Libertarian Municipalism: An Overview

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of the post-1968 New Left, when the notion of “power” was
divested of utopian or imaginative qualities, is to reduce radi-
calism to yet another subculture that will probably live more
on heroic memories than on the hopes of a rational future.

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Perhaps the greatest single failing of movements
for social reconstruction — I refer particularly to
the Left, to radical ecology groups, and to organi-
zations that profess to speak for the oppressed —
is their lack of a politics that will carry people be-
yond the limits established by the status quo.

Politics today means duels between top-down bureaucratic
parties for electoral office, that offer vacuous programs for “so-
cial justice” to attract a nondescript “electorate.” Once in office,
their programs usually turn into a bouquet of “compromises.”
In this respect, many Green parties in Europe have been only
marginally different from conventional parliamentary parties.
Nor have socialist parties, with all their various labels, exhib-
it any basic differences from their capitalist counter parts.
To be sure, the indifference of the Euro-American public — its
“apoliticism” — is understandably depressing. Given their low
expectations, when people do vote, they normally turn to estab-
lished parties if only because, as centers of power, they can pro-
duce results of sorts in practical matters. If one bothers to vote,
most people reason, why waste a vote on a new marginal orga-
nization that has all the characteristics of the major ones and
that will eventually become corrupted if it succeeds? Witness
the German Greens, whose internal and public life increasingly
approximates that of other parties in the new Reich.

That this “political process” has lingered on with almost no
basic alteration for decades now is due in great part to the in-
eria of the process itself. Time wears expectations thin, and
hopes are often reduced to habits as one disappointment is fol-
lowed by another. Talk of a “new politics,” of upsetting tradi-
tion, which is as old as politics itself, is becoming unconvincing.
For decades, at least, the changes that have occurred in radi-
cal politics are largely changes in rhetoric rather than structure.
The German Greens are only the most recent of a succession of
“nonparty parties” (to use their original way of describing their
organization) that have turned from an attempt to practice grassroots politics — ironically, in the Bundestag, of all places! — into a typical parliamentary party. The Social Democratic Party in Germany, the Labor Party in Britain, the New Democratic Party in Canada, the Socialist Party in France, and others, despite their original emancipatory visions, barely qualify today as even liberal parties in which a Franklin D. Roosevelt or a Harry Truman would have found a comfortable home. Whatever social ideals these parties may have had generations ago have been eclipsed by the pragmatics of gaining, holding, and extending their power in their respective parliamentary and ministerial bodies.

It is precisely such parliamentary and ministerial objectives that we call “politics” today. To the modern political imagination, “politics” is precisely a body of techniques for holding power in representative bodies — notably the legislative and executive arenas — not a moral calling based on rationality, community, and freedom.

A Civic Ethics

Libertarian municipalism represents a serious, indeed a historically fundamental project, to render politics ethical in character and grassroots in organization. It is structurally and morally different from other grassroots efforts, not merely rhetorically different. It seeks to reclaim the public sphere for the exercise of authentic citizenship while breaking away from the bleak cycle of parliamentarism and its mystification of the “party” mechanism as a means for public representation. In these respects, libertarian municipalism is not merely a “political strategy.” It is an effort to work from latent or incipient democratic possibilities toward a radically new configuration of society itself—a communitarian society oriented toward meeting human needs, responding to ecological imperatives, and de-

that is, to be as fully human as possible — and to challenge the existing society in behalf of our shared common humanity, not on the basis of gender, race, age, and the like.

Critics of libertarian municipalism even dispute the very possibility of a “general interest.” If, for such critics, the face-to-face democracy advocated by libertarian municipalism and the need to extend the premises of democracy beyond mere justice to complete freedom do not suffice as a “general interest,” it would seem to me that the need to repair our relationship with the natural world is certainly a “general interest” that is beyond dispute — and, indeed, it remains the “general interest” advanced by social ecology. It may be possible to coopt many dissatisfied elements in the present society, but nature is not cooptable. Indeed, the only politics that remains for the Left is one based on the premise that there is a “general interest” in democratizing society and preserving the planet. Now that traditional forces such as the workers’ movement have ebbed from the historical scene, it can be said with almost complete certainty that without libertarian municipalism, the left will have no politics whatever.

