

The Forms of Freedom

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Freedom has its forms. However personalized, individuated or dadaesque may be the attack upon prevailing institutions, a liberatory revolution always poses the question of what social forms will replace existing ones. At one point or another, a revolutionary people must deal with how it will manage the land and the factories from which it acquires the means of life. It must deal with the manner in which it will arrive at decisions that affect the community as a whole. Thus if revolutionary thought is to be taken at all seriously, it must speak directly to the problems and forms of social management. It must open to public discussion the problems that are involved in a creative development of liberatory social forms. Although there is no theory of liberation that can replace experience, there is sufficient historical experience, and a sufficient theoretical formulation of the issues involved, to indicate what social forms are consistent with the fullest realization of personal and social freedom.

What social forms will replace existing ones depends on what relations free people decide to establish between themselves. Every personal relationship has a social dimension; every social relationship has a deeply personal side to it. Ordinarily, these two aspects and their relationship to each other are mystified and difficult to see clearly. The institutions created by hierarchical society, especially the state institutions, produce the illusion that social relations exist in a universe of their own, in specialized political or bureaucratic compartments. In reality, there exists no strictly “impersonal” political or social dimension; all the social institutions of the past and present depend on the relations between people in daily life, especially in those aspects of daily life which are necessary for survival—the production and distribution of the means of life, the rearing of the young, the maintenance and reproduction of life. The liberation of man—not in some vague “historical,” moral, or philosophical sense, but in the intimate details of day-to-day life—is a profoundly social act and raises the problem of social forms as modes of relations between individuals.

The relationship between the social and the individual requires special emphasis in our own time, for never before have personal relations become so impersonal and never before have social relations become so asocial. Bourgeois society has brought all relations between people to the highest point of abstraction by divesting them of their human content and dealing with them as objects. The object—the commodity—takes on roles that formerly belonged to the community; exchange relationships (actualized in most cases as money relationships) supplant nearly all other modes of human relationships. In this respect, the bourgeois commodity system becomes the historical culmination of all societies, precapitalist as well as capitalist, in which human relationships are mediated rather than direct or face-to-face.

THE MEDIATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

To place this development in clearer perspective, let us briefly look back in time and establish what the mediation of social relations has come to mean.

The earliest social “specialists” who interposed themselves between people—the priests and tribal chiefs who permanently mediated their relations—established the formal conditions for hierarchy and exploitation. These formal conditions were consolidated and deepened by technological advances—advances which provided only enough material surplus for the few to live at the expense of the many. The tribal assembly, in which all members of the community had

decided and directly managed their common affairs, dissolved into chieftainship, and the community dissolved into social classes.

Despite the increasing investiture of social control in a handful of men and even one man, the fact remains that men in precapitalist societies mediated the relations of other people—council supplanting assembly, and chieftainship supplanted council. In bourgeois society, on the other hand, the mediation of social relations by men is replaced by the mediation of social relations by things, by commodities. Having brought social mediation to the highest point of impersonality, commodity society turns attention to mediation as such; it brings into question all forms of social organization based on indirect representation, on the management of public affairs by the few, on the distinctive existence of concepts and practices such as “election,” “legislation,” “administration.”

The most striking evidence of this social refocusing are the demands voiced almost intuitively by increasing numbers of American youth for tribalism and community. These demands are “regressive” only in the sense that they go back temporally to pre-hierarchical forms of freedom. They are profoundly progressive in the sense that they go back structurally to non-hierarchical forms of freedom.

By contrast, the traditional revolutionary demand for council forms of organization (what Hannah Arendt describes as “the revolutionary heritage”) does not break completely with the terrain of hierarchical society. Workers’ councils originate as class councils. Unless one assumes that workers are driven by their interests as workers to revolutionary measures against hierarchical society (an assumption I flatly deny), then these councils can be used just as much to perpetuate class society as to destroy it. We shall see, in fact, that the council form contains many structural limitations which favor the development of hierarchy. For the present, it suffices to say that most advocates of workers’ councils tend to conceive of people primarily as economic entities, either as workers or nonworkers. This conception leaves the onesidedness of the self completely intact. Man is viewed as a bifurcated being, the product of a social development that divides man from man and each man from himself.

Nor is this one-sided view completely corrected by demands for workers’ management of production and the shortening of the work week, for these demands leave the nature of the work process and the quality of the worker’s free time completely untouched. If workers’ councils and workers’ management of production do not transform the work into a joyful activity, free time into a marvelous experience, and the workplace into a community, then they remain merely formal structures, in fact, class structures. They perpetuate the limitations of the proletariat as a product of bourgeois social conditions. Indeed, no movement that raises the demand for workers’ councils can be regarded as revolutionary unless it tries to promote sweeping transformations in the environment of the work place.

