

# **Cities Against Centralization**

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## Communal Cohesion

Nearly 10,000 years ago some very lucky people found a terrific spot by a river in a rich forest not far from major runs of ruminant animals. Catal Hüyük is the name we now use for this site in modern-day Turkey. A city of some 6,000 people emerged, with houses pressed up so tightly against one another, without any streets, that the town was traversed on rooftop. Since these urbanites were capable of planting and harvesting, we call them neolithic. But the inhabitants of Catal Hüyük, the world's oldest known city, survived some 1,000 years overwhelmingly as hunter-gatherers. Such subsistence is usually assumed to reflect a nomadic life-style, not an urban one.

Many other Mesopotamian cities, rooted in fertile river valleys, grew through reliance on improving agricultural techniques such as irrigation. Yet there is evidence of agriculture emerging very early without cities: the Wadi Kubbaniya of prehistoric Egypt were nomads, using the planting and harvesting of crops as just one of many means of survival.

In other words, cities and agriculture do not necessarily require one another. Farming usually becomes a major tool for maintaining settlements in surroundings not so idyllic as Catal Hüyük's. The exceptions do not indicate that the neolithic urban trend wasn't powerful, but they show that there must be other reasons why people pile upon one another besides the need to manage agricultural land.

Humans were not the first species to find that mutual aid and cooperation improved one's chances of survival. Our social flexibility certainly evolved before Catal Hüyük was founded. Probably very early in that city's history people encountered serious health and sanitation problems with the dense living, yet the community stayed together a thousand years. Those who were uncomfortable left, but those who stayed benefited from reduced environmental pressures, superseded by social pressures within a system protecting a large number of families.

Commercial pressures, such as buying cheap and selling dear along trade routes, are often considered of primary importance in the formation of cities. In Western Europe nearly 1,000 years ago, rising population stimulated the rapid growth of towns and cities, which became centers of regional trade and craftwork. Yet commerce, of the kind that in the late middle ages gave magnates of trade and production great political power, was of little importance in the large cities of the ancient world, difficult as this may be to imagine.

Ancient Rome, which didn't develop a commercial port until it was already a major power in Western Europe, was mostly a center of consumption, military bureaucracy, and local production. This is not surprising – a general rule for absolutist territorial states is that their largest cities produce very little. They are parasites: this is how Rousseau described 18th century Paris. There is some parallel to this among citadels of power in our own time: many of our biggest cities consume much more than they produce in tangible goods, even those which began as industrial manufacturing centers. But ancient west Europeans lacked respect for commerce – buying and selling was done but there were no great ancient trading houses, nor a Roman bourgeoisie. Commerce as we know it did not rule the ancient world.

Looking only for the environmental, bureaucratic or commercial pressures that force people together into cities sidesteps what was to them an important cohesive force: community ideology. 2,300 years ago Aristotle protested against describing cities as strictly practical – he felt that strong community was itself a high point of civilization.

Because of natural and human pressures, townspeople come to see unorganized interfamily relations as no longer sufficiently fruitful. There emerges an apparent need for broader discussion of community goals, ethical and practical. The society learns to depend upon this discussion, as well as the benefits of carrying out a community plan and the satisfaction of seeing the results. Participation in this kind of community can become addictive.

There are exceptions of course – there is pervasive evidence of single-family homesteads, hamlets of a few isolated families, and hermits engaging in either tactical or psychological refuge. Most people lived in villages that needed to conduct rather little political discussion on a day-to-day basis. But for others, the special kind of community feeling in those small pre-industrial towns and cities, once tasted, was difficult to get off the palate. When Sparta defeated democratic Manitea, dismantled the city and dispersed the inhabitants to villages, Xenophon suggests that the Maniteans suffered mostly psychologically. When given a chance, they re-declared their city a generation later, under no strictly environmental or commercial pressure to do so. They just wanted their town back.

The city is the psychological and political center for much of recorded history, partly because cities are where records are kept. But it must be admitted that they can foster unusually vigorous social interaction. Urban communities can hold as strong a place in the human imagination as religions, ethnicities, nations, kingdoms or empires. What we today call the Roman empire was in ancient times known primarily as Rome, the Eternal City. To destroy their rivals the Carthaginians, some Roman senators felt they needed to destroy the city of Carthage itself, a difficult, rash, and genocidal deed whose ultimate consequence was the political collapse of the Roman republic.

