Toward a Communalist Approach

Murray Bookchin

Most likely 2006

Contents

There is an urgent need for a new radical approach to adequately address the new economic, ecological, technological, and cultural challenges of contemporary society; it must be one of theory and action, one that will draw on features from classical Marxism, socialism, and anarchism, yet go beyond their historical and theoretical limitations.

Conceived as they all were in the socially tumultuous era of industrial revolution, the ideologies of communism, socialism, and the more *social* versions of anarchism responded with a reasonable degree of adequacy to the challenges of the oppressive and exploitative circumstances and contexts in which they took form.

In Marx's hands, communism provided a philosophy, a theory of history, and a political strategy centered on a revolutionary class agent—the industrial proletariat—the coherence of which was unequaled by any other body of social theory and practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But Marxism's historical adequacy as a revolutionary ideology depended overwhelmingly on the social and economic conditions of the Industrial Revolution as they existed between 1848 and 1871. The degradation of the factory proletariat and the oppressions inflicted by the industrial bourgeoisie led to a furious class war. A remarkable confluence of circumstances—particularly the outbreak in 1914 of the worst war that humanity had ever known and the instability of quasi-feudal governments in most of continental Europe—allowed Lenin to use (and misuse) Marxism to take power in a vast, economically backward empire. The first "proletarian state" to hold power in history went on to produce a tyrannical state system that lasted for decades and tragically smothered socialism under a dark totalitarian regime.

Once World War One opened the revolutionary interwar period, however, socialism qua social democracy, despite its professed radical goals, responded by retreating to the liberal credo it had always held close to its heart, finally abandoning all its rhetorical pretensions as a radical movement for social change. In all fairness, however, the conventional social democratic parties constituted more of an authentic working-class movement than most of their competitors on the Left. Apart from rare—and remarkable—occasions brought about by unusual constellations of events, the proletariat proved not to be the fervent revolutionary agent that Marx, Engels, and the syndicalist theorists had believed it was. While its left-wing devotees celebrated the working class fervently for its alleged susceptibility to revolutionary ideas, workers in reality proved to be as closely wedded to bourgeois society as were the middle classes with which Marxists and anarchosyndicalists contrasted them. With few exceptions the proletariat responded in vastly greater numbers to the reformist directives of pragmatic trade union leaders than to the revolutionary pleas of communist propagandists. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht of the revolutionary Spartacus League, for example, never exercised the enormous influence over the German workers that Karl Legien, of the reformist (social democratic) Free Trade Unions, enjoyed.

Capitalism thus survived the horrors of two long world wars, the international impact of the Russian Revolution, and a highly unstable Depression decade in the 1930s. Although it was badly shaken at times, in the end capitalism did not lose its overall legitimacy (except perhaps in Spain in 1936) in the eyes of the very class that Marxism and syndicalism had selected as its historically revolutionary agent.

Anarchism (which should not be confused with syndicalism and communism) in its pure form meant little more than unrelenting resistance to and protest against attempts by society and particularly the state to confine individual liberty. It appealed mainly to marginal, déclassé elements, ranging from the dispossessed to idiosyncratic artists and writers. Although rarely influential as an ideology, it resonated with the agrarian *bunty*, the Russian peasant uprisings that were

notorious for their destructive, sometimes anti-urban insurrections. When impulsive anarchist sentiments affected well-organized proletarian struggles, they mutated into anarcho-syndicalism, which was seldom internally stable or free of serious tensions. Many anarcho-syndicalist notions, such as workers' control over industry and confederally structured revolutionary trade unions, enjoyed a considerable vogue among industrial workers; still, in the absence of external pressure and persecution by the bourgeoisie and the state, anarchosyndicalist unions seldom refrained from compromising their libertarian principles.

The great theories advanced by Marxists, socialists, anarchists, and anarcho-syndicalists, then, were insightful on many issues and were sometimes inspiring in making a socialistic revolution a realizable possibility. But today these theories are understandably incapable of encompassing and programmatically *integrating* into a coherent whole the new social issues, potential class realignments, and economic advances that have arisen (and that continue to arise) with extraordinary rapidity since the end of World War Two. To simply resuscitate them, even in the face of the failures they produced, and pretend that they enjoy an unchallengeable ideological immortality, would be dogmatic fatuity.