Finally, council organizations are forms of mediated relationships rather than face-to-face relationships. Unless these mediated relationships are limited by direct relationships, leaving policy decisions to the latter and mere administration to the former, the councils tend to become focuses of power. Indeed, unless the councils are finally assimilated by a popular assembly, and factories are integrated into new types of community, both the councils and the factories perpetuate the alienation between man and man and between man and work. Fundamentally, the degree of freedom in a society can be gauged by the kind of relationships that unite the people in it. If these relationships are open, unalienated and creative, the society will be free. If structures exist that inhibit open relationships, either by coercion or mediation, then freedom will

not exist, whether there is workers' management of production or not. For all the workers will manage will be production—the preconditions of life, not the conditions of life. No mode of social organization can be isolated from the social conditions it is organizing. Both councils and assemblies have furthered the interests of hierarchical society as well as those of revolution. To assume that the forms of freedom can be treated merely as forms would be as absurd as to assume that legal concepts can be treated merely as questions of jurisprudence. The form and content of freedom, like law and society, are mutually determined. By the same token, there are forms of organization that promote and forms that vitiate the goal of freedom, and social conditions favor sometimes the one and sometimes the other. To one degree or another, these forms either alter the individual who uses them or inhibit his further development.

This article does not dispute the need for workers' councils—more properly, factory committees—as a revolutionary means of appropriating the bourgeois economy. On the contrary, experience has shown repeatedly that the factory committee is vitally important as an initial form of economic administration. But no revolution can settle for councils and committees as its final, or even its exemplary, mode of social organization, any more than “workers' management of production” can be regarded as a final mode of economic administration. Neither of these two relationships is broad enough to revolutionize work, free time, needs, and the structure of society as a whole. In this article I take the revolutionary aspect of the council and committee forms for granted; my purpose is to examine the conservative traits in them which vitiate the revolutionary project.

It has always been fashionable to look for models of social institutions in the so-called “proletarian” revolutions of the past hundred years. The Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Soviets of 1905 and 1917, the Spanish revolutionary syndicates of the 1930s, and the Hungarian councils of 1956 have all been raked over for examples of future social organization. What, it is worth asking, do these models of organization have in common? The answer is, very little, other than their limitations as mediated forms. Spain, as we shall see, provides a welcome exception: the others were either too short-lived or simply too distorted to supply us with more than the material for myths.

The Paris Commune may be revered for many different reasons—for its intoxicating sense of libidinal release, for its radical populism, for its deeply revolutionary impact on the oppressed, or for its defiant heroism in defeat. But the Commune itself, viewed as a structural entity, was little more than a popular municipal council. More democratic and plebeian than other such bodies, the council was nevertheless structured along parliamentary lines. It was elected by “citizens,” grouped according to geographic constituencies. In combining legislation with administration, the Commune was hardly more advanced than the municipal bodies in the U.S. today.

Fortunately, revolutionary Paris largely ignored the Commune after it was installed. The insurrection, the actual management of the city's affairs, and finally the fighting against the Versailles, were undertaken mainly by the popular clubs, the neighborhood vigilance committees, and the battalions of the National Guard. Had the Paris Commune (the Municipal Council) survived, it is extremely doubtful that it could have avoided conflict with these loosely formed street and militia formations. Indeed, by the end of April, some six weeks after the insurrection, the Commune constituted an “all-powerful” Committee of Public Safety, a body redolent with memories of the Jacobin dictatorship and the Terror, which suppressed not only the right in the Great Revolution of a century earlier, but also the left. In any case, history left the Commune a mere three weeks

of life, two of which were consumed in the death throes of barricade fighting against Thiers and the Versaillese.

It does not malign the Paris Commune to divest it of "historical" burdens it never actually carried. The Commune was a festival of the streets, its partisans primarily handicraftsmen, itinerant intellectuals, the social debris of a precapitalist era, and lumpens. To regard these strata as "proletarian" is to caricature the word to the point of absurdity. The industrial proletariat constituted a minority of the Communards.

The Commune was the last great rebellion of the French sans-culottes, a class that lingered on in Paris for a century after the Great Revolution. Ultimately, this highly mixed stratum was destroyed not by the guns of the Versaillese but by the advance of industrialism.

