# The Obscenity of Hierarchy

**Cleansing the Obscenity of Hierarchy**

Tony Sheather

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In a society assumed to be equal and democratic, to query the existing order is to be regarded with at best bemusement, at worst suspicious resentment. The animated discussions of the 1960/1970's seem the lifetime away they almost are chronologically.

People see no contradiction between the power discrepancies existing in all walks of life and supposed aspirations towards and proclamations of, equality. They may grumble about the C.E.O or the headmaster, the manager or the bishop, the particular 'chain of command', as intimate and intrusive as it is, but the very idea that this is not social normality is foreign and disquieting.

As representative democracy is to almost all people the single incarnation of appropriate political conduct—and here hierarchy is also pervasive— consideration of alternative modes of political relationship is also rare. Mainstream thinking espouses the status quo as the only version of reality.

It is the intent of this article to embrace a different perspective, to suggest that hierarchy is limiting and in essence destructive, to observe that true equality is discerned and created within a co-operative, truly egalitarian sharing or dissolution of power, a

realm where no-one takes precedence, where order givers and order takers are 'things' of the past. A place of human intercourse where knowledge and respect define social and political conversation and practice, not a perverse arena of status, domination and submission.

The revelation of an alternative view and experience of social intercourse occurred for me forty and more years ago during the brief 'enlightenment' inspired by the questing of youth. This questing was initially occasioned by greater educational opportunities, secure employment, the broadening of social mores. The Vietnam War and conscription for twenty year old men were catalysts that urged affected youth—twenty-one was then the voting age in Australia—to challenge the assumptions of the establishment. My personal response to conscription was to enroll as a conscientious objector whose day in court was as 'instructive' as the passionate student debates and the Moratorium marches.

While the concepts of participatory or direct democracy were raised by libertarian young people throughout Western Europe and the United States as well as Australia, most conspicuously by elements of the New Left and those finding affinity with the Counter-Culture in the 1960's, few groups, or individuals, espoused these aspirations in a coherent and sustained manner. Even the May-June events in 1968 France, while resonant and symbolic, left little tangible legacy. As the 1970's progressed, most former student radicals entered the conventional worlds of academe, government or business. The Brisbane Self-Management Group represented a serious endeavour to describe and explore the possibilities of a political and social utopia.

I choose this word advisedly. In the post-Modernist depiction, human narrative may be subjective, relativist. In the pragmatic liberal-conservative domain, function and achievement are god. The essence of the former is dissonance or indulgence, the latter, a practical albeit instrumentalist, rationality. Vision, purposeful, co-operative and reasoned, lies in the fleeting debris of history.

ship between teacher and taught and always leaving the less experienced and informed individual free to make his or her decisions'. (Bookchin, *To Remember Spain*, 1994 35,34). Such reflections are pertinent to the internal democracy of libertarian groups, equally relevant to the desired social intercourse within the utopian vision of today's 'social reality' transformed.

Hence, a more authentic and vital conduct of human relationships, be they familial, work-oriented or civic/ 'political' may be enshrined within a legacy, sometimes limited or distorted but always adventurous, harking back to the Athenian ecclesia with many variations down the centuries, a heritage aspiring to tomorrow, today.

(Tony Sheather, 2017)

Tim Briedis's refreshing study of the S.M.G. '*A Map of the World that includes Utopia: The Self-Management Group and the Brisbane Libertarians'* is illustrative of the orientation and strivings of perhaps the largest organized group of libertarians in recent Australian-or international- history.

The organization of the S.M.G. into cells-Industrial, Medical, High School ...where equality was observed though discussion and voting, highlighted the insistence on internal democracy. Similar principles applied to the general assembly of full members. Lest the reader may perceive some discrimination here, all those interested in becoming active members were encouraged to reveal commitment and understanding through a temporary 'apprenticeship' in an appropriate cell. Here bonds of companionship and mutual trust were, in most instances, formed.

This was an era where a deeply conservative, electorally jerrymandered, corrupt government was in power. This was the government that entertained the all-white Springboks of apartheid South Africa, introducing a State of Emergency in 1971, that arrested four hundred people in anti-Uranium rallies in 1977. Special branch and Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) surveillance was customary, infiltration a real concern.