A dialectical view of the relationship of confederalism to the nation-state, an understanding of the narrowness, introverted character, and parochialism of identity-movements, and a recognition that the workers’ movement is essentially dead all illustrate that if a new politics is going to develop today, it must be unflinchingly public, in contrast to the alternative-cafe “politics” advanced by many radicals today. It must be electoral on a municipal basis, confederal in its vision, and revolutionary in its character.

Indeed, in my view, libertarian municipalism, with its emphasis on confederalism, is precisely the “Commune of communes” for which anarchists have fought over the past two centuries. Today, it is the “red button” that must be pushed if a radical movement is to open the door to the public sphere. To leave that red button untouched and slip back into the worst habits
libertarian municipalism becomes little more than “sewer socialism.”

Many heroic comrades who are prepared to do battle (one day) with the cosmic forces of capitalism find that libertarian municipalism is too thorny, irrelevant, or vague to deal with and opt for what is basically a form of political particularism. Our spray-can or “alternative cafe” radicals may choose to brush libertarian municipalism aside as “a ludicrous tactic,” but it never ceases to amaze me that well-meaning radicals who are committed to the “overthrow” of capitalism (no less!) find it too difficult to function politically — and, yes, electorally — in their own neighborhoods for a new politics based on a genuine democracy. If they cannot provide a transformative politics for their own neighborhood relatively modest task — or diligently work at doing so with the constancy that used to mark the more mature left movements of the past, I find it very hard to believe that they will ever do much harm to the present social system. Indeed, by creating cultural centers, parks, and good housing, they may well be improving the system by giving capitalism a human face without diminishing its under lying unfreedom as a hierarchical and class society.

A bouquet of struggles for “identity” has often fractured rising radical movements since SDS in the 1960s, ranging from foreign to domestic nationalisms. Because these identity struggles are so popular today, some of the critics of libertarian municipalism invoke “public opinion” against it. But when has it been the task of revolutionaries to surrender to “public opinion” not even the “public opinion” of the oppressed, whose views can often be very reactionary? Truth has its own life — regardless of whether the oppressed masses perceive or agree on what is true. Nor is it “elitist” to invoke truth, in contradiction to even radical public opinion, when that opinion essentially seeks a march backward into the politics of particularism and even racism. It is very easy to drop to all fours these days, but as radicals our most important need is to stand on two feet —

developing a new ethics based on sharing and cooperation. That it involves a consistently independent form of politics is a truism. More important, it involves a redefinition of politics, a return to the word’s original Greek meaning as the management of the community or polis by means of direct face-to-face assemblies of the people in the formulation of public policy and based on an ethics of complementarily and solidarity.

In this respect, libertarian municipalism is not one of many pluralistic techniques that is intended to achieve a vague and undefined social goal. Democratic to its core and nonhierarchical in its structure, it is a kind of human destiny, not merely one of an assortment of political tools or strategies that can be adopted and discarded with the aim of achieving power. Libertarian municipalism, in effect, seeks to define the institutional contours of a new society even as it advances the practical message of a radically new politics for our day.

Means and Ends

Here, means and ends meet in a rational unity. The word politics now expresses direct popular control of society by its citizens through achieving and sustaining a true democracy in municipal assemblies — this, as distinguished from republican systems of representation that preempt the right of the citizen to formulate community and regional policies. Such politics is radically distinct from statecraft and the state a professional body composed of bureaucrats, police, military, legislators, and the like, that exists as a coercive apparatus, clearly distinct from and above the people. The libertarian municipalist approach distinguishes statecraft — which we usually characterize as “politics” today — and politics as it once existed in precapitalist democratic communities.