The Paris Commune of 1871 was largely a city council, established to coordinate municipal administration under conditions of revolutionary unrest. The Russian Soviets of 1905 were largely fighting organizations, established to coordinate near-insurrectionary strikes in St. Petersburg. These councils were based almost entirely on factories and trade unions: there was a delegate for every five hundred workers (where individual factories and shops contained a smaller number, they were grouped together for voting purposes), and additionally, delegates from trade unions and political parties. The soviet mode of organization took on its clearest and most stable form in St. Petersburg, where the soviet contained about four hundred delegates at its high point, including representatives of the newly organized professional unions. The St. Petersburg soviet rapidly developed from a large strike committee into a parliament of all oppressed classes, broadening its representation, demands and responsibilities. Delegates were admitted from cities outside St. Petersburg, political demands began to dominate economic ones, and links were established with peasant organizations and their delegates admitted into the deliberations of the body. Inspired by St. Petersburg, Soviets sprang up in all the major cities and towns of Russia and developed into an incipient revolutionary power counterposed to all the governmental institutions of the autocracy.

The St. Petersburg soviet lasted less than two months. Most of its members were arrested in December 1905. To a large extent, the soviet was deserted by the St. Petersburg proletariat, which never rose in armed insurrection and whose strikes diminished in size and militancy as trade revived in the late autumn. Ironically, the last stratum to advance beyond the early militancy of the soviet were the Moscow students, who rose in insurrection on December 22 and during five days of brilliantly conceived urban guerrilla warfare reduced local police and military forces to near impotence. The students received very little aid from the workers in the city. Their street battles might have continued indefinitely, even in the face of massive proletarian apathy, had the czar's guard not been transported to Moscow by the railway workers on one of the few operating lines to the city.

The Soviets of 1917 were the true heirs of the Soviets of 1905, and to distinguish the two from each other, as some writers occasionally do, is spurious. Like their predecessors of twelve years earlier, the 1917 Soviets were based largely on factories, trade unions and party organizations, but they were expanded to include delegates from army groups and a sizeable number of stray radical intellectuals. The Soviets of 1917 reveal all the limitations of "sovietism." Though the Soviets were invaluable as local fighting organizations, their national congresses proved to be increasingly unrepresentative bodies. The congresses were organized along very hierarchical lines. Local Soviets in cities, towns and villages elected delegates to district and regional bodies; these elected delegates to the actual nationwide congresses. In larger cities, representation to the congresses

was less indirect, but it was indirect nonetheless—from the voter in a large city to the municipal soviet and from the municipal soviet to the congress. In either case the congress was separated from the mass of voters by one or more representative levels.

The soviet congresses were scheduled to meet every three months. This permitted far too long a time span to exist between sessions. The first congress, held in June 1917, had some eight hundred delegates; later congresses were even larger, numbering a thousand or more delegates. To “expedite” the work of the congresses and to provide continuity of function between the tri-monthly sessions, the congresses elected an executive committee, fixed at not more than two hundred in 1918 and expanded to a maximum of three hundred in 1920. This body was to remain more or less in permanent session, but it too was regarded as unwieldy and most of its responsibilities after the October revolution were turned over to a small Council of People’s Commissars. Having once acquired control of the Second Congress of Soviets (in October 1917), the Bolsheviks found it easy to centralize power in the Council of Commissars and later in the Political Bureau of the Communist Party. Opposition groups in the Soviets either left the Second Congress or were later expelled from all soviet organs. The tri-monthly meetings of the congresses were permitted to lapse: the completely Bolshevik Executive Committee and Council of People’s Commissars simply did not summon them. Finally, the congresses were held only once a year. Similarly, the intervals between the meetings of district and regional Soviets grew increasingly longer and even the meetings of the Executive Committee, created by the congresses as a body in permanent session, became increasingly infrequent until finally they were held only three times a year. The power of the local Soviets passed into the hands of the Executive Committee, the power of the Executive Committee passed into the hands of the Council of People’s Commissars, and finally, the power of the Council of People’s Commissars passed into the hands of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party.

That the Russian Soviets were incapable of providing the anatomy for a truly popular democracy is to be ascribed not only to their hierarchical structure, but also to their limited social roots. The insurgent military battalions, from which the Soviets drew their original striking power, were highly unstable, especially after the final collapse of the czarist armies. The newly formed Red Army was recruited, disciplined, centralized and tightly controlled by the Bolsheviks. Except for partisan bands and naval forces, soviet military bodies remained politically inert throughout the civil war. The peasant villages turned inward toward their local concerns, and were apathetic about national problems. This left the factories as the most important political base of the Soviets. Here we encounter a basic contradiction in class concepts of revolutionary power: proletarian socialism, precisely because it emphasizes that power must be based exclusively on the factory, creates the conditions for a centralized, hierarchical political structure.

