The Meaning of Confederalism

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increasingly authoritarian state institutions and helping to restore an institutionally decentralized democracy.

It will no doubt take a long time to physically decentralize an urban entity such as New York City into authentic municipalities and ultimately communes. Such an effort is part of the maximum program of a Green movement. But there is no reason why an urban entity of such a huge magnitude cannot be slowly decentralized institutionally. The distinction between physical decentralization and institutional decentralization must always be kept in mind. Time and again excellent proposals have been advanced by radicals and even city planners to localize democracy in such huge urban entities and literally give greater power to the people, only to be cynically shot down by centralists who invoke physical impediments to such an endeavor.

It confuses the arguments of advocates for decentralization to make institutional decentralization congruent with the physical breakup of such a large entity. There is a certain treachery on the part of centralists in making these two very distinct lines of development identical or entangling them with each other. Libertarian municipalists must always keep the distinction between institutional and physical decentralization clearly in mind, and recognize that the former is entirely achievable even while the latter may take years to attain.

November 3, 1990

Few arguments have been used more effectively to challenge the case for face-to-face participatory democracy than the claim that we live in a “complex society.” Modern population centers, we are told, are too large and too concentrated to allow for direct decision-making at a grassroots level. And our economy is too “global,” presumably, to unravel the intricacies of production and commerce. In our present transnational, often highly centralized social system, it is better to enhance representation in the state, to increase the efficiency of bureaucratic institutions, we are advised, than to advance utopian “localist” schemes of popular control over political and economic life.

After all, such arguments often run, centralists are all really “localists” in the sense that they believe in “more power to the people” — or at least, to their representatives. And surely a good representative is always eager to know the wishes of his or her “constituents” (to use another of those arrogant substitutes for “citizens”).

But face-to-face democracy? Forget the dream that in our “complex” modern world we can have any democratic alternative to the nation-state! Many pragmatic people, including socialists, often dismiss arguments for that kind of “localism” as otherworldly — with good-natured condescension at best and outright derision at worst. Indeed, some years back, in 1972, I was challenged in the periodical Root and Branch by Jeremy Brecher, a democratic socialist, to explain how the decentralist views I expressed in Post-Scarcity Anarchism would prevent, say, Troy, New York, from dumping its untreated wastes into the Hudson River, from which downstream cities like Perth Amboy draw their drinking water.

On the surface of things, arguments like Brecher’s for centralized government seem rather compelling. A structure that is “democratic,” to be sure, but still largely top-down is assumed as necessary to prevent one locality from afflicting another ecologically. But conventional economic and political arguments against decentralization, ranging from the fate of Perth Amboy’s drinking water to our alleged “addiction” to petroleum, rest on a number of
very problematical assumptions. Most disturbingly, they rest on an unconscious acceptance of the economic status quo.

**Decentralism and Self-Sustainability**

The assumption that what currently exists must necessarily exist is the acid that corrodes all visionary thinking (as witness the recent tendency of radicals to espouse “market socialism” rather than deal with the failings of the market economy as well as state socialism). Doubtless we will have to import coffee for those people who need a morning fix at the breakfast table or exotic metals for people who want their wares to be more lasting than the junk produced by a consciously engineered throwaway economy. But aside from the utter irrationality of crowding tens of millions of people into congested, indeed suffocating urban belts, must the present-day extravagant international division of labor necessarily exist in order to satisfy human needs? Or has it been created to provide extravagant profits for multinational corporations? Are we to ignore the ecological consequences of plundering the Third World of its resources, insanely interlocking modern economic life with petroleum-rich areas whose ultimate products include air pollutants and petroleum-derived carcinogens? To ignore the fact that our “global economy” is the result of burgeoning industrial bureaucracies and a competitive grow-or-die market economy is incredibly myopic.