Many cities developed gradually from villages, castles, churches or ports. But powerful ancient metropolises such as Rome, Carthage and Athens established many cities at one stroke to serve as outposts and colonies. Though quickly constructed for openly territorial purposes, these towns were still meant to satisfy personal cravings for diversity and interaction.

In most pre-industrial towns, ecologically responsible behavior was perfectly compatible with the city's peculiar, vibrant level of regular social contact. To imagine a kind of ecological city, one has to blink away modern urban impressions, and visualize cities based in and served by primarily rural economies, cities that produced goods mostly for their own or their region's consumption and where urbanites helped with their region's harvest. They were proudly local, willing to defend their city's and their region's autonomy. Their casual contact would seem to us today to be overwhelmingly personal. It was in these cities that the original form of politics was born: regular group discussion and face-to-face decision-making. This kind of direct politics has almost disappeared in the mass media demagoguery of the modern age.

Today what we call politics is really statecraft, something done by professional politicians and those who imitate their individualistic manipulations in smaller groups. The change in the use of the word politics, with its root of polis or city, reflects the astounding changes that the world has undergone in the past two hundred years: among them the formation of the modern bureaucratic nation state and the invasion, through modern communication, of corporate values into our social relations. An early example of the original politics, that of the city, can be found in classical Athens.

## The Athenian City-Democracy

An indication of unusually wide political participation in Athens is the torrent of criticism Greek political institutions received from Greek writers allied with the rich. In contrast, Roman institutions, constructed to the advantage of the wealthy, were rarely criticized by contemporary literate Romans.

The Athenian assembly gathered around 40 times a year, attended by as much as 1/4 of the city's population. They were an experienced, politically active group, rich farmer and poor peasant citizens alike. When Theophrastus criticizes peasants, he complains that they inappropriately provide too much detail of assembly meetings to neighbors in the countryside who didn't make the gathering. We'd praise this today as healthy grassroots communications.

A staggering number of Athenian residents were involved in running the city and debating its future. It is difficult to compare its level of participatory democracy to any city of its size since. From the end of the 6th century B.C. for some two centuries, keen attendance at the open assembly, selection by lot of 500 new people every year to serve on the council, juries of up to 1,000 people, and scores of official posts rotating regularly, point to a depth of citizen participation at odds with modern ideas of politics.

Citizens participated broadly not only in decision-making, but in carrying out policy as well. When a decision to go to war was made, it was often a reluctant one since many of the people voting would themselves have to go to battle. Assemblies meeting to choose among such serious options were especially well attended. The close connection between decision and implementation gave demagogues a very difficult time in Athens – no matter how well someone's speeches roused the crowd, if their policies did not work their influence quickly dissolved.

Freedom of speech in Athens meant the freedom to speak and be heard by the entire assembly. It meant the freedom to present legislation and participate in the discussion prior to making decisions. The open public assembly then had full power to act – the assembly even structurally dissolved itself for a short time in 411 B.C. Of course, the bulk of public debate took place outside of the formal meetings, where even non-citizens must have contributed.

A smaller council of 500 did what the full public assembly decided they should do, and these duties changed constantly. This embodied a very important lesson: in responsible government, representatives shouldn't be given blanket power; instead, the full body politic must actively and regularly decide the limits of the officials' powers, to allow for changing circumstances. These specific limits must be determined in person, constraining somewhat the scale at which this kind of assembly system can be used. Athens was a very large body politic, perhaps a hundred thousand citizens, so various mechanisms were found to ensure that officials would not abuse their positions.

Most offices lasted for one year, could not be held twice, and were followed by a public review of behavior in office. Influence mongering was difficult since most offices were filled by a random drawing from among all citizens, i.e. sortition, rather than through campaigning. Not only did this prevent the buying of votes, but culturally it required a deep commitment to educating everyone well enough to be loyal, competent and principled public servants.

Athenians were, in a sense, extremely well educated. This does not mean that they were literate, for this was mostly a verbal, interactive age. For these Greeks, education was not a systematic program of lectures and exams leading to certification, but rather the regular lessons and tests of

daily life. In such an active political community no one could be shut out of unofficial discussion, since the future responsibilities of the average citizen would be very great.