However much its social position is strengthened by a system of “self-management,” the factory is not an autonomous social organism. The amount of social control the factory can exercise is fairly limited, for every factory is highly dependent for its operation and its very existence upon other factories and sources of raw materials. Ironically, the Soviets, by basing themselves primarily in the factory and isolating the factory from its local environment, shifted power from the community and the region to the nation, and eventually from the base of society to its summit. The soviet system consisted of an elaborate skein of mediated social relationships, knitted along nationwide class lines.

Perhaps the only instance where a system of working-class self-management succeeded as a mode of class organization was in Spain, where anarcho-syndicalism attracted a large number

of workers and peasants to its banner. The Spanish anarcho-syndicalists consciously sought to limit the tendency toward centralization. The CNT (Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo), the large anarcho-syndicalist union in Spain, created a dual organization with an elected committee system to act as a control on local bodies and national congresses. The assemblies had the power to revoke their delegates to the council and countermand council decisions. For all practical purposes the “higher” bodies of the CNT functioned as coordinating bodies. Let there be no mistake about the effectiveness of this scheme of organization: it imparted to each member of the CNT a weighty sense of responsibility, a sense of direct, immediate and personal influence in the activities and policies of the union. This responsibility was exercised with a highmindedness that made the CNT the most militant as well as the largest revolutionary movement in Europe during the interwar decades.

The Spanish Revolution of 1936 put the CNT system to a practical test, and it worked fairly well. In Barcelona, CNT workers seized the factories, transportation facilities and utilities, and managed them along anarcho-syndicalist lines. It remains a matter of record, attested to by visitors of almost every political persuasion, that the city’s economy operated with remarkable success and efficiency—despite the systematic sabotage practiced by the bourgeois Republican government and the Spanish Communist Party. The experiment finally collapsed in shambles when the central government’s assault troops occupied Barcelona in May 1937, following an uprising of the proletariat.

Despite their considerable influence, the Spanish anarchists had virtually no roots outside certain sections of the working class and peasantry. The movement was limited primarily to industrial Catalonia, the coastal Mediterranean areas, rural Aragon, and Andalusia. What destroyed the experiment was its isolation within Spain itself and the overwhelming forces—Republican as well as fascist, and Stalinist as well as bourgeois—that were mobilized against it.

It would be fruitless to examine in detail the council modes of organization that emerged in Germany in 1918, in the Asturias in 1934, and in Hungary in 1956. The German councils were hopelessly perverted: the so-called “majority” (reformist) social democrats succeeded in gaining control of the newly formed councils and using them for counterrevolutionary ends. In Hungary and Asturias the councils were quickly destroyed by counterrevolution, but there is no reason to believe that, had they developed further, they would have avoided the fate of the Russian Soviets. History shows that the Bolsheviks were not the only ones to distort the council mode of operation. Even in anarcho-syndicalist Spain there is evidence that by 1937 the committee system of the CNT was beginning to clash with the assembly system; whatever the outcome might have been, the whole experiment was ended by the assault of the Communists and the Republican government against Barcelona.

The fact remains that council modes of organization are not immune to centralization, manipulation and perversion. These councils are still particularistic, one-sided and mediated forms of social management. At best, they can be the stepping stones to a decentralized society—at worst, they can easily be integrated into hierarchical forms of social organization.

ASSEMBLY AND COMMUNITY

Let us turn to the popular assembly for an insight into unmediated forms of social relations. The assembly probably formed the structural basis of early clan and tribal society until its functions

were pre-empted by chiefs and councils. It appeared as the ecclesia in classical Athens; later, in a mixed and often perverted form, it reappeared in the medieval and Renaissance towns of Europe. Finally, as the "sections," assemblies emerged as the insurgent bodies in Paris during the Great Revolution. The ecclesia and the Parisian sections warrant the closest study. Both developed in the most complex cities of their time and both assumed a highly sophisticated form, often welding individuals of different social origins into a remarkable, albeit temporary, community of interests. It does not minimize their limitations to say that they developed methods of functioning so successfully libertarian in character that even the most imaginative Utopias have failed to match in speculation what they achieved in practice.

The Athenian ecclesia was probably rooted in the early assemblies of the Greek tribes. With the development of property and social classes, it was replaced by a feudal social structure, lingering only in the social memory of the people. For a time, Athenian society seemed to be charting the disastrous course toward internal decay that Rome was to follow several centuries later. A large class of heavily mortgaged peasants, a growing number of serf-like sharecroppers, and a large body of urban laborers and slaves were polarized against a small number of powerful and magnates and a parvenu commercial middle class. By the sixth century B.C., all the conditions in Athens and Attica (the surrounding agricultural region) had ripened for a devastating social war.