Significantly, capitalism has changed in many respects since World War Two. It has created new, *generalized social issues* that are not limited to wages, hours, and working conditions—notably environmental, gender, hierarchical, civic, and democratic issues. The problems raised by these issues cut across class lines, even as they exacerbate or modify the problems that once gave rise to the classical revolutionary movements. Older definitions of freedom, while preserving certain unassailable components, become inadequate in the light of later historical advances; so too older revolutionary theories and movements, while losing none of their insights and lessons, become inadequate with the passage of time, as the emergence of new issues necessitate broader programs and movements.

Since Marxism was fashioned in the context of the Industrial Revolution, it would indeed be uncanny if it did not require sweeping revisions and redefinitions as a body of ideas. Or if socialism (qua social democracy)—all its cross-currents and variations notwithstanding—remained a fixed strategy for achieving basic social change in the face of new developments over the past fifty years. Or if anarchism and its variants, with their central demand for personal autonomy (as opposed to social freedom), could adequately deal with the new ecological, hierarchical, technological, democratic, and civic issues that have arisen.

Nor can the proletariat, whose class identity is being subverted by an immense middle class, hope to speak for the majority of the population. Capitalism is inflicting generalized threats on humanity, sweeping problems such as globalization, climate changes that may alter the very face of the planet, challenges to civil rights and traditional freedoms, and the radical transformation of civic life as a result of rampant urbanization; other issues have yet to emerge as a result of the immensely transformative technologies that will make the coming century unrecognizable. A new revolutionary movement must be capable of dealing not only with the more familiar issues that linger on, but with new, more general ones that potentially may bring the vast majority of society into opposition to an ever evolving and challenging capitalist system.

That these major problems that confront us were not on the agenda of previous socialistic movements, or else were treated marginally, should not surprise us. A socially oriented *ecology* has yet to take hold, despite newly arrived anarchists' attempts to impute one to Peter Kropotkin or Elisée Reclus. Older movements regarded *hierarchy*, if they saw it as undesirable at all, more as an epiphenomenon of class structures and the state than as the oppressive institutionalization of

cultural and economic differentiation among men, and between men and women, that emerged very early in social life. Classical socialists and anarchists cloaked the role of the *city* and democracy in human affairs in such strictly class terms that they barely explored them as arenas for human development and self-realization. Indeed, nearly all classical radical and revolutionary discussions centered on the industrial proletariat, which was supposed to become the majority of the population in Western European countries and would inevitably be driven to revolution by capitalist exploitation and immiseration.[1]

What classical revolutionary ideologies can teach us is that capitalism remains a grossly irrational social order in which the pursuit of profit and the accumulation of wealth for its own sake pollutes every material and spiritual advance. It is an economic and social order that now threatens to afflict humanity with the homogenization and atomization of human relationships by the spread of commodity production and by the disintegration of community life and solidarity. This crisis-ridden society will not disappear on its own: it has to be opposed unrelentingly by a dedicated Left that must be committed to the rescuing of the high estate of reason in human affairs that is currently under siege by anti-Enlightenment forces. To encompass the problems we face today, the ideological orbit described by Marxism, anarchism, and (to a lesser degree) socialism qua social democracy would have to be expanded beyond recognition. To this end the idea of *communalism* is presented as a project—one that will render the best in classical revolutionary ideologies relevant to a new century and confront problems that were formerly little more than ancillary anticipations.

What is Communalism?