This immersion into community life was what developed the distinctive individual. Rather than mold the citizen through the homogenization of formal education, as Sparta did, the Athenians felt that individual character and original opinion must develop in order to best serve the city. A follower adds less than an independent, thinking individual, enlivening important discussions on community direction. This was the purpose of education, or *paideia*. Nietzsche's complaint that genius can develop only against the community doesn't take into account Athenian ideals of personal development, and instead reflects the fear, among his generation's elite, of the emerging impersonal era of mass politics.

Athenians not only encouraged individual ability – laws often required paid officials or jurors to take some stand in a debate – they also fought the creation of state structures that would limit the citizen. Athens had no bureaucracy to speak of, making the phrase "city-state" now applied to it seem inappropriate. The small administration changed every year. The judicial system was not run by judges, but by juries that were extremely large, discouraging bribery, and which were paid by the city and selected by lot. They were diversely constituted and empowered to interpret law, evidence, custom and notions of justice in whatever way they felt fair. Yet courts were called only as a last resort in resolving a conflict: prosecutors were fined if unsuccessful, cutting down on unnecessary legal proceedings, and the overwhelming social preference was settlement through informal mediation or sometimes arbitration. Citizens over sixty years old were expected to make themselves available to anyone needing mediation.

At every turn we see Athenians resisting state structure. They considered the maintenance of standing armies in times of peace a waste of the individual. In the end, however, they maintained a small empire, in part because of the employment opportunities its navy offered some of its poorer citizens. This was something of a circular trap they inherited: the poor could find few other jobs mostly because of the import of slaves captured in imperial looting.

Even within their empire the Athenians tried to convert others to a direct democratic model of government, and in most subject cities they counted on the support of the poor and the hostility of the rich. They were well aware that their social and political achievements were unique – the theme runs through the best of Greek drama. But their ideas of progress and empire were not boundless. For example, unlike many later empires they were acutely aware of the limited ability of their local ecology to sustain them.

Athens was the political center of a rural region, more like a modern county than a city, with most of its wealthiest and poorest citizens living directly off the land. Since the citizens of Athens were overwhelmingly agriculturalists, it should not be surprising that self-reliance was the mark of success in this city. In fact, those who did not grow their own food were considered politically suspect – how could they form an independent judgement if they were not independent in life? Because many of those who were not independent were urban manual workers, this thinking is often misinterpreted as some general Greek disparagement of work, brought on by the over-dependence on slave labor. It was instead a disparagement of producers who were totally dependent on buyers, and of employee-employer dependent relationships. Most wealthy and poor citizens worked very hard for themselves and for the community.

The community was of course not always united and cooperative. The Greeks were keenly aware of the battle between rich and poor. The rich often put up much money to hold festivals,

developing a patron-client relationship in city and countryside. This largesse was encouraged, and its influence held in check, by Athens' diverse political body.

Although it never developed the level of urban democracy Athens did, Rome experienced a warping of a similar patron-client relationship, one which took political power away from the poor and accountability away from the rich, a consequence of self-sustaining wars. This is the urban political atmosphere that spawned the gratuitous destruction and enslavement of Carthage, leading to a burden on Rome's poor and an attempt by the Gracchi brothers to relieve it.

## Reforming the Republic

Roman tombstones always list the state offices held by the deceased during their lives, and classical Athenian tombstones never do. The rich in the city of Rome aspired to the bureaucracy, to powerful official positions that emerged from centuries of military growth. A magistrate's imperium, with its root sense of command, allowed him to issue arbitrary punishments against the populace without appeal. This is a very long way from Athenian direct democracy.

In Rome the Republic held assemblies, but there was little discussion of issues. The existence of the assembly merely maintained a fiction of popular power. Citizens could only vote on legislation and candidates presented to them through the senate. The assembly became just another arena for political maneuvering among a corrupt elite, of a kind we are very familiar with today.

The senate was the key decision-making body of the Roman republic, basically an extremely exclusive lifelong club. There were no ways to work within the system: Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus attributed what early victories were made by the poor to riots and demonstrations.

The rulers of republican Rome succeeded in professionalizing politics, in making it less personal. In parallel, the poor lost their sense of community power, and very often community concern, at the center of this growing military-bureaucracy. It's easy to understand the classical difference between democracies and republics – in one the masses act, in the other they are acted for. But among representatives they occasionally find a champion.