The course of Athenian history was reversed by the reforms of Solon. In a series of drastic measures, the peasantry was restored to an economically viable condition, the landowners were shorn of most of their power, the ecclesia was revived, and a reasonably equitable system of justice was established. The trend toward a popular democracy continued to unfold for nearly a century and a half, until it achieved a form that has never quite been equaled elsewhere. By Periclean times the Athenians had perfected their polis to a point where it represented a triumph of rationality within the material limitations of the ancient world.

Structurally, the basis of the Athenian polis was the ecclesia. Shortly after sunrise at each prytany (the tenth day of the year), thousands of male citizens from all over Attica began to gather on the Pnyx, a hill directly outside Athens, for a meeting of the assembly. Here, in the open air, they leisurely disported themselves among groups of friends until the solemn intonation of prayers announced the opening of the meeting. The agenda, arranged under the three headings of "sacred," "profane" and "foreign affairs," had been distributed days earlier with the announcement of the assembly. Although the ecclesia could not add or bring forward anything that the agenda did not contain, its subject matter could be rearranged at the will of the assembly. No quorum was necessary, except for proposed decrees affecting individual citizens.

The ecclesia enjoyed complete sovereignty over all institutions and offices in Athenian society. It decided questions of war and peace, elected and removed generals, reviewed military campaigns, debated and voted upon domestic and foreign policy, redressed grievances, examined and passed upon the operations of administrative boards, and banished undesirable citizens. Roughly one man out of six in the citizen body was occupied at any given time with the administration of the community's affairs. Some fifteen hundred men, chosen mainly by lot, staffed the boards responsible for the collection of taxes, the management of shipping, food supply and public facilities, and the preparation of plans for public construction. The army, composed entirely of conscripts from each of the ten tribes of Attica, was led by elected officers; Athens was policed by citizen-bowmen and Scythian state slaves.

The agenda of the ecclesia was prepared by a body called the Council of 500. Lest the council gain any authority over the ecclesia, the Athenians carefully circumscribed its composition and functions. Chosen by lot from rosters of citizens who, in turn, were elected annually by the tribes, the Council was divided into ten subcommittees, each of which was on duty for a tenth of the year. Every day a president was selected by lot from among the fifty members of the subcommittee that was on duty to the polis. During his twenty-four hours of office, the Council's president held the state seal and the keys to the citadel and public archives and functioned as acting head of the country. Once he had been chosen, he could not occupy the position again.

Each of the ten tribes annually elected six hundred citizens to serve as "judges"—what we would call jurymen—in the Athenian courts. Every morning, they trudged up to the temple of Theseus, where lots were drawn for the trials of the day. Each court consisted of at least 201 jurymen and the trials were fair by any historical standard of juridical practice.

Taken as a whole, this was a remarkable system of social management; run almost entirely by amateurs, the Athenian polis reduced the formulation and administration of public policy to a completely public affair. "Here is no privileged class, no class of skilled politicians, no bureaucracy; no body of men, like the Roman Senate, who alone understood the secrets of State, and were looked up to and trusted as the gathered wisdom of the whole community," observes W. Warde Fowler. "At Athens there was no disposition, and in fact no need, to trust the experience of any one; each man entered intelligently into the details of his own temporary duties, and discharged them, as far as we can tell, with industry and integrity." Overdrawn as this view may be for a class society that required slaves and denied women any role in the polis, the fact remains that Fowler's account is essentially accurate.

Indeed, the greatness of the achievement lies in the fact that Athens, despite the slave, patriarchal and class features it shared with classical society, as a whole developed into a working democracy in the literal sense of the term. No less significant, and perhaps consoling for our own time, is the fact that this achievement occurred when it seemed that the polis had charted a headlong course toward social decay. At its best, Athenian democracy greatly modified the more abusive and inhuman features of ancient society. The burdens of slavery were small by comparison with other historical periods, except when slaves were employed in capitalist enterprises. Generally, slaves were allowed to accumulate their own funds; on the yeoman farmsteads of Attica they generally worked under the same conditions and shared the same food as their masters; in Athens, they were indistinguishable in dress, manner and bearing from citizens—a source of ironical comment by foreign visitors. In many crafts, slaves not only worked side by side with freemen, but occupied supervisory positions over free workers as well as other slaves.

On balance, the image of Athens as a slave economy which built its civilization and generous humanistic outlook on the backs of human chattels is false—"false in its interpretation of the past and in its confident pessimism as to the future, willfully false, above all, in its cynical estimate of human nature," observes Edward Zimmerman. "Societies, like men, cannot live in compartments. They cannot hope to achieve greatness by making amends in their use of leisure for the lives they have brutalized in acquiring it. Art, literature, philosophy, and all other great products of a nation's genius, are no mere delicate growths of a sequestered hothouse culture; they must be sturdily rooted, and find continual nourishment, in the broad common soil of national life. That, if we are looking for lessons, is one we might learn from ancient Greece."