It is hardly necessary to explore the sound ecological reasons for achieving a certain measure of self-sustainability. Most environmentally oriented people are aware that a massive national and international division of labor is extremely wasteful in the literal sense of that term. Not only does an excessive division of labor make for overorganization in the form of huge bureaucracies and tremendous expenditures of resources in transporting materials over great distances; it reduces the possibilities of effectively recy-
power is to grossly misunderstand the basic political nature of civic life itself, all its malformations notwithstanding. Thus, for Greens to contend in a purely formal and analytical manner — as modern logic instructs that terms like “executive” make the two positions interchangeable is to totally remove the notion of executive power from its context, to reify it, to make it into a mere lifeless category because of the external trappings we attach to the word. If the city is to be seen as a whole, and its potentialities for creating a participatory democracy are to be fully recognized, so provincial governments and state governments in Canada and the United States must be seen as clearly established small republics organized entirely around representation at best and oligarchical rule at worst. They provide the channels of expression for the nation-state — and constitute obstacles to the development of a genuine public realm.

To run a Green for a mayor on a libertarian municipalist program, in short, is qualitatively different from running a provincial or state governor on a presumably libertarian municipalist program. It amounts to decontextualizing the institutions that exist in a municipality, in a province or state, and in the nation-state itself, thereby placing all three of these executive positions under a purely formal rubric. One might with equal imprecision say that because human beings and dinosaurs both have spinal cords, that they belong to the same species or even to the same genus. In each such case, an institution — be it a mayoral, councillor, or selectperson — must be seen in a municipal context as a whole, just as a president, prime minister, congressperson, or member of parliament, in turn, must be seen in the state context as a whole. From this standpoint, for Greens to run mayors is fundamentally different from running provincial and state offices. One can go into endless detailed reasons why the powers of a mayor are far more controlled and under closer public purview than those of state and provincial office-holders.

At the risk of repetition, let me say that to ignore this fact is to simply abandon any sense of contextuality and the environment cling wastes, avoiding pollution that may have its source in highly concentrated industrial and population centers, and making sound use of local or regional raw materials.

On the other hand, we cannot ignore the fact that relatively self-sustaining communities in which crafts, agriculture, and industries serve definable networks of confederally organized communities enrich the opportunities and stimuli to which individuals are exposed and make for more rounded personalities with a rich sense of selfhood and competence. The Greek ideal of the rounded citizen in a rounded environment — one that reappeared in Charles Fourier’s utopian works — was long cherished by the anarchists and socialists of the last century.

The opportunity of the individual to devote his or her productive activity to many different tasks over an attenuated work week (or in Fourier’s ideal society, over a given day) was seen as a vital factor in overcoming the division between manual and intellectual activity, in transcending status differences that this major division of work created, and in enhancing the wealth of experiences that came with a free movement from industry through crafts to food cultivation. Hence self-sustainability made for a richer self, one strengthened by variegated experiences, competencies, and assurances. Alas, this vision has been lost by leftists and many environmentalists today, with their shift toward a pragmatic liberalism and the radical movement’s tragic ignorance of its own visionary past.

We should not, I believe, lose sight of what it means to live an ecological way of life, not merely follow sound ecological practices. The multitude of handbooks that teach us how to conserve, invest, eat, and buy in an “ecologically responsible” manner are a travesty of the more basic need to reflect on what it means to think — yes, to reason — and to live ecologically in the full meaning of the term. Thus, I would hold that to garden organically is more than a good form of husbandry and a good source of nutrients; it is above all a way to place oneself directly in the food web by personally culti-
vating the very substances one consumes to live and by returning to one’s environment what one elicits from it.

Food thus becomes more than a form of material nutriment. The soil one tills, the living things one cultivates and consumes, the compost one prepares all unite in an ecological continuum to feed the spirit as well as the body, sharpening one’s sensitivity to the nonhuman and human world around us. I am often amused by zealous “spiritualists,” many of whom are either passive viewers of seemingly “natural” landscapes or devotees of rituals, magic, and pagan deities (or all of these) who fail to realize that one of the most eminently human activities — namely, food cultivation — can do more to foster an ecological sensibility (and spirituality, if you please) than all the incantations and mantras devised in the name of ecological spiritualism.