Around 135 B.C. Tiberius Gracchus was elected a tribune of the people. He was unusually sensitive to his role, and risked a great deal to try to repair the lot of the poor Roman citizen. Tiberius prepared legislation and proposals, for the approval of the open popular assembly, within what was traditionally considered the territory of the senatorial elite – a strategy for power redistribution that modern radical politicians might pursue. He had the assembly vote to remove from office tribunes in the pockets of the rich. He passed reforms to redistribute lands to the peasants, lands that had been taken by the rich to create plantations farmed with the new slaves from Carthage. For his trouble Tiberius was clubbed to death by a mob of senators.

Gaius Gracchus, Tiberius' brother, was later elected tribune and pursued the same course – but he managed to create a serious problem for the elite of the Roman state by passing laws to remove the senate from complete power over the judicial system. He was assassinated by senate interests, and the city plunged into increasingly violent struggles for power until Augustus established himself as Rome's first Emperor.

The popular romantic notion that the senatorial republicans were in some way the "good guys" versus dictators and emperors, must be displaced by the evidence that it was the republican patricians' resistance to democratic reform, both urban and rural, that led to the destruction of stable city politics and eventually to Imperial rule.

## Medieval Tensions

Around the 5th century, with the final collapse in western Europe of the Roman empire and its formalisms and codes, came the widespread community reassertion of informal local custom. Custom was both locally distinctive and unwritten. Throughout the middle ages most political, legal and economic systems were flexible: indeed those three aspects were never considered individually. It was not until just before the early modern period in Europe, an era we associate with the Renaissance, that rigidity, formality and statecraft began again to seriously take hold of daily life.

Informal custom and local common sense were the primary guides for people in the middle ages, a time of unusually pervasive collective rule. This does not mean that an egalitarian ideology prevailed: a loose hierarchy was generally accepted as natural. But anyone with power had to consult and come to agreement with their community. The basis of these communities were assemblies, either town assemblies where everyone could make themselves heard, or assemblies of nobles or representatives meeting with a king. The idea of hierarchy wasn't much questioned as long as the people in power acted responsibly, and as long as it was possible to check corruption. If rulers overtaxed those who provided their food, they might starve, so there were strong and deeply felt social obstacles to abuse. When there was abuse, it was considered the duty of those below to get rid of the abuser, despite lower social rank. It was at this time when we first see the word 'commune' take on its radical connotations: communities asserted themselves against the rising nobility.

With population increases leading to a strengthening of the formality of lordships and kingdoms in the 13th century, we see an increase in charters declaring town rights. These were typically explanations of existing custom presented to the nobility. Gradually the habit of consulting with the community at large gave way to government by committee, where not only did people need to evaluate their trust in nobility, but also their trust in representatives attending various, nearly invisible, small meetings. The transition to "committeism" was a subtle one, and though it surely seemed natural, it allowed bureaucracies to organize decision-making without involving the public.

Yet even in these growing states popular pressure could easily assert itself. Many communities and groups were easily organized in medieval times, through the informal 12th century guilds of family, friends, parish or craft, as well as through the more formal alliances of later centuries. There was no topic truly outside an organized community's domain: justice, public ownership, economic restrictions, parish priests, or revolt. When decisions were made, strong unanimity was most highly regarded, compromising consensus was accepted if unanimity was impossible, and voting was considered a distasteful necessity on occasion. Overall their cooperative decisions were successful in keeping harsh domination in check.

In prehistoric times, towns like Catal Hüyük survived because they represented advantageous cooperation, and the same can be said of many medieval towns and cities. But if their neighborhoods were run by conflicting crafts or families, the cities needed to form complex governments to deal with internal conflict – otherwise they would not continue to enjoy the benefits of communal living. Sometimes these actions led to further erosion of communal custom. In Italian communes a town leader, the *podestà*, was often elected from outside, so as not to be partisan to neighborhood family disputes. But an outsider could not maintain custom and would lean increasingly on Roman and church-inspired formalisms.

The necessary alliances of different interests within a city made associations between cities a natural extension of politics. Cities often formed leagues in defence against alliances of nobility. Many were temporary, such as the Lombard League of the independent communes of Northern Italy, whose sole purpose was to push out the German King Frederick Barbarossa in the 12th century. Other alliances, such as the 2nd Rhenish League and the Swiss Confederation, aimed for more permanent mutual support against the taxes and controls of Kings, Emperors and Barons.