In Athens, the popular assembly emerged as the final product of a sweeping social transition. In Paris, more than two millennia later, it emerged as the lever of social transition itself, as a

revolutionary form and an insurrectionary force. The Parisian sections of the early 1790s played the same role as organs of struggle as the Soviets of 1905 and 1917, with the decisive difference that relations within the sections were not mediated by a hierarchical structure. Sovereignty rested with the revolutionary assemblies themselves, not above them.

The Parisian sections emerged directly from the voting system established for elections to the Estates General. In 1789 the monarchy had divided the capital into sixty electoral districts, each of which formed an assembly of so-called "active" or taxpaying citizens, the eligible voters of the city. These primary assemblies were expected to elect a body of electors which, in turn, was to choose the sixty representatives of the capital. After performing their electoral functions, the assemblies were required to disappear, but they remained on in defiance of the monarchy and constituted themselves into permanent municipal bodies. By degrees they turned into neighborhood assemblies of all "active" citizens, varying in form, scope and power from one district to another.

The municipal law of May 1790 reorganized the sixty districts into forty-eight sections. The law was intended to circumscribe the popular assemblies, but the sections simply ignored it. They continued to broaden their base and extend their control over Paris. On July 30, 1792, the Theatre-Francais section swept aside the distinction between "active" and "passive" citizens, inviting the poorest and most destitute of the sans-culottes to participate in the assembly. Other sections followed the Theatre-Francais, and from this period the sections became authentic popular organs—indeed the very soul of the Great Revolution. It was the sections which constituted the new revolutionary Commune of August 10, which organized the attack on the Tuileries and finally eliminated the Bourbon monarchy; it was the sections which decisively blocked the efforts of the Girondins to rouse the provinces against revolutionary Paris; it was the sections which, by ceaseless prodding, by their unending delegations and by armed demonstrations, provided the revolution with its remarkable leftward momentum after 1791.

The sections, however, were not merely fighting organizations; they represented genuine forms of self-management. At the high point of their development, they took over the complete administration of the city. Individual sections policed their own neighborhoods, elected their own judges, were responsible for the distribution of food, provided public aid to the poor, and contributed to the maintenance of the National Guard. With the declaration of war in April 1792 the sections took on the added tasks of enrolling volunteers for the revolutionary army and caring for their families, collecting donations for the war effort, and equipping and provisioning entire battalions. During the period of the "maximum," when controls were established over prices and wages to prevent a runaway inflation, the sections took responsibility for the maintenance of government-fixed prices. To provision Paris, the sections sent their representatives to the countryside to buy and transport food and see to its distribution at fair prices.

It must be borne in mind that this complex of extremely important activities was undertaken not by professional bureaucrats but, for the most part, by ordinary shopkeepers and craftsmen. The bulk of the sectional responsibilities were discharged after working hours, during the free time of the section members. The popular assemblies of the sections usually met during the evenings in neighborhood churches. Assemblies were ordinarily open to all the adults of the neighborhood. In periods of emergency, assembly meetings were held daily; special meetings could be called at the request of fifty members. Most administrative responsibilities were discharged by committees, but the popular assemblies established all the policies of the sections, reviewed and passed upon the work of all the committees, and replaced officers at will.

The forty-eight sections were coordinated through the Paris Commune, the municipal council of the capital. When emergencies arose, sections often cooperated with each other directly, through ad hoc delegates. This form of cooperation from below never crystalized into a permanent relationship. The Paris Commune of the Great Revolution never became an overbearing, ossified institution; it changed with almost every important political emergency, and its stability, form and functions depended largely upon the wishes of the sections. In the days preceding the uprising of August 10, 1792, for example, the sections simply suspended the old municipal council, confined Petion, the mayor of Paris, and, in the persons of their insurrectionary commissioners, took over all the authority of the Commune and the command of the National Guard. Almost the same procedure was followed nine months later when the Girondin deputies were expelled from the Convention, with the difference that the Commune, and Pache, the mayor of Paris, gave their consent (after some persuasive “gestures”) to the uprising of the radical sections.