Communalism is an attempt to enter into a more advanced terrain of revolutionary ideas. From the outset, we must distinguish *communalism*, as a tradition and a theory, from *communitarianism*, with which it is often mistaken. Communitarianism was and is a movement to establish communities that are organized around cooperative personal living and working arrangements, such as were common among counter-cultural youth during the 1960s and 1970s. Their propagators saw these islets of the good life as products of healthy normal human impulses, in contrast to evil conventional norms that warped or blotted out such impulses. The most famous communitarians were nineteenth-century utopian visionaries such as Robert Owen (whose followers established the New Harmony community) and John Humphrey Noyes (a religious social reformer who established the more successful Oneida community in New York State). These experiments and radical ones like them rested on the conviction that once enough people adopted cooperative

---

[1]Today ecological issues are highly fashionable and acceptable to leftists, but even during the tumultuous 1960s they were readily dismissed. I recall publishing key, manifesto-type articles such as "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought" in 1964, and raising environmental issues for years in radical circles, only to be snidely derogated for "ignoring" class issues (as though the two were in conflict with each other!) and not adopting views that were more closely linked to Cold War diplomacy than they were to socialism. The same was true of feminist issues. It took the Left decades to show any appreciation of the crises opened by global warming, to which I had alluded in "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought," and several decades to remove itself from the mire of Cold War "socialism," such as Maoism. Now, to be sure, one learns that Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, and Reclus were ecologically oriented all the time—as far back as the nineteenth century—and clairvoyantly anticipated all the new issues that were raised in the last half of the twentieth century! Nevertheless, the left-wing movements lack a clear idea of how these issues can be given a programmatic character on which people can act.

lifestyles, they would eventually abandon the evil world of private property and egoism in favor of new cooperative living arrangements.

Most commonly, however, the social perspective of communitarians was highly limited. They usually saw their communities as personal refuges from the ills of the surrounding world. But communitarianism—which is still alive in the writings of Robert Theobald, a variety of cooperativists, and assorted anarchists—is basically a lifestyle project, committed to the ethical and often quasireligious principle that humanity is innately good and must be restored to its pristine condition of kindness and mutual aid, primarily by example and gradual physical expansion. In a word, communitarianism—to the extent that it even seeks to change the world—slowly inculcates the values of goodness by a one-to-one conversion to particular living arrangements.

Communalism, by contrast, is a *revolutionary* political theory and practice, deeply rooted in the general socialist tradition. Far from setting up models or examples of cooperative lifestyles, it actively seeks to confront capital and the basic structures of state power. Far from functioning as a personal refuge, it seeks to construct a broad civic sphere and markedly enhance political involvement. Indeed, it seeks to reconstruct municipalities as a whole to form a counter-power to the nation-state. The word has roots as a political term in the Paris Commune of 1871, when the armed people of the French capital fought for the idea of a quasi-socialistic confederation of the nation's cities and towns or *communes* (as they are called to this day in many parts of Europe). Today, we can still get a sense of the far-reaching social goals of *communalism* from consulting even conventional reference books like *The American Heritage Dictionary*.

Socialist revolutionary theory seldom attributed an important place to municipalities. Early nineteenthcentury socialists were concerned mainly with influencing the working class and ultimately gaining control of the nation-state. Apart from anarchists, most left-wingers tended retrospectively to admire the Jacobins of the Great French Revolution, who were the advocates of a highly centralized state apparatus. The Jacobins' principal opponents on the Left, the Girondins, preached a federalist message but were closely associated with the counterrevolution of the 1790s and hated revolutionary Paris so deeply that their federalist ideas fell into disrepute on the Left. Not for decades would federalism gain a good name among French radicals.

After the Revolution the most active European movements for social change were spawned less in the countryside than in towns and cities. Insurgent Paris exploded in the insurrection of 1830 and in a workers' uprising in June 1848—and the French capital was highly conscious of its ancient municipal identity and liberties. Well into the twentieth century it clung to that identification with civic freedom with extraordinary fervor. Indeed, in the years to come many socialistic revolutions that swept over Europe, even those that were internationalist in character, were notable for the hegemonic role that municipalities played in their uprisings. "Red Petrograd," "Red Berlin," and "Red and Black Barcelona" became synonymous with particularly incendiary uprisings between 1917 and 1936. More often than not, a municipality initiated a revolution, and its success in overthrowing the old local authorities initiated a nationwide insurrection.

