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Debbie Bookchin  
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# Radical Municipalism

The Future We Deserve

Debbie Bookchin

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*Only a global confederation of rebel cities can lead us out of the death-spiral of neoliberalism towards a new rational society that delivers on the promise of humankind.*

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I am the daughter of two longtime municipalists. My mother, Beatrice Bookchin, ran for city council of Burlington, Vermont thirty years ago, in 1987, on an explicitly municipalist platform of building an ecological city, a moral economy and, above all, citizen assemblies that would contest the power of the nation state. My father is the social theorist and libertarian municipalist, Murray Bookchin.

For many years the left has struggled with the question of how to bring our ideas, of equality, economic justice and human rights, to fruition. And my father's political trajectory is instructive for the argument that I want to make: that municipalism isn't just one of many ways to bring about social change — it is really the only way that we will successfully transform society. As someone who

had grown up as a young communist and been deeply educated in Marxist theory, my father became troubled by the economic, reductionist modes of thinking that had historically permeated the Marxist left. He was searching for a more expansive notion of freedom — not just freedom from economic exploitation, but freedom that encompassed all manner of oppression: race, class, gender, ethnicity.

At the same time, in the early 1960s, it became increasingly clear to him that capitalism was on a collision course with the natural world. Murray believed you could not address environmental problems piecemeal — trying to save redwood forests one day, and opposing a nuclear power plant the next — because ecological stability was under attack by capitalism. That is to say, the profit motive, the grow-or-die ethos of capitalism, was fundamentally at odds with the ecological stability of the planet.

So he began to elaborate this idea that he called *social ecology*, which starts from the premise that all ecological problems are social problems. Murray said that, in order to heal our rapacious relationship to the natural world, we must fundamentally alter social relations. We have to end not only class oppression, we must also end domination and hierarchy at every level, whether it be the domination of women by men, of lesbians, gays and transgender people by straights, of people of color by whites, or of the young by the old.

So the question for him became: How do we bring a new egalitarian society into being? What type of alternative social organization will create a society in which truly emancipated human beings can flourish — and that will heal our rift with the natural world? The question really is: what is the kind of political organization that can best contest the power of the state? And so, in the late 1960s, Murray began writing about a form of organization that he called libertarian municipalism. He believed that municipalism offered a way out of the deadlock between the Marxist and anarchist traditions.

ciety that decades of neoliberalism have foisted upon us to a new rational society that delivers on the promise of humankind, we must create a global network of fearless cities, towns and villages. We deserve nothing less.

Municipalism rejects seizing state power, which we all know from the experiences of the twentieth century to be a hopeless pursuit, a dead end, because the state — whether capitalist or socialist — with its faceless bureaucracy is never truly responsive to the people. At the same time, activists must acknowledge that we won't achieve social change simply by taking our demands to the street. Large encampments and demonstrations may challenge the authority of the state, but they have not succeeded in usurping it. Those who engage only in a politics of protest or organizing on the margins of society must recognize that there will always be power — it does not simply dissolve. The question is in whose hands this power will reside: in the centralized authority of the state, or on the local level with the people.

It is increasingly clear that we will never achieve the kind of fundamental social change we so desperately need simply by going to the ballot box. Social change won't occur by voting for the candidate who promises us a \$15 minimum wage, free education, family leave or offers platitudes about social justice. When we confine ourselves to voting for the lesser of evils, to the bones that social democracy throws our way, we play into and support the very centralized state structure that is designed to keep us down forever.

At the same time, though often overlooked by the left, there is a rich history of direct democracy, of radical politics and self-government by citizens: from ancient Athens to the Paris Commune to the anarchist collectives of Spain in 1936, to Chiapas, Mexico, to Barcelona and other Spanish cities and towns in recent years — and now to Rojava, in northern Syria, where the Kurdish people have implemented a profoundly democratic project of self-rule unlike anything ever seen in the Middle East.

A municipalist politics is about much more than bringing a progressive agenda to city hall, important as that may be. Municipalism — or communalism, as my father called it — returns politics to its original definition, as a moral calling based on rationality,

community, creativity, free association and freedom. It is a richly articulated vision of a decentralized, assembly-based democracy in which people act together to chart a rational future. At a time when human rights, democracy and the public good are under attack by increasingly nationalistic, authoritarian centralized state governments, municipalism allows us to reclaim the public sphere for the exercise of authentic citizenship and freedom.

Municipalism demands that we return power to ordinary citizens, that we reinvent what it means to do politics and what it means to be a citizen. True politics is the opposite of parliamentary politics. It begins at the base, in local assemblies. It is transparent, with candidates who are 100 percent accountable to their neighborhood organizations, who are delegates rather than wheeling-and-dealing representatives. It celebrates the power of local assemblies to transform, and be transformed by, an increasingly enlightened citizenry. And it is celebratory — in the very act of doing politics we become new human beings, we build an alternative to capitalist modernity.

Municipalism asks the questions: What does it mean to be a human being? What does it mean to live in freedom? How do we organize society in ways that foster mutual aid, caring and cooperation? These questions and the politics that follow from them carry an ethical imperative: to live in harmony with the natural world, lest we destroy the very ecological basis for life itself, but also to maximize human freedom and equality.

The great news is that this politics is being articulated more and more vocally in horizontalist movements around the world. In the factory recuperation politics of Argentina, in the water wars of Bolivia, in the neighborhood councils that have arisen in Italy, where the government was useless in assisting municipalities after severe flooding, over and over we see people organizing at the local level to take power, indeed to build a *counterpower* that increasingly challenges the power and authority of the nation state. These movements are taking the idea of democracy and expressing

it to its fullest potential, creating a politics that meets human needs, that fosters sharing and cooperation, mutual aid and solidarity, and that recognizes that women must play a leadership role.

Achieving this means taking our politics into every corner of our neighborhoods, doing what the conservatives around the world have done so successfully in the last few decades: running candidates at the municipal level. It also means creating a minimum program — such as ending home foreclosures, stopping escalating rents and the destabilization of our neighborhoods through gentrification — but also developing a maximum program in which we re-envision what society could be if we could build a caring economy, harness new technologies and expand the potential of every human being to live in freedom and exercise their civic rights as members of flourishing, truly democratic communities.

As a next step, we must confederate, work across state and national borders in developing programs that will address regional and even international issues. This is an important response to those who say that we won't be able to solve great transnational problems by acting at the local level. In fact, it is precisely at the local level where these problems are being solved day in and day out. Even great issues such as climate change can be managed through the confederation of communities that send delegates to manage regional and global issues. We don't need a centralized state bureaucracy to do this. We need to create lasting political institutions at the local level, not merely through political leaders who articulate a social justice agenda, but through institutions that are directly democratic, egalitarian, transparent, fully accountable, anti-capitalist and ecologically aware and that give voice to the aspirations of the people. It will require time and education and the building of municipal assemblies as a countervailing power to the nation state, but this is our only hope of becoming the new human beings needed to build a new society.

This is our time. Around the world people want not merely to survive but to live. If we are to transition from the death-spiral so-