Moreover, libertarian municipalism also involves a clear delineation of the social realm — as well as the political realm —
in the strict meaning of the term social: notably, the arena in
which we live our private lives and engage in production. As
such, the social realm is to be distinguished from both the politi-
cal and the statist realms. Enormous mischief has been caused
by the interchangeable use of these terms — social, political,
and the state. Indeed, the tendency has been to identify them
with one another in our thinking and in the reality of everyday
life. But the state is a completely alien formation, a thorn in the
side of human development, an exogenous entity that has in-
cessantly encroached on the social and political realms. Often,
in fact, the state has been an end in itself, as witness the rise
of Asian empires, ancient imperial Rome, and the totalitarian
state of modern times. More than this, it has steadily invaded
the political domain, which, for all its past shortcomings, had
empowered communities, social groupings, and individuals.

Such invasions have not gone unchallenged. Indeed, the con-
flict between the state on the one hand and the political and so-
cial realms on the other has been an ongoing subterranean civil
war for centuries. It has often broken out into the open — in
modern times in the conflict of the Castilian cities (comuneros)
against the Spanish monarchy in the 1520s, in the struggle of
the Parisian sections against the centralist Jacobin Convention
of 1793, and in endless other clashes both before and after these
encounters.

Today, with the increasing centralization and concentration
of power in the nation-state, a “new politics” — one that is
genuinely new — must be structured institutionally around the
restoration of power by municipalities. This is not only neces-
sary but possible even in such gigantic urban areas as New York
City, Montreal, London, and Paris. Such urban agglomerations
are not, strictly speaking, cities or municipalities in the tradi-
tional sense of those terms, despite being designated as such
by sociologists. It is only if we think that they are cities that
we become mystified by problems of size and logistics. Even
before we confront the ecological imperative of physical de-

alectics” is their “method.” The struggle toward creating new
civic institutions out of old ones (or replacing the old ones al-
together) and creating civic confederations is a self formative
one, a creative dynamic formed from the tension of social con-

flict. The effort to work along these lines is as much a part of
the end as the process of maturing from the child to the adult —
from the relatively undifferentiated to the fully differentiated
— with all its difficulties. The very fight for a municipal confed-
eration, for municipal control of “property,” and for the actual
achievement of worldwide municipal confederation is directed
toward achieving a new ethos of citizenship and community,
not simply to gain victories in largely reformist conflicts.

Thus, libertarian municipalism is not merely an effort sim-
ply to “take over” city councils to construct a more “environment-
ally friendly” city government. These adherents or oppo-
nents of libertarian municipalism, in effect, look at the civic
structures that exist before their eyes now and essentially (all
rhetoric to the contrary aside) take them as they exist. Liber-
tarian municipalism, by contrast, is an effort to transform and
democratize city governments, to root them in popular assem-
bles, to knit them together along confederal lines, to appropri-
ate a regional economy along confederal and municipal lines.

In fact, libertarian municipalism gains its life and its integrity
precisely from the dialectical tension it proposes between the
nation-state and the municipal confederation. Its “law of life,” to
use an old Marxian term, consists precisely in its struggle with the
state. The tension between municipal confederations and the
state must be clear and uncompromising. Since these confedera-
tions would exist primarily in opposition to statecraft, they
can not be compromised by state, provincial, or national elections,
much less achieved by these means. Libertarian municipalism
is formed by its struggle with the state, strengthened by this
struggle, indeed defined by this struggle. Divested of this dialec-
tical tension with the state, of this duality of power that must
ultimately be actualized in a free “Commune of communes,”
that is becoming increasingly aware of the low-quality goods and staples that are being foisted on it now.

Libertarian municipalism is a politics that can excite the public imagination, appropriate for a movement that is direly in need of a sense of direction and purpose. The papers that appear in this collection offer ideas, ways, and means not only to undo the present social order but to remake it drastically — expanding its residual democratic traditions into a rational and ecological society.

Addendum

This addendum seems to be necessary because some of the opponents of libertarian municipalism — and, regrettably, some of its acolyte — misunderstand what libertarian municipalism seeks to achieve indeed, misunderstand its very nature.

