Usufruct Collective
Communalism
Form, Content, Means, and Ends
01/08/21

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Communalism

Form, Content, Means, and Ends

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Communalism

Communalism is a political philosophy and practice. Communalism refers to specific ends to be developed, and specific means and strategies towards developing such ends. Communalists want means and ends to "meet in a rational unity", where people use communalist processes and practices as means to develop communalist ends (Bookchin 1992). The principles and practices that communalists are in favor of include but are not limited to communal self-governance, direct democracy, non-hierarchy, communal property and usufruct, liberatory technology, free association, co-federation, production for needs and distribution according to needs, mutual aid, and direct action (Bookchin 2007).

Communalism is grounded in an ethics of freedom, non-hierarchy, mutual aid, complementarity, and unity in diversity (Bookchin 1996). Communalism is in favor of social freedom constituted by the institutionalization of the above ethical features, collective decision making, and the political economic social relations that give rise to good individual freedoms. People should be able to have self-management bounded by the self-management of others. Such an interdependent self-management would mean that people would have the freedom to make decisions about what they do and what affects them personally, socially, politically, economically etc. bounded by such freedoms extended to all– and the responsibility of each and all to respect such freedoms of others. For this kind of freedom to exist on every scale, there needs to be ways for people to make decisions on a community level where that which affects all is decided by all– that is community self-management. If there is a political ruling class–or other kinds of hierarchical relations– then people do not have the freedoms to actually decide how political life functions and on the decisions that they are affected by. In order for decisions about groups to be made where people retain freedoms to

make decisions about what they are effected by, then there needs to be at least some kind of direct democracy– direct democracy meaning some kind of direct collective decision making process.

Direct democracy should not be reduced to a mere vote or ballot. Direct democracy should be a process of dialogue where people collaborate in assemblies to develop plans, actions, and decisions about what effects a group and what that group and persons within it want to do. During such a process, people bring up their ideas, proposals, alternative proposals, considerations, amendments, dissent, critiques, etc. and then try to arrive at collective decisions. This process of cooperative conflict would aim to take the best parts of what everyone is saying as much as possible to round out proposals– as opposed to atomized decision making, conflict averse forms of decision making, and hierarchical power games. There are many ways to practice direct democracy, and the specifics of direct democracy can be adapted to many different kinds of contexts and preferences. If consensus is not arrived at, then a decision can be put to a vote to find out how to move forward after further deliberation. Such direct democracy should exist in tandem with the free association of individuals and individual freedoms. Communalist democracy aims for a form with a content where the decisions made do not violate good sets of freedoms persons, communities, and collectives should have.

The freedoms persons should have should include robust freedom of and from as well as freedom within associations (participatory relations within egalitarian limits). No one would be coerced to implement decisions–participatory labor, work, and action would replace coerced labor. If a person disagrees with a decision so much that they want to leave a group they are a part of, then they are free to leave as well (and under full communalist social relations, people would be given the means of free association, including access to means of existence, production, transportation, and politics wherever

Communalism aims to organize as much of the non-ruling class as possible, and seeks to unite people together through communal assemblies, other self-managed organizations, direct actions, and mutual aid projects. Communalist assemblies can develop oppositional politics and reconstructive politics at the points of reproduction, production, distribution, politics (city/community management), extraction, and consumption. This allows a flexible approach that can adapt well to specific conditions while also potentially organizing on multiple fronts in strategic ways.

If self management on every scale is good, then we need communal self management as an end. Without communal self management, decisions about community life are privatized in some sense over and above the communal sphere and the people directly. Such a goal of self management on every scale bounded by the self-management of others determines the means we ought to use. We need structures that embody communal self governance, direct democracy, non-hierarchy, co-federalism, direct action, mutual aid, etc. to develop such ends.

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institutions that exist to sustain direct collective action. As Bookchin says in The Ecology of Freedom, "A relationship between an assembled populace that formulates policies in a face-to-face manner and such actions as strikes, civil disobedience, and even insurrection can be established around the right of a people to assume unmediated control over public life," (Bookchin 2005). Community assemblies can also easily play formal or informal assist roles to most any kind of direct action (and they can help catalyze other groups that can help organize direct actions, can help provide mutual aid and mutual aid infrastructure to sustained actions– as well as a solidaristic community of potential volunteers!).