The elaboration of direct democracy from community and industrial general assemblies through mandated and recallable delegates attending local, regional, 'national' and 'international' meetings or councils was presented as a viable vision if not blueprint.

The nature of organization and leadership was intrinsic to the conversations of a group opposing mainstream assumptions. The need for more forceful personalities to avoid 'dominance', for the less assertive to strive to grow in confidence and 'conviction' – these were issues that provoked debate, at times tension and 'censure'.

The ultimate division in 1977 illustrated philosophical difference-anarchism, social or lifestyle, structured or spontaneous—also conflict concerning the existence of informal hierarchy 'under

the guise' of coherence. It is interesting to observe Tim Briedis's citation of disquiet with certain 'prominent' individuals, notably Brian Laver, 'critiqued… for exerting too strong an influence on… a non-hierarchical group' (72), his inclusion of Drew Hutton and Greg George's contention that leaders were necessary, indeed 'central to the group's success'(ibid).

Historical figures, notably, Bakunin, offer at best ambiguity concerning this crucial question. Detractors of Murray Bookchin described 'the Bookchin cult' although it is instructive to perceive this comment was made by a former ardent admirer, John Clark! Peter Marshall's reflections are pertinent and insightful—Bakunin's 'enormous charisma', Kropotkin's 'saintly aura', Proudhon's patriarchal leanings, Shelley's acknowledgement of William Godwin as a 'wise mentor' are pondered. (Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible, A History of Anarchism*, 43). Are these aspects of particular people and eras or cautionary tales for libertarians of all times and places? Recent experience would indicate the latter. Nonetheless, all anarchists reveal in essence a trenchant rejection of political, economic and social power wielded by the elite, be it centralized or devolved.

'They deny anyone the right to issue orders and have them obeyed …(they) do not wish to become dominating leaders, even within small, informal groups…they prefer to influence others through persuasion, offering rational arguments…' (Bookchin, *To Remember Spain*, 44).

Social anarchism, social ecology, suggest unity in diversity. The quiet
listener may contribute as significantly as the orator or organizer, the thoughtful as much as the activist or the eloquent. Personalities are different and this should be savored and treasured as a source of fecundity, not as something divisive and hierarchical. The 'equality of unequals' as Bookchin observes. While critics of anarchism may perceive occasional discordance between ideal and reality, between manifestations of 'authority' (authoritarian,

authoritative, libertarian?) within the anarchist realm, it may at least be claimed that a 'new' conversation is occurring. The liberal/conservative domain does not even ask the question.

It is critical in introducing people to what may seem alien ideas to stress that a rich and diverse heritage of libertarian practice and support exists. One may not merely cite the contemporary influence of anarcho-syndicalism on Noam Chomsky, indicate the massive dimensions of Marshall's erudite magnum opus (all eight hundred pages) and Murray Bookchin's impressive legacy, notably his four volume historical study '*The Third Revolution*'. One may observe the natural curiosity, the intellectual and emotional growth, the emerging confidence and ethical awareness of those stripped of 'the chains of illusion'(Fromm).

Hierarchy, like class and the all-encompassing power of the state, is not an immutable law of human freedom, however much it-and they- have
accompanied certain versions of liberty and progress.

The SMG may have passed into history but it offered a vigorous portrayal of a different world. Whatever the truth suggested by the queries above –and there was substance to these misgivings -men like Brian (Laver), Drew (Hutton) and Greg (George) were accomplished, eloquent, courageous, at times inspirational.

Tim Briedis is also perceptive in discerning the essence of the SMG-and indeed the Libertarian Socialist Organisation, the most enduring subsequent group- as a collective manifestation. All members grew in confidence, knowledge and accomplishment. The persistence of the ideas in the belief systems of mature former members, the awareness displayed by younger people such as Tim today bear testament to an ideal of nobility and possibility. Bookchin is perceptive in observing: 'The organisation must recognize that differences in experience and consciousness do exist and handle these differences with a wary consciousness…(that) 'knowledge, experience and oratorical gifts (are employed) …for the goal of lovingly imparting knowledge and experience, for equalizing the relation-