For some of its instrumental acolytes, libertarian municipalism is becoming a tactical device to gain entry into so-called independent movements and new third parties that call for "grassroots politics," such as those proposed by NOW and certain Labor leaders. In the name of "libertarian municipalism," some radical acolytes of the view are prepared to blur the tension that they should cultivate between the civic realm and the state — presumably to gain greater public attention in electoral campaigns for gubernatorial, congressional, and other state offices. These radicals regrettably warp libertarian municipalism into a mere "tactic" or "strategy" and drain it of its revolutionary content.

But those who propose to use tenets of libertarian municipalism for "tactical" reasons as a means to enter another reformist party or function as its "left wing" have little in common with the idea. Libertarian municipalism is not a product of the formal logic that has such deep roots in left-wing "analyses" and "strategies" today, despite the claims of many radicals that "decentralization (a necessity anticipated by Frederick Engels and Peter Kropotkin alike), we need feel no problems about decentralizing them institutionally. When Francois Mitterand tried to decentralize Paris with local city halls a few years ago, his reasons were strictly tactical (he wanted to weaken the authority of the capital's right-wing mayor). Nonetheless, he failed not because restructuring the large metropolis was impossible but because the majority of the affluent Parisians supported the mayor.

Clearly, institutional changes do not occur in a social vacuum. Nor do they guarantee that a decentralized municipality, even if it is structurally democratic, will necessarily be humane, rational, and ecological in dealing with public affairs. Libertarian municipalism is premised on the struggle to achieve a rational and ecological society, a struggle that depends on education and organization. From the beginning, it presupposes a genuinely democratic desire by people to arrest the growing powers of the nation-state and reclaim them for their community and their region. Unless there is a movement — hopefully an effective Left Green movement — to foster these aims, decentralization can lead to local parochialism as easily as it can lead to ecological humanist communities.

But when have basic social changes ever been without risk? The case that Marx's commitment to a centralized state and planned economy would inevitably yield bureaucratic totalitarianism could have been better made than the case that decentralized libertarian municipalities will inevitably be authoritarian and have exclusionary and parochial traits. Economic interdependence is a fact of life today, and capitalism itself has made parochial autarchies a chimera. While municipalities and regions can seek to attain a considerable measure of self-sufficiency, we have long left the era when self-sufficient communities that can indulge their prejudices are possible.
Confederalism

Equally important is the need for confederation — the interlinking of communities with one another through recallable deputies mandated by municipal citizens’ assemblies and whose sole functions are coordinative and administrative. Confederation has a long history of its own that dates back to antiquity and that surfaced as a major alternative to the nation state. From the American Revolution through the French Revolution and the Spanish Revolution of 1936, confederalism constituted a major challenge to state centralism. Nor has it disappeared in our own time, when the breakup of existing twentieth-century empires raises the issue of enforced state centralism or the relatively autonomous nation. Libertarian municipalism adds a radically democratic dimension to the contemporary discussions of confederation (as, for example, in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia) by calling for confederations not of nation-states but of municipalities and of the neighborhoods of giant megalopolitan areas as well as towns and villages.

In the case of libertarian municipalism’ parochialism can thus be checked not only by the compelling realities of economic interdependence but by the commitment of municipal minorities to defer to the majority wishes of participating communities. Do these interdependencies and majority decisions guarantee us that a majority decision will be a correct one? Certainly not — but our chances for a rational and ecological society are much better in this approach than in those that ride on centralized entities and bureaucratic apparatuses. I cannot help but marvel that no municipal network has been emergent among the German Greens, who have hundreds of representatives in city councils around Germany but who carry on a local politics that is completely conventional and self enclosed within particular towns and cities.

Many arguments against libertarian municipalism — even with its strong confederal emphasis derive from a failure to
interest that must ultimately cut across class, gender, ethnic, and status lines if humanity is to continue to exist as a viable species. This interest is the one created in our times by ecological catastrophe. Capitalism’s “grow or die” imperative stands radically at odds with ecology’s imperative of interdependence and limit. The two imperatives can no longer coexist with each other — nor can any society founded on the myth that they can be reconciled hope to survive. Either we will establish an ecological society, or society will go under for everyone, irrespective of his or her status.