On closer inspection, the civic nature of most modern revolutions points to the fundamental role that municipalities have played as incubators of social development and the functions they have performed in fulfilling humanity's potentialities. When Aristotle wrote his political works he set a standard for the Western conception of the city, defining it as the arena for the development of citizenship and even humanness itself, specifically reason, self-consciousness, and the good life. The Hellenic word *polis*, from which we derive the word political, has too often been wrongly translated as "city-state." In fact the Athenian *polis* was not a state but a humanly

scaled municipality that became an outright face-to-face democracy. The Athenians of the fifth century BCE would have regarded even a modern republic as oppressive and would have found its bureaucratic apparatus oligarchical at best and tyrannical at worst. In Periclean times they drew a clear distinction between monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, and democracy. They generally viewed a face-to-face democracy as the fulfillment of the *polis's* evolution out of assemblages of households, and they continued to treasure its essentially democratic features over all other forms, even after their Roman conquerors virtually eliminated it.

Communalism not only recaptures these functions but goes beyond them as an effort to constitute the developmental arena of mind and discourse. By contrast, modern urbanized cities reduce citizens to mere codwellers who live in close physical proximity to one another, or to taxpayers who expect the city to provide them with goods and services in return for revenue. As such, communalism sees the municipality as potentially a transformative development beyond organic evolution into the domain of social evolution. Indeed, for communalists the municipality is the domain wherein mere adaptation to changing environments is supplanted by proactive association based on the free exchange of ideas, the creative endeavor to bring consciousness to the service of change, and the collective vehicle, where necessary, to intervene in the world with a view toward ending environmental as well as economic insults. The municipality, once it is freed of hierarchical domination and material exploitation—indeed, once it is recreated as rational arena for human creativity in all spheres of life – is potentially the *ethical space* for the good life. It is also potentially the *school* for the formation of a new human being, the *citizen*, who has shed the archaic blood ties of tribalism and the hierarchical impulses created by differences in ethnicity, gender, and parochial exclusivity.

Historically, the municipality was the domain that, at least juridically, dissolved the blood tie, which had formerly united family and tribe according to the facts of biology, to the exclusion of the outsider. It was in the municipality, eventually, that the once-feared stranger could be absorbed into a community of citizens, initially as the coequal of all other residents who occupied a common territory and eventually as a member of the citizens' assembly, engaging with all other free male residents in making policy decisions. In this respect, the formation of the municipality antedated the rise of the state—which, it is worth noting, appeared among agrarian peoples well before it appeared among their urban cousins.

Indeed, the state, which may be defined as an organized system of dominance by a privileged class, was continually in tension, if not in open warfare, with the municipality. The so-called autonomous cities of the medieval world were in conflict with medieval and Renaissance monarchs as well as with territorial lords, both of whom threatened their civic freedoms. To be sure, internal conflicts raged within their own walls between various classes and estates. But if they were not often at peace either with themselves or with their external opponents, their libertarian origins were seldom forgotten: during periods of crisis, these sentiments surfaced as revolutionary upsurges in Europe and even Asia. Indeed today, when the nation-state seems supreme, whatever rights municipalities retain are the hard-won gains of commoners, who over the course of history preserved them against assaults by ruling classes. Characteristically, the *comuñero* uprising of the Castilian cities in 1520–22 and the *journées* of the Parisian sectional assemblies during the French Revolution (to cite only two of the more outstanding cases) were impelled by strong civic sentiments and by demands for a Federation of Communes.

Thus communalism is no contrived body of political and social concepts, spun out from the vagrant fancies of mere imagination. In many respects, it expresses an abiding concept of political

reconstruction, one that long antedates nationalism. As a movement of downtrodden classes, its pedigree is perhaps more ambiguous. The guildsmen who kept their muskets and swords at the ready beside their workbenches, so as to be able to immediately rise to the defense of their hard-won liberties, often had a class status somewhere between the beggarly crowds that filled the medieval cities and the patricians. In fact, upper-class nobles often hired déclassés from the towns to undermine the status and political influence of the craftsmen-burghers. Nevertheless, it was this burgher stratum that fashioned the ideals of civic freedom and political participation, upon which all the great revolutionaries of later years drew, often with no knowledge of their medieval origins.