Such monumental changes as the dissolution of the nation-state and its substitution by a participatory democracy, then, do not occur in a psychological vacuum where the political structure alone is changed. I argued against Jeremy Brecher that in a society that was radically veering toward decentralistic, participatory democracy, guided by communitarian and ecological principles, it is only reasonable to suppose that people would not choose such an irresponsible social dispensation as would allow the waters of the Hudson to be so polluted. Decentralism, a face-to-face participatory democracy, and a localist emphasis on community values should be viewed as all of one piece — they must assuredly have been so in the vision I have been advocating for more than thirty years. This “one piece” involves not only a new politics but a new political culture that embraces new ways of thinking and feeling, and new human interrelationships, including the ways we experience the natural world. Words like “politics” and “citizenship” would be redefined by the rich meanings they acquired in the past, and enlarged for the present.

It is not very difficult to show — item by item — how the international division of labor can be greatly attenuated by using local...
sublate the two into a conscious form of interdependence between individuals and between the individual and society.

Confederalism is thus a fluid and ever-developing kind of social metabolism in which the identity of an ecological society is preserved through its differences and by virtue of its potential for ever-greater differentiation. Confederalism, in fact, does not mark a closure of social history (as the “end of history” ideologists of recent years would have us believe about liberal capitalism) but rather the point of departure for a new eco-social history marked by a participatory evolution within society and between society and the natural world.

Confederation as Dual Power

Above all, I have tried to show in my previous writings how confederation on a municipal basis has existed in sharp tension with the centralized state generally, and the nation-state of recent times. Confederalism, I have tried to emphasize, is not simply a unique societal, particularly civic or municipal, form of administration. It is a vibrant tradition in the affairs of humanity, one that has a centuries-long history behind it. Confederations for generations tried to countervail a nearly equally long historical tendency toward centralization and the creation of the nation-state.

If the two — confederalism and statism — are not seen as being in tension with each other, a tension in which the nation-state has used a variety of intermediaries like provincial governments in Canada and state governments in the United States to create the illusion of “local control,” then the concept of confederation loses all meaning. Provincial autonomy in Canada and states’ rights in the United States are no more confederal than “soviets” or councils were the medium for popular control that existed in tension with Stalin’s totalitarian state. The Russian soviets were taken over by the Bolsheviks, who supplanted them with their party within

and regional resources, implementing ecotechnologies, resealing human consumption along rational (indeed, healthful) lines, and emphasizing quality production that provides lasting (instead of throwaway) means of life. It is unfortunate that the very considerable inventory of these possibilities, which I partly assembled and evaluated in my 1965 essay “Toward a Liberatory Technology,” suffers from the burden of having been written too long ago to be accessible to the present generation of ecologically oriented people. Indeed, in that essay I also argued for regional integration and the need to interlink resources among eco-communities. For decentralized communities are inevitably interdependent upon one another.

Problems of Decentralism

If many pragmatic people are blind to the importance of decentralism, many in the ecology movement tend to ignore very real problems with “localism” — problems that are no less troubling than the problems raised by a globalism that fosters a total interlocking of economic and political life on a worldwide basis. Without such holistic cultural and political changes as I have advocated, notions of decentralism that emphasize localist isolation and a degree of self-sufficiency may lead to cultural parochialism and chauvinism. Parochialism can lead to problems that are as serious as a “global” mentality that overlooks the uniqueness of cultures, the peculiarities of ecosystems and ecoregions, and the need for a humanly scaled community life that makes a participatory democracy possible. This is no minor issue today, in an ecology movement that tends to swing toward very well-meaning but rather naive extremes. I cannot repeat too emphatically that we must find a way of sharing the world with other humans and with nonhuman forms of life, a view that is often difficult to attain in overly “self-sufficient” communities.
Much as I respect the intentions of those who advocate local self-reliance and self-sustainability, these concepts can be highly misleading. I can certainly agree with David Morris of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, for example, that if a community can produce the things it needs, it should probably do so. But self-sustaining communities cannot produce all the things they need unless it involves a return to a back-breaking way of village life that historically often prematurely aged its men and women with hard work and allowed them very little time for political life beyond the immediate confines of the community itself.