Will this ecological society be authoritarian, or possibly even totalitarian, a hierarchal dispensation that is implicit in the image of the planet as a “spaceship” Or will it be democratic? If history is any guide, the development of a democratic ecological society, as distinguished from a command ecological society, must follow its own logic. One cannot resolve this historical dilemma without getting to its roots. Without a searching analysis of our ecological problems and their social sources, the pernicious institutions that we now have will lead to increased centralization and further ecological catastrophe. In a democratic ecological society, those roots are literally the grass roots that libertarian municipalism seeks to foster.

For those who rightly call for a new technology, new sources of energy, new means of transportation, and new ecological lifeways, can a new society be anything less than a Community of communities based on confederation rather than statism? We already live in a world in which the economy is "overglobalized," overcentralized, and overbureaucratized. Much that can be done locally and regionally is now being done largely for profit, military needs, and imperial appetites — on a global scale with a seeming complexity that can actually be easily diminished.

If this seems too “utopian” for our time, then so must the present flood of literature that asks for radically sweeping shifts in energy policies, far-reaching reductions in air and wa-
federations represents a confrontation between the state and the political realms. This confrontation can be resolved only after libertarian municipalism forms the new politics of a popular movement and ultimately captures the imagination of millions.

Certain points, however, should be obvious. The people who initially enter into the duel between confederalism and statism will not be the same human beings as those who eventually achieve libertarian municipalism. The movement that tries to educate them and the struggles that give libertarian municipalist principles reality will turn them into active citizens, rather than passive “constituents.” No one who participates in a struggle for social restructuring emerges from that struggle with the prejudices, habits, and sensibilities with which he or she entered it. Hopefully, then, such prejudices — like parochialism — will increasingly be replaced by a generous sense of cooperation and a caring sense of interdependence.

Municipalizing the Economy

It remains to emphasize that libertarian municipalism is not merely an evocation of all traditional antistatist notions of politics. Just as it redefines politics to include face-to-face municipal democracies graduated to confederal levels, so it includes a municipalist and confederal approach to economics. Minimally, a libertarian municipalist economics calls for the municipalization of the economy, not its centralization into state-owned “nationalized” enterprises on the one hand or its reduction to “worker-controlled” forms of collectivistic capitalism on the other. Trade-union control of “worker controlled” enterprises (that is, syndicalism) has had its day. This should be evident to anyone who examines the bureaucracies that even revolutionary trade unions spawned during the Spanish Civil War of 1936. Today, corporate capitalism too is increasingly eager to bring the worker into complicity with his or her own exploitation by means of “workplace democracy.” Nor was the revolution in Spain or in other countries spared the existence of competition among worker-controlled enterprises for raw materials, markets, and profits. Even more recently, many Israeli kibbutzim have been failures as examples of nonexploitative, need-oriented enterprises, despite the high ideals with which they were initially founded.

Libertarian municipalism proposes a radically different form of economy one that is neither nationalized nor collectivized according to syndicalist precepts. It proposes that land and enterprises be placed increasingly in the custody of the community more precisely, the custody of citizens in free assemblies and their deputies in confederal councils. How work should be planned, what technologies should be used, how goods should be distributed are questions that can only be resolved in practice. The maxim “from each according to his or her ability, to each according to his or her needs” would seem a bedrock guide for an economically rational society, provided to be sure that goods are of the highest durability and quality, that needs are guided by rational and ecological standards, and that the ancient notions of limit and balance replace the bourgeois marketplace imperative of “grow or die.”

In such a municipal economy — confederal, interdependent, and rational by ecological, not simply technological, standards — we would expect that the special interests that divide people today into workers, professionals, managers, and the like would be melded into a general interest in which people see themselves as citizens guided strictly by the needs of their community and region rather than by personal proclivities and vocational concerns. Here, citizenship would come into its own, and rational as well as ecological interpretations of the public good would supplant class and hierarchical interests.

This is the moral basis of a moral economy for moral communities. But of overarching importance is the general social interest that potentially underpins all moral communities, an