A communalist politics would apply the general principles of communalism through organization building, direct action, and mutual aid on local and co-federated regional scales. This process would strive to meet people's needs, oppose unjust and unfree institutions and relations, and build the kind of organizations that should exist as much as we can in the present, and teach and learn from one another in a process of education through dialogue and action. This process would arrive at short term gains and victories and also develop a vision and world incompatible with hierarchical society overtime. The specifics of how to apply communalism will vary based on all sorts of relevant variables such as needs and preferences of people in a given area, ecological factors, technological factors, specific power relations and infrastructure in a given area and beyond, ideological composition of the population, military and propaganda power of opponents etc. However through such adaptations, communalist politics ought to develop and maintain its essential dimensions– otherwise it could lead to a one sided politics that has some communalist features combined with some evil, unfree, unstrategic, or harmful features (or combined with a lack of features needed to round out the other features).

they go). Communalists are in favor of creating bylaws and constitutions that enshrine freedoms and responsibilities within and between organizations.

The kinds of bylaws and constitutions communalists are in favor of are radically different from hierarchical politics. Communalists, being opposed to all hierarchies, are in favor of non-hierarchical bylaws and constitutions (Bookchin 2007). Hierarchies are forms of institutionalized top-down command obedience (Bookchin 2005). Examples of hierarchical relations include a political ruling class ruling over and above people (as exists within all state forms of government), patriarchs ruling over families, bosses commanding workers, or masters commanding slaves, and cops wielding and enforcing hierarchical rule over civilians, and the probabilistic racialized and gendered division of labor and power. Although all of the above are different, they share institutionalized top-down command obedience as a lower common denominator. They all have accompanying epistemologies of rule– worldviews and cultural dimensions that uphold hierarchical institutions (and can even cause hierarchical institutions). Without substantial freedoms from hierarchies, people cannot make decisions about what affects them. In a communalist society, freedom from hierarchy would be enshrined in institutional structures and shared practices, and additionally developed within culture. As opposed to rulers and ruled, communalists are in favor of "rules without rulers" and an expansive realm of freedom within such bounds where there is self management on every scale. Such self management on every scale of existence would include community self-management through community assemblies.

Community assemblies can make decisions on a plurality of scales from the block, to the neighborhood, to the village, to the town, to the city, to regions, etc. to intercommunal relations between all of the above. Community assemblies, and assemblies connecting such assemblies, allow everyone affected by such communal and intercommunal decisions to come to-

gether on an equal footing to participate in direct politics. Decisions about city management, communal economics (how to meet people's needs and desires including production, reproductive labor, protocols for shared use of commons etc.), and collective actions can be made together at these assemblies– that which affects all being decided by all. This allows people to come together to dialogue about how to create a better world and ways to take action together and develop common projects and provide mutual support through horizontalist democratic processes– as well as forging cooperative incentives in the process. By giving everyone common ownership of politics and economics, everyone has a stake in the common good and mutual thriving of each other, where "the good of each cannot be pursued without also pursuing the good of all those who participate," (MacIntyre 2002, 107).

Acting locally on a community scale is a great place to start. However, It is not enough for us to merely act locally: on one level, different communities face common and unique problems that would be better solved with the assistance of others. And this interdependence can be organized through mutuality and complementarity as opposed to hierarchical, or competitive, or atomized relations. Additionally, if communities practice mutual assistance of one another, then they can thrive in far greater ways than if they were isolated. Pooling skills, tools, resources, ideas, desires, volunteer capacity, etc. within and between communities, enables more expansive capacity to meet people's needs. This above kind of process can increase the overall capacity of persons and collectives to act–increasing the range of freedom (and capacity for reconstructive politics and oppositional politics). However, this should be done in a way that respects the sets of freedoms persons and communities joining together should have. Different formal collectives can link up together across distances for joint political economic activity through keeping all decision making power in

fuel oppositional movements, help to meet people's needs (a goal in itself), help educate participants through experience on how to have an organization that is self-managed, and some of such reconstructive projects can make sense as things that keep existing after the revolution such as community assemblies and various kinds of people powered infrastructure. On top of horizontalist community assemblies being reconstructive projects themselves (despite also doing oppositional politics), other reconstructive projects can be embedded within, started by, or helped by community assemblies.

