at a global scale can successfully oppose the dystopian future ahead. All the necessary tools are at hand. A great wealth of resources have accumulated during humanity’s many struggles. With it — with communalism — we might remake the world upon humanity’s potential for reason, creativity and freedom.

A Free Society

There is no single blueprint for a municipal movement. Doubtlessly, however, the realization of such free political communities can only come about with fundamental changes in our social, cultural and economic fabric. The attitudes of racism and xenophobia, which have fueled the virulent rise of fascism today in places like the United States, must be combated by a radical humanism that celebrates ethnic, cultural and spiritual diversity. For millennia, sex and gender oppression have denigrated values and social forms attributed to women. These attitudes must be supplanted by a feminist ethic and sensibility of mutual care.

Nor can freedom cannot come about without economic stability. Capitalism along with all forms of economic exploitation must be abolished and replaced by systems of production and distribution for use and enjoyment rather than for profit and sale. The vast, concrete belts of “modern” industrial cities must be overhauled and rescaled into meaningful, livable and sustainable urban spaces. We must deal meaningfully with problems of urban development, gentrification and inequality embodied within urban space.

Just as individuals cannot be separated from the broader political community of which they are a part, human society cannot be separated from our context within the natural world. The cooperative, humanistic politics of communalism thus work hand in hand with a radical ecological sensibility that recognizes human beings a unique, self-conscious part of nature.

While managing our own needs and desires, we have the capacity to be outward-thinking and future-oriented. The Haudenasaunee (Iroquis) Confederacy calls this the “Seven Generations Principle.” According to the Seven Generations Principle, all political deliberations must be made on behalf of the present community — which includes animals and the broader ecological community — for the succeeding seven generations.

Communist predecessors also emerge in large-scale urban communities. From classical Athens to the medieval Italian city-states, direct democracy has a home in the city. In 2015, the political movement Barcelona en Comú won the Barcelona city mayoralty based on a vast, richly layered collective of neighborhood assemblies. Today, they are the largest party in the city-council, and continue to design platforms and policies through collective assembly processes. In Northern Syria, the Kurdish Freedom Movement has established democratic confederalism, a network of people’s assemblies and councils that govern alongside the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

These are just a few examples among countless political traditions that testify to “the great theoretical, organizational and political wealth” that is available to empower people against naked authoritarianism.

Power, administration and citizenship

The most fundamental institution of communalism is the civic assembly. Civic assemblies are regular communal gatherings open to all adults within a given municipality — such as a town, village or city borough — for the purpose of discussing, debating and making decisions about matters that concern the community as a whole.

In order to understand how civic assemblies function, one must understand the subtle, but crucial distinction between administration and decision-making power. Administration encompasses tasks and plans related to executing policy. The administration of a particular project may make minor decisions — such as what kind of stone to use for a bridge.

Power, on the other hand, refers to the ability to actually make policy and major decisions — whether or not to build a bridge. In communalism, power lies within this collective body, while smaller, mandated councils are delegated to execute them. Experts such as

engineers, or public health practitioners play an important role in assemblies by informing citizens, but it is the collective body itself which is empowered to actually *make* decisions.

With clear distinctions between administration and power, the nature of individual leadership changes dramatically. Leaders cultivate dialogue and execute the will of the community. The Zapatistas expresses this through the term *cargo*, meaning the charge or burden. Council membership execute the will of their community, leadership means “to obey and not to command, to represent and not to supplant...to move down and not upwards.”

A second critical distinction between professional-driven politics as usual and communalism is citizenship. By using the term “citizen”, communalists deliberately contradict the restrictive and emptied notion of citizenship invoked by modern-day nation-states. In communal societies, citizenship is conferred to every adult who lives within the municipality. *Every* adult who lives within the municipality is empowered to directly participate, vote and take a turn performing administrative roles. This radical idea of citizenship is based on residency and face-to-face relationships.

Civic assemblies are a living tradition that appear time and again throughout history. It is worth pausing here to consider the conceptual resources left to us by classical Athenian democracy. Admittedly, Athenian society was far from perfect. Like the rest of the Mediterranean world at that time, Athens was built upon the backs of slaves and domesticated women. Nonetheless, Athenian democracy to this day is the most well-documented example of direct, communal self-management:

Agora: The common public square or meetinghouse where the assembly gathers. The agora is home to our public selves, where we go to make decisions, raise problems, and engage in public discussion.

Ekklesia: The general assembly, a community of citizens.

Boule: The administrative body of 500 citizens that rotated once every year.

Polis: The city itself. But here again, the term refers not to mere materiality, but rather to a rich, multi-species and material community. The polis is an entity and character unto itself.

Paeida: Ongoing political and ethical education individuals undergo to achieve arete, virtue or excellence.

The key insight of classical Athenian democracy is that assembly politics are organic. Far more than a mere structure or set of mechanisms, communalism is a synergy of elements and institutions that lead to a particular kind of community and process. Yet assemblies alone do not exhaust communal politics. Just as communities are socially, ecologically and economically inter-dependent, a truly free and ethical society must engage in robust inter-community dialogue and association. Confederation allows autonomous communities to “scale up” for coordination across a regional level.

Confederation differs from representative democracy because it is based on recallable delegates rather than individually empowered representatives. Delegates cannot make decisions on behalf of a community. Rather, they bring proposals back down to the assembly. Charters articulate a confederacy’s ethical principles and define expectations for membership. In this way, communities have a basis to hold themselves and one another accountable. Without clear principles, basis of debate to actions based on principles of reason, humanism and justice.

In the Kurdish Freedom Movement of Rojava, Northern Syria, the Rojava Social Contract is based on “pillars” of feminism, ecology, moral economy and direct democracy. These principles resonate throughout the movement as a whole, tying together diverse organizations and communities on a shared basis of feminism, radical multiculturalism and ecological stewardship.