Having relied on the sections to fasten their hold on the Convention, the Jacobins began to rely on the Convention to destroy the sections. In September 1793 the Convention limited section assemblies to two a week; three months later the sections were deprived of the right to elect justices of the peace and divested of their role in organizing relief work. The sweeping centralization of France, which the Jacobins undertook between 1793 and 1794, completed the destruction of the sections. The sections were denied control over the police and their administrative responsibilities were placed in the hands of salaried bureaucrats. By January 1794 the vitality of the sections had been thoroughly sapped. As Michelet observes: “The general assemblies of the sections were dead, and all their power had passed to their revolutionary committees, which, themselves being no longer elected bodies, but simply groups of officials nominated by the authorities, had not much life in them either.” The sections had been subverted by the very revolutionary leaders they had raised to power in the Convention. When the time came for Robespierre, Saint-Just and Lebas to appeal to the sections against the Convention, the majority did virtually nothing in their behalf. Indeed, the revolutionary Gravilliers section—the men who had so earnestly supported Jacques Roux and the enragés in 1793—vindictively placed their arms at the service of the Thermidorians and marched against the Robespierrists—the Jacobin leaders, who, a few months earlier, had driven Roux to suicide and guillotined the spokesmen of the left.

FROM “HERE” TO “THERE”

The factors which undermined the assemblies of classical Athens and revolutionary Paris require very little discussion. In both cases the assembly mode of organization was broken up not only from without, but also from within—by the development of class antagonisms. There are no forms, however cleverly contrived, that can overcome the content of a given society. Lacking the material resources, the technology and the level of economic development to overcome class antagonisms as such, Athens and Paris could achieve an approximation of the forms of freedom only temporarily—and only to deal with the more serious threat of complete social decay. Athens held on to the ecclesia for several centuries, mainly because the polis still retained a living contact with tribal forms of organization; Paris developed its sectional mode of organization for a period of several years, largely because the sans-culottes had been precipitously swept to the head of the revolution by a rare combination of fortunate circumstances. Both the ecclesia and the sections were undermined by the very conditions they were intended to check—property, class

antagonisms and exploitation—but which they were incapable of eliminating. What is remarkable about them is that they worked at all, considering the enormous problems they faced and the formidable obstacles they had to overcome.

It must be borne in mind that Athens and Paris were large cities, not peasant villages; indeed, they were complex, highly sophisticated urban centers by the standards of their time. Athens supported a population of more than a quarter of a million, Paris over seven hundred thousand. Both cities were engaged in worldwide trade; both were burdened by complex logistical problems; both had a multitude of needs that could be satisfied only by a fairly elaborate system of public administration. Although each had only a fraction of the population of present-day New York or London, their advantages on this score were more than canceled out by their extremely crude systems of communication and transportation, and by the need, in Paris at least, for members of the assembly to devote the greater part of the day to brute toil. Yet Paris, no less than Athens, was administered by amateurs: by men who, for several years and in their spare time, saw to the administration of a city in revolutionary ferment. The principal means by which they made their revolution, organized its conquests, and finally sustained it against counterrevolution at home and invasion abroad, was the neighborhood public assembly. There is no evidence that these assemblies and the committees they produced were inefficient or technically incompetent. On the contrary, they awakened a popular initiative, a resoluteness in action, and a sense of revolutionary purpose that no professional bureaucracy, however radical its pretensions, could ever hope to achieve. Indeed, it is worth emphasizing that Athens founded Western philosophy, mathematics, drama, historiography and art, and that revolutionary Paris contributed more than its share to the culture of the time and the political thought of the Western world. The arena for these achievements was not the traditional state, structured around a bureaucratic apparatus, but a system of unmediated relations, a face-to-face democracy organized into public assemblies.

The sections provide us with a rough model of assembly organization in a large city and during a period of revolutionary transition from a centralized political state to a potentially decentralized society. The ecclesia provides us with a rough model of assembly organization in a decentralized society. The word “model” is used deliberately. The ecclesia and the sections were lived experiences, not theoretical visions. But precisely because of this they validate in practice many anarchic theoretical speculations that have often been dismissed as “visionary” and “unrealistic.”

The goal of dissolving propertied society, class rule, centralization and the state is as old as the historical emergence of property, classes and states. In the beginning, the rebels could look backward to clans, tribes and federations; it was still a time when the past was closer at hand than the future. Then the past receded completely from man’s vision and memory, except perhaps as a lingering dream of the “golden age” or the “Garden of Eden.”* At this point the very notion of liberation becomes speculative and theoretical, and like all strictly theoretical visions its content was permeated with the social material of the present. Hence the fact that Utopia, from More to Bellamy, is an image not of a hypothetical future, but of a present drawn to the logical conclusion of rationality—or absurdity. Utopia has slaves, kings, princes, oligarchs, technocrats, elites, suburbanites and a substantial petty bourgeoisie. Even on the left, it became customary to define the goal of a propertyless, stateless society as a series of approximations, of stages in which the end in view was attained by the use of the state. Mediated power entered into the vision of the future; worse, as the development of Russia indicates, it was strengthened to the point where the state today is not merely the “executive committee” of a specific class but a human condition. Life itself has become bureaucratized.