I regret to say that there are people in the ecology movement who advocate a return to a highly labor-intensive economy, not to speak of Stone Age deities. Clearly, we must give the ideals of localism, decentralism, and self-sustainability greater and fuller meaning.

Today we can produce the basic means of life—and a good deal more—in an ecological society that is focused on the production of high-quality useful goods. Yet still others in the ecology movement too often end up advocating a kind of “collective” capitalism, in which one community functions like a single entrepreneur, with a sense of proprietorship toward its resources. Such a system of cooperatives once again marks the beginnings of a market system of distribution, as cooperatives become entangled in the web of “bourgeois rights”—that is, in contracts and bookkeeping that focus on the exact amounts a community will receive in “exchange” for what it delivers to others. This deterioration occurred among some of the worker-controlled enterprises that functioned like capitalist enterprises in Barcelona after the workers expropriated them in July 1936—a practice that the anarcho-syndicalist CNT fought early in the Spanish Revolution.

It is a troubling fact that neither decentralization nor self-sufficiency in itself is necessarily democratic. Plato’s ideal city in the Republic was indeed designed to be self-sufficient, but its self-sufficiency was meant to maintain a warrior as well as a philo-

special to promote who are faced with a community’s problems, but citizens, irrespective of their occupations or workplaces. For once, it will be necessary to transcend the traditional special interests of work, workplace, status, and property relations, and create a general interest based on shared community problems.

Confederation is thus the ensemble of decentralization, localism, self-sufficiency, interdependence—and more. This more is the indispensable moral education and character building—what the Greeks called *paideia*—that makes for rational active citizenship in a participatory democracy, unlike the passive constituents and consumers that we have today. In the end, there is no substitute for a conscious reconstruction of our relationship to each other and the natural world.

To argue that the remaking of society and our relationship with the natural world can be achieved only by decentralization or localism or self-sustainability leaves us with an incomplete collection of solutions. Whatever we omit among these presuppositions for a society based on confederated municipalities, to be sure, would leave a yawning hole in the entire social fabric we hope to create. That hole would grow and eventually destroy the fabric itself—just as a market economy, conjoined with “socialism,” “anarchism,” or whatever concept one has of the good society, would eventually dominate the society as a whole. Nor can we omit the distinction between policy making and administration, for once policy making slips from the hands of the people, it is devoured by its delegates, who quickly become bureaucrats.

Confederalism, in effect, must be conceived as a whole: a consciously formed body of interdependencies that unites participatory democracy in municipalities with a scrupulously supervised system of coordination. It involves the dialectical development of independence and dependence into a more richly articulated form of interdependence, just as the individual in a free society grows from dependence in childhood to independence in youth, only to
withdrawing into themselves at the expense of wider areas of hu-
man consociation.

Confederalism is thus a way of perpetuating the interdepen-
dence that should exist among communities and regions — indeed,
it is a way of democratizing that interdependence without surren-
dering the principle of local control. While a reasonable measure
of self-sufficiency is desirable for every locality and region, con-
federalism is a means for avoiding local parochialism on the one
hand and an extravagant national and global division of labor on
the other. In short, it is a way in which a community can retain
its identity and roundedness while participating in a sharing way
with the larger whole that makes up a balanced ecological society.

Confederalism as a principle of social organization reaches its
fullest development when the economy itself is confederalized by
placing local farms, factories, and other needed enterprises in lo-
cal municipal hands — that is, when a community, however large
or small, begins to manage its own economic resources in an inter-
linked network with other communities. To force a choice between
either self-sufficiency on the one hand or a market system of ex-
change on the other is a simplistic and unnecessary dichotomy. I
would like to think that a confederal ecological society would be a
sharing one, one based on the pleasure that is felt in distributing
among communities according to their needs, not one in which
“cooperative” capitalistic communities mire themselves in the quid
pro quo of exchange relationships.

