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Toward a New Kind of Political Practice

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There are two ways to look at the word “politics.” The first—and most conventional—is to describe politics as a fairly exclusive, generally professionalized system of power interactions in which specialists whom we call “politicians” formulate decisions that affect our lives and administer these decisions through governmental agencies and bureaucrats.

These “politicians” and their “politics” are generally regarded with a certain measure of contempt by many Americans. They come to power partly through “parties,” which are highly structured bureaucracies, and profess to “represent” people—at times, one person for vast numbers of people such as Congressmen and Senators. They are “elected” and belong to “the Elect” (to translate an old religious term into a “political” one), and, in this sense, form a distinct hierarchical elite however much they profess to “speak” in “the People’s” name. They are not “the People.” They are its “representatives” at best, which sets them apart from the people, and its manipulators at worst, which often sets them against the people. Quite often, they are very offensive creatures because they

engage in manipulative, immoral, and elitist practices, using mass media and normally betraying some of their most basic programmatic commitments to “serve” the people. Rather, they tend to serve special interest groups, usually well-heeled moneyed ones, who are likely to advance their careers and material well-being.

This professionalized, elitist, often immoral, and manipulative system of “politics,” which usually makes a mockery of the democratic processes we associate with our traditions, is a relatively new political conception. It arose with the Nation-State several hundred years ago, when the Absolute monarchs of Europe like Henry VIII in England or Louis XIV in France began to centralize enormous power in their hands, forming the hierarchical states we associate with “Government” and carving out those distinct large-scale jurisdictions we call “nations” from more decentralized jurisdictions such as free cities, confederations of localities, and a variety of feudal domains.

Before the formation of the Nation-State “politics” had a meaning that was very different from the one it has today—and the “powers that be” are doing everything they can to erase the memory of this meaning from our minds. At its best, it meant that people at the community level—in villages, towns, neighborhoods, and cities—managed the public affairs that have since been pre-empted by politicians and bureaucrats. They managed these affairs in direct, face-to-face citizens’ assemblies such as we still encounter in New England town-meetings. At most they elected councils to administer policy decisions which the citizens formulated in their own assemblies. And the assemblies were careful to closely supervise the administrative activities of the councils, recalling “deputies” whose behavior became the object of public disapproval.

Moreover, political life extended beyond citizens’ assemblies to include a rich political culture: daily public discussions in squares, parks, street-corners, educational institutions, open lectures, clubs, and the like. People discussed politics wher-

an ecological politics—not a statist politics structured around parties, bureaucracies, political specialists, and elites. Organic or ecological—in a word, Green—means literally the evolution of a politics of the organism in the very real sense that we begin with the cellular level of social life: the community, be it the neighborhood, city, town, or village, not the abstract “nation” with its imperatives of national parties, bureaucracies, “executives,” and the like. Green politics means that we apply ecological principles and processes to our ways of functioning politically—at grassroots levels in face-to-face, democratic, and popular assemblies. It means an intimate politics that is based on education, not simply mobilization, such that we help to create active, politically concerned, participatory citizens, not passive, privatized, and spectatorial “constituents” who have no control over their destinies. The terrain for this politics is the municipality: neighborhood assemblies, town meetings, community meetings that will turn our own localities into a confederated, inter-linked, and well-organized network of localist institutions—institutions that will act as a countervailing force to the ever-growing centralization and bureaucratization of the Nation-State. Its basic program will be: let the people decide! And it is a program that stems from a distinctly American radical tradition, not a borrowed and refurbished one from abroad.

Weak as they may be, these parallel local institutions in the U.S. are still very much in place. They exist as a democracy within our republic and as a form of indigenous radicalism within our democracy. Our demand should be:

Americans! In an era of ever-growing State centralization and bureaucratization, we demand that we democratize our republic and radicalize our democracy!

self or herself against authority, the desirability of a relative degree of self-sufficiency, the claims of the community against corporate power—the “inalienable” rights of human beings to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” an expression that is notable for the absence of any emphasis on property. Washington’s remoteness as a “national capitol” has been an abiding feature of American political rhetoric and an emphasis on regionalism and localism an abiding ideal.

We have permitted cynical political reactionaries and the spokesmen of large corporations to preempt these basic libertarian American ideals. We have permitted them not only to become the specious “voice” of these ideals such that individualism has been used to justify egotism; the “pursuit of happiness” to justify greed, and even our emphasis on local and regional autonomy has been used to justify parochialism, insularism, and exclusivity—often against ethnic minorities and so-called “deviant” individuals. We have even permitted these reactionaries to stake out a claim to the word “libertarian,” a word, in fact, that was literally devised in the 1890s in France by Elisée Reclus as a substitute for the word “anarchist,” which the government had rendered an illegal expression for identifying one’s views. The proprietarians, in effect—acolytes of Ayn Rand, the “earth mother” of greed, egotism, and the virtues of property—have appropriated expressions and traditions that should have been expressed by radicals but were willfully neglected because of the lure of European and Asian traditions of “socialism,” “socialisms” that are now entering into decline in the very countries in which they originated.

