The Meaning of Confederalism

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tion 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.

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In cities that are transforming themselves into quasi-states, there is still a good deal of leeway in which politics can be conducted along libertarian lines. Already, the executive branches of these urban entities constitute a highly precarious ground — burdened by enormous bureaucracies, police powers, tax powers, and juridical systems that raise serious problems for a libertarian municipal approach. We must always ask ourselves in all frankness what form the concrete situation takes. Where city councils and mayoral offices in large cities provide an arena for battling the concentration of power in an increasingly strong state or provincial executive, and even worse, in regional jurisdictions that may cut across many such cities (Los Angeles is a notable example), to run candidates for the city council may be the only recourse we have, in fact, for arresting the development of 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 distinc-

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 exces-

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 officeholders.

At the risk of repetition, let me say that to ignore this fact is to simply abandon any sense of contextuality and the environment in which issues like policy, administration, participation, and representation must be placed. Simply, a city hall in a town or city is not a capital in a province, state, or nation-state.

Unquestionably, there are now cities that are so large that they verge on being quasi-republics in their own right. One thinks for example of such megalopolitan areas as New York City and Los Angeles. In such cases, the minimal program of a Green movement can demand that confederations be established within the urban area — namely, among neighborhoods or definable districts — not only among the urban areas themselves. In a very real sense, these highly populated, sprawling, and oversized entities must ultimately be broken down institutionally into authentic municipalities that are scaled to human dimensions and that lend themselves to participatory democracy. These entities are not yet fully formed state powers, either institutionally or in reality, such as we find even in sparsely populated American states. The mayor is not yet a governor, with the enormous coercive powers that a governor has, nor is the city council a parliament or statehouse that can literally legislate the death penalty into existence, such as is occurring in the United States today.
of human interaction that is more basic (apart from the family itself) than any level that is expressed in representative forms of governance, where collective power is literally transmuted into power embodied by one or a few individuals. The municipality is thus the most authentic arena of public life, however much it may have been distorted over the course of history.

By contrast, delegated or authoritarian levels of “politics” presuppose the abdication of municipal and citizen power to one degree or another. The municipality must always be understood as this truly authentic public world. To compare even executive positions like a mayor with a governor in representative realms of 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
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 cultivating 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 nutrient. The
soil one tills, the living things one cultivates and consumes,
compost one prepares, all unite in an ecological continuum
to feed the spirit as well as the body, sharpening one’s sensitiv-
ty to the nonhuman and human world around us. I am often
amused by zealous “spiritualists,” many of whom are either pas-
sive viewers of seemingly “natural” landscapes or devotees of
rituals, magic, and pagan deities (or all of these) who fail to real-
ize that one of the most eminently human activities — namely,
food cultivation — can do more to foster an ecological sensibil-
ity (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 decentral-
istic, participatory democracy, guided by communitarian and
ecological principles, it is only reasonable to suppose that peo-
ple would not choose such an irresponsible social dispensation
as would allow the waters of the Hudson to be so polluted. De-
centralism, a face-to-face participatory democracy, and a local-
ist emphasis on community values should be viewed as all of
one piece — they most 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 cul-
ture that embraces new ways of thinking and feeling, and new
human interrelationships, including the ways we experience

If the two — confederalism and statism — are not seen as be-
ing in tension with each other, a tension in which the nation-
state has used a variety of intermediaries like provincial gov-
ernments in Canada and state governments in the United States
to create the illusion of “local control,” then the concept of con-
federation 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 Rus-
sian soviets were taken over by the Bolsheviks, who supplanted
them with their party within a year or two of the October Rev-
olution. To weaken the role of confederal municipalities as a
countervailing power to the nation-state by opportunistically
running “confederalist” candidates for state government — or,
more nightmarishly, for governorship in seemingly democratic
states (as some U.S. Greens have proposed) is to blur the im-
portance of the need for tension between confederations and
nation-states — indeed, they obscure the fact that the two can-
not co-exist over the long term.

In describing confederalism as a whole — as a structure for
decentralization, participatory democracy, and localism — and
as a potentiality for an ever-greater differentiation along new
lines of development, I would like to emphasize that this same
concept of wholeness that applies to the interdependencies be-
tween municipalities also applies to the municipality itself. The
municipality, as I pointed out in earlier writings, is the most
immediate political arena of the individual, the world that is
literally a doorstep beyond the privacy of the family and the in-
timacy of personal friendships. In that primary political arena,
where politics should be conceived in the Hellenic sense of lit-
ely managing the polls or community, the individual can be
transformed from a mere person into an active citizen, from a
private being into a public being. Given this crucial arena that
literally renders the citizen a functional being who can partici-
pate directly in the future of society, we are dealing with a level
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 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.

It is not very difficult to show — item by item — how the international division of labor can be greatly attenuated by using local 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 ecocommunities. 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 wholistic 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 mi-
nor 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-sustainabilty, 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 do, in fact, 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 capitalistic
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 alternative we have to the confederated mu-
nicipalization of the economy. At any rate, for once it will no
longer be privileged state bureaucrats or grasping bourgeois
entrepreneurs — or even "collective" capitalists in so-called
workers-controlled enterprises — all with their 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 decentraliza-
tion or localism or self-sustainabilty leaves us with an incom-
plete collection of solutions. Whatever we omit among these
presuppositions for a society based on confederated municipal-
ities, 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, cojoined
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 mak-
ning and administration, for once policy making slips from the
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 withdrawing into themselves at the expense of wider areas of human consociation.

Confederalism is thus a way of perpetuating the interdependence that should exist among communities and regions — indeed, it is a way of democratizing that interdependence without surrendering the principle of local control. While a reasonable measure of self-sufficiency is desirable for every locality and region, confederalism 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 local municipal hands — that is, when a community, however large or small, begins to manage its own economic resources in an interlinked network with other communities. To force a choice between either self-sufficiency on the one hand or a market system of exchange 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 property (which reinforces the political power of the centralized 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 philosophical 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 co-exist with extremely rigid hierarchies. A striking example is European and Oriental feudalism, a social order in which princely, ducal, and baronial hierarchies were based on highly decentralized communities. With all due respect to Fritz Schumacher, small is not necessarily beautiful.

Nor does it follow that humanly scaled communities and “appropriate technologies” in themselves constitute guarantees against domineering societies. In fact, for centuries humanity lived in villages and small towns, often with tightly organized social ties and even communistic forms of property. But these provided the material basis for highly despotic imperial states. Considered on economic and property terms, they might earn a high place in the “no-growth” outlook of economists like Herman Daly, but they were the hard bricks that were used to build the most awesome Oriental despotisms in India and China. What these self-sufficient, decentralized communities feared almost as much as the armies that ravaged them were the imperial tax-gatherers that plundered them.

If we extol such communities because of the extent to which they were decentralized, self-sufficient, or small, or employed “appropriate technologies,” we would be obliged to ignore the extent to which they were also culturally stagnant and easily...
dominated by exogenous elites. Their seemingly organic but tradition-bound division of labor may very well have formed the bases for highly oppressive and degrading caste systems in different parts of the world—caste systems that plague the social life of India to this very day.

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 policymaking and the coordination and execution of adopted policies. Policymaking 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 policymaking. If one community is not obliged to count on another or others generally to satisfy important material needs and realize common