Impossible? Unless we are to believe that nationalized prop-
erty (which reinforces the political power of the centralized state
with economic power) or a private market economy (whose law of
“grow or die” threatens to undermine the ecological stability of the
entire planet) is more workable, I fail to see what viable alternatives
we have to the confederated municipalization of the economy. At
any rate, for once it will no longer be privileged state bureaucrats
or grasping bourgeois entrepreneurs — or even “collective” capi-
talists in so-called workers-controlled enterprises — all with their

sophical elite. Indeed, its capacity to preserve its self-sufficiency
depended upon its ability, like Sparta, to resist the seemingly
“corruptive” influence of outside cultures (a characteristic, I
may say, that still appears in many closed societies in the East).
Similarly, decentralization in itself provides no assurance that we
will have an ecological society. A decentralized society can easily
go from rigid hierarchies. A striking example is
European and Oriental feudalism, a social order in which princely,
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talists in so-called workers-controlled enterprises — all with their
At the risk of seeming contrary, I feel obliged to emphasize that decentralization, localism, self-sufficiency, and even confederation each taken singly — do not constitute a guarantee that we will achieve a rational ecological society. In fact, all of them have at one time or another supported parochial communities, oligarchies, and even despotic regimes. To be sure, without the institutional structures that cluster around our use of these terms and without taking them in combination with each other, we cannot hope to achieve a free ecologically oriented society.

Confederalism and Interdependence

Decentralism and self-sustainability must involve a much broader principle of social organization than mere localism. Together with decentralization, approximations to self-sufficiency, humanly scaled communities, ecotechnologies, and the like, there is a compelling need for democratic and truly communitarian forms of interdependence — in short, for libertarian forms of confederalism.

I have detailed at length in many articles and books (particularly *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship*) the history of confederal structures from ancient and medieval to modern confederations such as the *comuneros* in Spain during the early sixteenth century through the Parisian sectional movement of 1793 and more recent attempts at confederation, particularly by the Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution of the 1930s. Today, what often leads to serious misunderstandings among decentralists is their failure in all too many cases to see the need for confederation — which at least tends to counteract the tendency of decentralized communities to drift toward exclusivity and parochialism. If we lack a clear understanding of what confederalism means — indeed, the fact that it forms a key principle and gives fuller meaning to decentralism — the agenda of a libertarian municipalism can easily become vacuous at best or be used for highly parochial ends at worst.

What, then, is confederalism? It is above all a network of administrative councils whose members or delegates are elected from popular face-to-face democratic assemblies, in the various villages, towns, and even neighborhoods of large cities. The members of these confederal councils are strictly mandated, recallable, and responsible to the assemblies that choose them for the purpose of coordinating and administering the policies formulated by the assemblies themselves. Their function is thus a purely administrative and practical one, not a policy making one like the function of representatives in republican systems of government.

A confederalist view involves a clear distinction between policy making and the coordination and execution of adopted policies. Policy making is exclusively the right of popular community assemblies based on the practices of participatory democracy. Administration and coordination are the responsibility of confederal councils, which become the means for interlinking villages, towns, neighborhoods, and cities into confederal networks. Power thus flows from the bottom up instead of from the top down, and in confederations, the flow of power from the bottom up diminishes with the scope of the federal council ranging territorially from localities to regions and from regions to ever-broader territorial areas.

A crucial element in giving reality to confederalism is the interdependence of communities for an authentic mutualism based on shared resources, produce, and policy making. If one community is not obliged to count on another or others generally to satisfy important material needs and realize common political goals in such a way that it is interlinked to a greater whole, exclusivity and parochialism are genuine possibilities. Only insofar as we recognize that confederation must be conceived as an extension of a form of participatory administration — by means of confederal networks — can decentralization and localism prevent the communities that compose larger bodies of association from parochially