Most significant medieval history may be seen freshly as the actions of alliances, and with this in mind we can see emerging awareness of the problems with territorial centralization. When King John was forced by a league of rebel Barons to sign the Magna Carta in 1215, the point was unrelated to modern democracy, and was instead the maintenance of local authorities against the King's abusive centralizing tendencies. Local control was maintained through an alliance against the center. Kings and Emperors were often elected positions, or treated as such, and the Magna Carta was just one of many charters written at the time asserting the customary collective responsibilities of people on different levels of a hierarchy.

Cooperative associations were both pervasive and manifold in medieval times. In Bologna, a town where many teachers and students gathered as early as the 11th century, students felt cheated by both teachers who did not cover much ground and by townspeople who overcharged for lodging, clothing, food and books. The students formed a union, modeled after the guilds, hence the name Universitas, University, meaning "all of us" – a medieval alliance still with us in greatly modified form.

In the 14th century many large scale alliances and interests became formalized. The Church, nobles and patricians formed estate committees to check the King's power within government. Demands for structural reform arose, even demands to be freed from the hierarchy. Switzerland is of course a prime example. In France in the 1350's Etienne Marcel tried to unite merchants, artisans and the peasants of the Jacquerie rebellions through the 3rd estate, an assembly meant to represent everyone neither noble nor clerical. His attempt to create a union against the King and nobility is of the same trend as Wat Tyler's successful British peasant revolt in 1381, and Cola di Rienzi's insurgent government in Rome in 1347. Cola called for an Italian confederation of communes, and 25 Guelf towns sent him representatives.

As trade increased and cities grew, monarchs tried whenever possible to tax their wealth, setting the economy of the cities against the territorial state. Many, such as the free cities within the Hapsburg Empire and their various leagues, resisted and maintained commercially supported independence for centuries. However, the wealthy classes within the cities generally made political amends with the royalty of the solidifying territorial states, often against the interests of peasants or rural barons. The territorial states swallowed the cities, their wealthy merchants, independent artisans and working poor alike. Urban governments then tended towards tyranny, maintained by gun and guile, and were plagued by insurrection.

Unfortunately for absolutist states, they were in the end unable to digest all the forces represented by cities, and it wasn't until the failure of absolutism that new models of the territorial state could emerge. And these new models had far more potential for centralization than any previously.

## Modern Times

In France, where royal absolutism was most developed, the Bourbon Kings regularly taxed commerce beyond the economy's limits, making merchants pine for a constitutionally limited monarchy, like Britain's. Revolution against the Stuart Kings in the 17th century had weakened the British monarchy, and this unfettered the merchant economy. Government support for import and export set the stage for the massive textile production of the industrial revolution.

The French monarchy went bankrupt in their support for the American Revolution against rival Britain. The ensuing dissatisfaction with the Bourbon administration was one of the causes of the French revolution. Contempt for a monarch's centralizing tendencies was nothing new: the medieval rich were a united class only in the face of peasant rebellions. Positions like the prime minister, originally the King's valet, smacked too much of the kingdom as an extension of the King's household, and angered nobles who felt that power within their own households was then undermined.

Aristocratic discontent created opportunities for the bourgeoisie, the extremely wealthy, free-thinking group that had evolved around commerce. With the support of the masses the modern alliance of urban insurrection with social revolution was forged. This opened the door, which the bourgeois then tried to shut, on a wildly democratic, revolutionary experiment in the heart of the former absolutism: the Paris commune of the sans-culottes. By 1792, sectional assemblies all over the city were opened to every class, and the poor were paid to attend. The sections ran their own police, relief and defense against the reacting aristocracy. The assemblies succeeded in maintaining the economy and judiciary for their sections, but within two years they were betrayed by the hardening revolutionary government under Robespierre.

With the revolution came a major component of modern centralization: patriotism. In France, the revolution gave a bigger portion of the population than ever before a feeling of having a stake in their country, more than could have ever been possible under Kings. This patriotism allowed Napoléon to tear through Europe's aristocracies, and develop what was at the time unprecedented central authority.

The downfall of royal power, and the emergence of an urban-based professional class of bourgeois politician, made room for a new economic trend. By the middle of the 19th century, after Britain's successes in the cotton trade, industrialism began to take hold, supported by capital and nations in a force that is one of the most destructive of modern times: self-sustaining growth.