For communalists, oppositional politics refers to opposing social problems, especially opposing hierarchies. Communalists advocate for using and use direct democracy, direct action, community assemblies, and other self-managed organizations in the process through which we oppose hierarchical institutions– so that we develop processes and means conducive to liberatory ends. Direct action refers to people directly acting together without being mediated by top down command obedience in their own processes. Direct action most commonly refers to oppositional politics in particular with the above features. Direct action is deliberated about through direct democracy. Oppositional politics against hierarchy can be comprised of many kinds of actions: There are occupations, expropriations (seizing land, products, raw materials, resources, instruments of production, infrastructure etc.), blockades (blocking hierarchical processes), strikes (withholding labor), community self defense, property destruction, insurrections, boycotts, rallies, sabotage, sit-ins, marches, etc. The above can be put together strategically in tandem with reconstructive politics in concerted efforts against hierarchical institutions and for short term and long term goals. Oppositional politics can be organized through community assemblies, radical unions, tenant unions, affinity groups, issue specific social movement groups etc.– or even all of the above in some way! Direct action can be "institutionalized" via directly democratic

tices to be communalist assemblies. Such assemblies have specific yet broad content that they do which can be broadly summarized as reconstructive politics and oppositional politics.

Reconstructive politics aims at creating the institutions and actions that we should develop in the world. Communalists judge what should be reconstructed according to the above principles talked about–direct democracy, non-hierarchy, co-federalism, free association, rules without rulers, mandated and recallable delegates, embedded councils, production and distribution based on needs, etc. This creates a content of direct action, mutual aid, and communalist institution building towards a world based on such practices. Mutual aid, on a social level, refers to mutual support based on horizontalist institutions and voluntary relations to meet one another's needs. Reconstructive politics includes things like setting up community assemblies, mutual aid collectives, collective kitchens, community centers, social centers, free food distribution, tool and resource libraries, free resource distribution, community gardens, community technology projects, common infrastructure more broadly, community and worker managed cooperatives, socializing labor needed to reproduce daily life, credit unions, transformative conflict resolution councils, popular education groups, etc. The list of potential mutual aid projects and reconstructive projects that could be developed is far too long to list.

Oppositional politics should be developed so we can approximate various ethical ends including the processes and ends of good reconstructive politics. Any sustained movement that includes oppositional politics needs some way to meet the needs of the participants and would be participants. Mutual aid collectives can help and/or be part of oppositional political movements to meet their needs– and help oppositional politics become more resilient (and, however vaguely or concretely, point towards a positive program of mutual aid). In the interim from here to a better society, such reconstructive politics can

the hands of people directly. The above inter-collective process is called co-federation (Bookchin 1992).

Communalists are in favor of delegates of communal assemblies for various communicative, administrative, and coordinative functions. Some examples of delegates roles include notetaker, or facilitator, email correspondent etc, whereas other kinds of delegates are for Co-Federal communication. Such delegates are distinct from representative politicians because they do not have any policy making power and are mandated by communal assemblies (where actual decision making is retained). Such delegates act within the bounds of a mandate given to them from the assembly that delegated them. Each delegate is additionally immediately recallable by the assembly that delegated them. And on top of that, delegates rotate out; they are a temporary role shared by many people over-time. Co-Federal Delegates meet up (in person when needed and possible and supplemented with video and audio chat as needed) to discuss co-federal politics together and then bring back relevant information and communication–assisted by written communication between groups (which can be assisted via electronic communication)– to the general assemblies. This allows dialogue, political/economic activity, and decisions to be made on many scales–block, neighborhood, town/city, between cities, between regions etc. while keeping decision making power in the hands of people directly through communal assemblies. Co-federation is a way of organizing the interdependence we have upon each other along radically egalitarian lines, meeting the economic needs of all, while increasing the overall capacity of people to develop shared goals. Having significant mutual support, shared means of production, economic plans, and political projects within and between communities can help align self interest with social interest– the flourishing of co-federated communities helping the flourishing of individual communities and individual persons. Such a cooperative incentive structure in conjunction

with a coherent cluster of practices allows for direct horizontalist governance of the commons (Ostrom 2019) (Bookchin 1992) (Bookchin 2007).