In envisioning the complete dissolution of the existing society, we cannot get away from the question of power — be it power over our own lives, the “seizure of power,” or the dissolution of power. In going from the present to the future, from “here” to “there,” we must ask: what is power? Under what conditions is it dissolved? And what does its dissolution mean? How do the forms of freedom, the unmediated relations of social life, emerge from a statified society, a society in which the state of unfreedom is carried to the point of absurdity — to domination for its own sake?

We begin with the historical fact that nearly all the major revolutionary upheavals began spontaneously: witness the three days of “disorder” that preceded the take-over of the Bastille in July 1789, the defense of the artillery in Montmartre that led to the Paris Commune of 1871, the famous “five days” of February 1917 in Petrograd, the uprising of Barcelona in July 1936, the takeover of Budapest and the expulsion of the Russian army in 1956. Nearly all the great revolutions came from below, from the molecular movement of the “masses,” their progressive individuation and their explosion — an explosion which invariably took the authoritarian “revolutionists” completely by surprise.

There can be no separation of the revolutionary process from the revolutionary goal. A society based on self-administration must be achieved by means of self-administration. This implies the forging of a self (yes, literally a forging in the revolutionary process) and a mode of administration which the self can possess. If we define “power” as the power of man over man, power can only be destroyed by the very process in which man acquires power over his own life and in which he not only “discovers” himself but, more meaningfully, formulates his selfhood in all its social dimensions.

Freedom, so conceived, cannot be “delivered” to the individual as the “end product” of a “revolution” — much less as a “revolution” achieved by social-philistines who are hypnotized by the trappings of authority and power. The assembly and community cannot be legislated or decreed into existence. To be sure, a revolutionary group can purposively and consciously seek to promote the creation of these forms; but if assembly and community are not allowed to emerge organically, if their growth is not instigated, developed and matured by the social processes at work, they will not be really popular forms. Assembly and community must arise from within the revolutionary process itself; indeed, the revolutionary process must be the formation of assembly and community, and with it, the destruction of power. Assembly and community must become “fighting words,” not distant panaceas. They must be created as modes of struggle against the existing society, not as theoretical or programmatic abstractions.

It is hardly possible to stress this point strongly enough. The future assemblies of people in the block, the neighborhood or the district — the revolutionary sections to come — will stand on a higher social level than all the present-day committees, syndicates, parties and clubs adorned by the most resounding “revolutionary” titles. They will be the living nuclei of Utopia in the decomposing body of bourgeois society. Meeting in auditoriums, theaters, courtyards, halls, parks and — like their forerunners, the sections of 1793 — in churches, they will be the arenas of de-massification, for the very essence of the revolutionary process is people acting as individuals.

At this point the assembly may be faced not only with the power of the bourgeois state—the famous problem of “dual power”—but with the danger of the incipient state. Like the Paris sections, it will have to fight not only against the Convention, but also against the tendency to create mediated social forms.* The factory committees, which will almost certainly be the forms that will take over industry, must be managed directly by workers’ assemblies in the factories.

By the same token, neighborhood committees, councils and boards must be rooted completely in the neighborhood assembly. They must be answerable at every point to the assembly; they and their work must be under continual review by the assembly; and finally, their members must be subject to immediate recall by the assembly. The specific gravity of society, in short, must be shifted to its base—the armed people in permanent assembly.

As long as the arena of the assembly is the modern bourgeois city, the revolution is faced with a recalcitrant environment. The bourgeois city, by its very nature and structure, fosters centralization, massification and manipulation. Inorganic, gargantuan, and organized like a factory, the city tends to inhibit the development of an organic, rounded community. In its role as the universal solvent, the assembly must try to dissolve the city itself.

We can envision young people renewing social life just as they renew the human species. Leaving the city, they begin to found the nuclear ecological communities to which older people repair in increasing numbers. Large resource pools are mobilized for their use; careful ecological surveys and suggestions are placed at their disposal by the most competent and imaginative people available. The modern city begins to shrivel, to contract and to disappear, as did its ancient progenitors millennia earlier. In the new, rounded ecological community, the assembly finds its authentic environment and true shelter. Form and content now correspond completely. The journey from “here” to “there,” from sections to ecclesia, from cities to communities, is completed. No longer is the factory a particularized phenomenon; it now becomes an organic part of the community. In this sense, it is no longer a factory. The dissolution of the factory into the community completes the dissolution of the last vestiges of property, of class, and, above all, of mediated society into the new polis. And now the real drama of human life can unfold, in all its beauty, harmony, creativity and joy.

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Murray Bookchin
The Forms of Freedom
January 1968

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