Transport costs had kept inland exploitation in check for centuries: the situation in 1800 was barely better than it was in ancient times, when it was cheaper to ship from Constantinople to Spain than overland 75 miles. But the railroad, invented originally to haul coal, opened the land for exploitation of people and resources. The return on money invested was phenomenal, making possible the colonization of both inland Europe and what was to become the third world.

Expectations for investment returns were high, and the economic pressure on borrowed money has continued to drive capital and technology into every corner of natural and human existence. For the sake of profit, ancient life-styles were uprooted, spawning romanticism, starvation, migration and the dissolution of medieval agrarian self-sufficiency. When the economy slowed down towards the end of the 19th century, formally laissez-faire states began to panic and compete with each other for markets and resources, leading to wars in the 20th century of unprecedented violence.

Transactions within the tight trading districts of cities facilitated this growth, but cities cannot be completely blamed for the new economies. The industrial revolution started in the countryside, spawning new cities as it grew successful. Cities and their citizens can most usefully be seen as tools of the process, but not passive ones: they resisted many changes along the way.

Artisans involved in export production, such as home weavers who were paid to use hand looms well into the industrial revolution, were completely lost as automation began to take over. Their resistance had a major impact on the first half of the 19th century, such as in the nationally organized Chartist movement in Britain, and in most of the revolutions leading to the continent wide rebellions in 1848. Guilds, and later labor unions, were often banned because of the insurrectionary potential of artisans, and central city police forces now first appeared to put down riots over food and living/working conditions. Rioting occurred more often in cities than in the countryside in part because there were more obvious sites for protest. The rural situation was much worse, however. In Ireland the famine of 1846-1848, during which one million died and another million emigrated, was a consequence of the pressure for rents by absentee landlords. The pressure forced Irish peasants into dependence on the highest yield crop of the day: the potato.

A civic resistance now fought the massive centralization taking place for the sake of capital. In the worst of times in Europe, both before the 1848 revolts and after the depression starting in the 1870's, mutual aid societies, revolutionary organizations and socialist groups pushed their way onto the political stage, leading many nationalist movements and toppling many monarchs. These groups pushed for democracy, usually in the form of electoral republicanism. It must be pointed out that modern democracy developed in reaction to capitalism, mostly in the second half of the 19th century, and in spite of the hesitance of a liberal commercial class who at the time paid mostly lip-service to equal rights.

The corporate elite looked for easier game to exploit than the newly enfranchised people in their own countries. They began to look towards overseas conquest, and the popular support it would bring in the industrialized world. This mix of mass politics and gunboat economic growth ended in territorial wars among countries no longer satisfied with the kind of sophisticated, bounded political treaties Bismarck was so good at forging in the late 19th century. Industry and capital grew in great leaps, and national ambitions replaced civic ones as cities grew larger and more impersonal. When conditions grew bad enough in cities to affect the wealthy, great expenditure and management was forthcoming, along with ghettos and police to isolate "the problems".

Such local and international exploitation sparked global migration, overwhelmingly to urban centers. Within cities to this day we see very strong immigrant neighborhoods not so easily assimilated to corporate consumer culture. Cities are hotbeds of activism, their problems and density often sparking cooperation that cannot be easily detected, for example, in the suburbs of the United States, where much of the country lives. It is difficult to imagine insurrection in suburbia, with political discussion limited by distances and a prevailing tendency to hire government to do politics and run cities. In suburbia we can see considerable loss of social cohesion, and it has become obvious that, to use Bookchin's phrase, society's grassroots are turning to straw.

When urban governments find themselves without money, as they do today, public volunteerism begins to look more attractive. But officials still hold onto the decision-making power, both because that is what they know how to do and because citizens believe that the city is a business for which one must employ professionals. But what better way to satisfy increasing numbers of volunteer citizens than to give them back the ability to make serious decisions? Decentralized

cities can run with much less money than centrally administered ones because the work that gets done is for your friends and neighbors, who pay you back in similar fashion without participating in the cash network. Athens and the first Paris commune were both such "amateur cities", where the government's role is to help organize, not to force ideas or perform services.

The ideals of city-democracy have not disappeared. Town meetings, still common in New England, have a respectable resonance in US culture, and these kind of assemblies are the key to uniting people on the local level. In confederation it is still possible that assemblies in towns, cities and the countryside can break up the enormous centralized power of wasteful, hulking nation-states.

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