It is time, at long last, that we developed a politics that is not statecraft—a statecraft that the American people already view with deep and justifiable suspicion. It is time, too, that we begin to speak to the American people in the vocabulary of homegrown American radicalism, not German Marxism or Chinese Maoism, a vocabulary that is waning even in Germany and China. Finally, it is time that we develop an organic politics—

ever they came together, as though they were preparing themselves for the citizens’ assemblies. Politics was a form of education, not mobilization; its goal was not only formulating decisions but building character and developing mind. It was a self-formative process in which the citizen body developed not only a rich sense of cohesion but a rich sense of personal selfhood—that indispensable self-development so necessary to foster self-administration and self-management. Finally, the concept of a political culture gave rise to civic rituals, festivals, celebrations, and shared expressions of joy and mourning that provided every locality, be it a village, town, neighborhood, or city, with a sense of personality and identity, one which supported individual uniqueness rather than subordinated it to the collective.

Such politics, in effect, was organic and ecological rather than “structural” in the top-down sense of the word. It was a continual process, not a fixed and limited “event” such as we encounter on “election days.” The citizen developed personally as a result of his or her political involvement because of the wealth of discussion and interaction it entailed and the sense of empowerment it engendered. Citizens correctly believed that they had control over their destinies and could determine their fate—not that it was predetermined for them by people and forces over which they had no control. This feeling was mutualistic: the political domain reinforced the personal by giving it a sense of power, and the personal domain reinforced the political by supporting it with a sense of loyalty. In this reciprocal process, the individual “I” and the collective “we” were not subordinated to each other, but each nourished the other. The public sphere provided the collective base and soil for the development of strong personal characters and the latter united together to form the contours and domain of a strong public sphere.

It remains to emphasize that such free communities did not always or necessarily dissolve into self-contained, mutually ex-

clusive, and parochial units. They often networked with each other to coordinate their decisions in a cooperative way. They confederated—initially on the equivalent of what we, today, would designate as a “county” level; later, in many cases, on a regional (perhaps equivalently, in the U.S., on a statewide) level. We have a rich history of such municipal confederations, in some cases structured around grassroots, even neighborhood, control that have yet to be given the study they deserve—and in the U.S. no less than in Europe. In some cases, too, confederal councils coordinated decisions made by local assemblies which at all times formulated policies, while recallable, carefully supervised councils administered them in a purely technical way. Wherever experts were needed to provide strictly technical alternatives, they were organized into advisory boards and, lacking any decision-making powers, advanced various alternatives for consideration, modification, and determination by the citizens’ assemblies in villages, towns, neighborhoods, and cities. And where differences existed, they were simply adjudicated by conference committees or arbitration boards, such as they still are today when different, often conflicting variations of the same law are passed by the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives.

The modern version of what we call “politics,” today, is really statecraft. It emphasizes “professionalism,” not popular control; the monopoly of power by the few, not the empowerment of the many; the “election” of an “Elect” group, not face-to-face democratic processes that involve the people as a whole; “representation,” not participation. We use “politics” to mobilize “constituencies” to achieve preselected goals, not educate them into the self management of society and the formation of the strong selves that make for genuine individuality and personality. We deal with the people as a passive “electorate” whose “political”

task is to ritualistically vote for “candidates” who come from so-called “parties,” not for deputies who are strictly mandated to administer the policies formulated and decided by active citizens. We stress obedience, not involvement—and even distort words like “involvement” to mean little more than a spectatorial stance in which the individual is lost in the “mass” and the “masses” are themselves fragmented into isolated, frustrated, and powerless atoms.

This image of “politics,” as I have indicated, is a fairly recent phenomenon that emerged in Europe in the sixteenth century and made its way into popular consciousness in fairly recent times. It was still not the accepted notion of “politics” in the last century. Quite to the contrary: the Nation-State in France, Spain, Germany, and Italy—and perhaps most significantly, in the United States—still had to make every effort to assert its authority over localities and regions against massive popular resistance. In America, this process is perhaps less complete than most European countries. Our Revolution, two centuries ago, gave enormous powers—initially complete power—to regional and local areas (I refer to our first constitution, The Articles of Confederation, which gave the original thirteen states preemptive authority over the national government—a constitution, I may add, that favored the farmers and urban poor over the wealthy, hence its “ignoble” place in our history texts) and structured our defense around a citizen’s militia, not a professional army.

The reality of early politics persisted for generations even after the Nation-State began to assert itself juridicially. “That is to say, regions and municipalities retained enormous de facto power and provided vital political arenas despite the enactment of laws to diminish their activities and place them under the Nation-State’s sovereignty. The American tradition, often in marked contrast to the European, stresses this ideal of local autonomy and the dangers of excessive State power. That tradition emphasizes the rights of the individual to assert him-