Communalist assemblies can additionally create embedded participatory councils to implement specific agreed upon plans, projects, and actions. These embedded councils of assemblies, like delegates, are mandated by communal assemblies and immediately recallable by them so as to ensure that policy-making power is not privatized over and above the direct assemblies. Sometimes these will be completely open committees, whereas other times specific people might be delegated for some function. Such embedded councils of various kinds self manage within the limits of the policy and mandate given by the direct assembly from below.

In a full communalist society, community assemblies would be rudders of the commons: making direct decisions about common land in use, public facilities, and means of production. Communal assemblies can make decisions about public space, resolving incompatible preferences, to protocols for use for specific infrastructure, solving common problems, and developing common projects and actions etc. The economic sphere and the reproduction of daily life would be integrated into the horizontalist political sphere of community assemblies. Under full communalism land and means of production are "integrated into the commune as a material constituent of its libertarian institutional framework, indeed as a part of a larger whole… not as vocationally oriented interest groups." (Bookchin 2005). The economy would become "a truly political economy: the economy of the… commune" where "the economy is genuinely communized as well as politicized" (Bookchin 2005). This political economy would have embedded participatory working groups and councils implementing specific decisions and self managing within their mandates from below. This enables participatory decisions during decision making and self management during implementation without privatizing the economy

dimensions that inhibit rational, caring, and informed actions. Communalist politics would not only abolish such hierarchical root causes of ecological destruction, but would also create mutualistic, rational, and caring inter-communal politics (with accompanying "epistemologies of freedom" as opposed to epistemologies of rule). An ecological politics would recognize the responsibilities us social-political-institutional animals have to be good ecological stewards. A communalist approach to ecological stewardship and developing mutualistic relations between human communities and broader ecological communities would include: 1. the abolition of the root causes of ecological destruction, 2. the presence of new social conditions for politics, economics, and managing the commons conducive to post scarcity and ecological economics, (Ostrom 2019) (Bookchin 2005) (Bookchin 2018) 3. a content of abolishing anti-ecological technology (such as but not limited to fossil fuels), 4. a content of using and developing ecological-technology (ecological criteria being crucial dimensions of what makes technology liberatory), and 5. the development of a meaningfully ecological sensibility and liberatory culture conducive to people making informed, rational, and caring decisions (politically and extra-politically, in regards to humans and the broader ecological world). Social ecology does not pose robust political, economic, and social freedom and a good standard of living for all against ecological resilience; instead social ecology sees the development of the former as needed to meaningfully address hierarchically induced ecological crises (Bookchin 2007).

Reconstructive Politics and Oppositional politics

Communalist assemblies must contain/develop a gestalt of ethical principles embedded within their processes and prac-

the evils of prisons and cops, which include but are not limited to enforcing the biggest causes of violent behavior (overall inequality caused by class relations and hierarchies). Self defense and defense of others is another important part of liberatory conflict resolution: in dire scenarios, using self defense and defense of others is by far the most peaceful or otherwise ethical option compared to standing idly by and a whole array of other conflict resolution options. There would be non-hierarchical standards for institutions and justified defense as opposed to hierarchical rule and arbitrary rule. As confederations of good societies develop overtime, the root causes of unjust violence would dramatically diminish.

A communalist politics would also be an ecological politics. As social ecology astutely points out, the root causes of ecological problems are caused by specific malleable political, economic, and social institutions and relations and also have political, economic, and social solutions. There are Ecological dimensions of communalism that are present within features of communalism besides ecology itself. For example, opposition to hierarchy is an ecological principle because hierarchy is the greatest cause of ecological destruction through the "power-over mechanism"– a mechanism that becomes an imperative for any ruling class or strata to maintain and expand their hierarchical power. For hierarchical institutions to develop overtime, hierarchical forms must develop hierarchical content and such a power-over mechanism will in turn instrumentalize humans and ecosystems to hierarchical power accumulation at the expense of societies and ecosystems. Capitalism in particular destroys the ecological world at particularly fast rates through the profit imperative, commodity production, and wage labor, etc. Capitalism is also enforced by states– and there are other hierarchies embedded within capitalist and state structures such as divisions of power and labor along lines of gender, race, nationality, etc. And hierarchical institutions have accompanying cultural

over and above the communes. The self-managed work needed to reproduce daily life would be shared according to abilities and volition. Production would be for needs, desires and use. Additionally, distribution would be according to needs and desires with guaranteed access to the means of existence (food, water shelter, energy, clothing, healthcare, education, internet, instruments for hobbies, etc.) on top of access to communal cornucopia including shared means of production, communal fruits of labor, horizontalist political power, library based access systems, public spaces, facilities, public transportation, etc. Under post scarcity conditions, a functional access abundance would exist for everything people need as well as most everything people want. And on the way towards developing post-scarcity conditions– such as in a revolutionary process that is under external attack in turbulent and less than ideal conditions– communal economics can distribute more essential and abundant resources according to needs in a way where there is more than enough for all, and less essential and more scarce resources according to some communistic rationing (for example as practiced by the thousands of societies that have existed with communal property, or as talked about by Kropotkin in The Conquest of Bread, or as practiced by communes during several libertarian socialist revolutions) (Kropotkin 2017).

Communalists are in favor of using technology in an ecological and freeing way– meaning in conjunction with free political economic and social structures and relations (Bookchin 2018). What counts as liberatory technology will vary according to different relevant variables people are adapting to. Political economic and social contexts shape the means through which technology is developed, the ends through which it is developed for, and the ways technology is used (and the ends it is used for). Liberatory technology approximates a moving ideal of the right kind of technology for the right functions, in the right contexts for the right ends, through the right means. Such liberatory technology would approximate technology that is

produced through liberatory means for liberatory ends, used through liberatory means for liberatory ends. Some kinds of technology would be liberatory if it were embedded within free social relations. Some Technology that would have been liberatory if it were combined with free social relations in some time/space locations would not be liberatory in other contexts (or if it were combined with other variables). For example, building a standard 1970's solar panel would not be liberatory compared to a more efficient one with more contemporary technology. How it might make sense to adapt houses to one geographic area's ecological features might not make sense in another area. Additionally, solar panels could be used to fuel something as wholesome as a social center or as evil as a police station! And due to people's different needs and different preferences, one style of design of a particular thing (for example, a house, or a chair, or shoes) might make sense for some people but not for others. That being said, here is a list of some technology that could be considered to be liberatory– or more accurately potentially liberatory technology when combined with the right social processes: solar energy, wind energy, wave energy, tidal energy, geothermal energy, recycling, regenerative materials, agroecology, restoration agriculture, biochar, aeroponics plant based batteries, rainwater collection and purification, water desalination, 3d printing, modular design, free software, computers, automation of toil (which can be done to things like full production of cars and houses as well as simpler production processes), etc. Of course for any of the above to be sufficiently liberatory, they will have to be in tandem with approximations of ethical processes and ethical ends–in regards to production process, distribution, and use.

Additionally, computerization can assist assemblies and co-federations of assemblies with decentralized planning of production and distribution (through software with interactive open collaboration between groups and people to coordinate knowledge of ecological dynamics of areas, resources available, regeneration rates, overall needs, volunteers for specific activities or kinds of activities, specific production specific people or places need help with etc.). As opposed to production of things to be bought and sold, communalist production is planned based on the needs and desires of people. Production can be implemented by participatory councils within community assemblies and some of such implementation can be entirely automated or partially automated. Most unwanted mechanical labor CAN be automated, so in a fully developed communalist production process, it would be up to people to decide what automatable mechanical processes they want to automate. Some production would be done for library based access stations (where people can access items as personal possessions that rotate), and other production would be intended for personal possessions that don't rotate (or at least don't rotate at the rate of specific library goods). Production protocols can be agreed upon and changed as needed. Such an approach would aim towards a post scarcity economy.

A communalist society would have a justice system that is neither based on arbitrary nor centralized power. First and foremost, a communalist society is in favor of transforming underlying hierarchical conditions that are the biggest causes of abuse, unmet needs, violence, (Wilkinson and Pickett 2011) and other violations of what should be people's freedoms. Additionally, the presence of solidaristic, free, and egalitarian institutions and social relations help to develop virtues in people that minimize such injustice and promote pro-social behavior (Usufruct Collective 2019). The best parts of and ways of doing transformative justice and restorative justice demonstrate a justice process based on group dialogue and agreed upon steps for moving forward in a way that stops harmful behaviors or transforms underlying causes of them. Although not universally successful, such approaches have less recidivism and higher victim satisfaction compared to punitive approaches (Latimer et al. 2005)– and do not come with all of