Here, too, however, contemporary language betrays the past, just as it does when *polis* is translated as "city-state." The word *politics*, derived as it is from the Greek word for "city," denotes an activity that is charged with moral obligation to one's own community—in contrast to *statecraft*, which minimally presupposes a professionalized and bureaucratic state apparatus that is expressly set apart from the people. Politics once referred to the civic responsibilities that all citizens were expected to discharge as ethical beings. In the Middle Ages, citizens committed themselves to undertake these political responsibilities by swearing an ethical oath or pledge of fraternity—a *conjuratio*—which was seen not as a contract but minimally as a moral vow to act in the interests of all who lived and worked in the city. They participated in citizens' assemblies that either formulated civic policies themselves or else annually elected a publicly responsible administrative committee. The city was defended from external threats by a popular militia, while a citizens' guard maintained domestic peace. Any attempt at professionalization of the city's administrative apparatus, even if tentatively undertaken to deal with the dangers of invasion and war, was viewed with deep suspicion.

Thus politics originally did not mean statecraft. In contrast to the self-governing *polis*, the state consists of the institutions by which a privileged and exploitative class imposes itself, by force where necessary, on an oppressed and exploited class. Statecraft is the activity of officials within that professional machinery to control the citizenry in the interests of that privileged class. By contrast, politics is the active participation of free citizens in managing the affairs of the city and defending its freedom. Only after centuries of civic debasement, marked by class formation, conflict, and mutual hatred, was the state produced and politics degraded to the practice of statecraft. With the rise of statecraft, people became disengaged from moral responsibility for their cities; the city was transformed, ultimately along with the nation, into a provider of goods and services. Proactive citizens, filled with a deep moral commitment to their cities, gradually gave way to the passive subjects of rulers and to the constituents of parliamentarians, until today they are, in fact, little more than consumers whose free time is spent in shopping malls and retail stores.

Municipal Freedoms and Autonomy

Communalism is in every way a decidedly *political* body of ideas that seeks to recover the city or commune in accordance with its greatest historical traditions, and to advance its development. It seeks to create popular assemblies as vital decision-making arenas for civic life. It advances a civic ethics predicated on reason, and a municipalized economy.

In advancing these goals, communalism seeks to actualize the traits that potentially make us human. It departs decidedly from Marxist notions of a centralized state, let alone a dictatorial

regime ostensibly based on the interests of a single class. At the same time it goes beyond loose anarchist notions of autonomous confederations, collectives, and towns, which ostensibly can "go it on their own" as they choose without due consideration for the society as a whole. These ad hoc, often chaotic and "spontaneous" anarchic escapades in autonomy, even in "temporary autonomous zones," usually express individualistic, indeed egocentric, impulses that in practice lead to demands for the unrestricted rights of sovereign individuals without requiring of them any obligatory duties. Anarchists and their affines often dismiss obligations of any sort as authoritarian or worse. But one of the great maxims of the First International, to which all factions subscribed, was Marx's slogan: "No Rights Without Duties, No Duties Without Rights." In a free society, as revolutionaries of all kinds generally understood, we would enjoy freedoms ("rights"), but we would also have responsibilities ("duties") we would have to exercise. The concept of individual autonomy becomes meaningless when it denies the obligations that every individual owes to society as social responsibilities.

We are all shaped to one degree or another by forces outside our control and, frankly, *beyond* our control. No one can live forever, or do without nutrition; and after a certain age simply keeping oneself in health requires numerous—even onerous—efforts. In the fullness of daily life, long life requires effort and calls for actions that may be painful, annoying, demanding, and disagreeable. We are thus always under some kind of constraint; the real issue is whether a constraint is rational and advances the fulfillment of the good life or whether it is exploitative and irrational. It is the height of hubris to believe that total "autonomy"—including the right to "choose" whatever one wants about anything—can coexist with society.

Communalists seek to create a democratic, collectivist social order. Property, in a communalist society, will be municipalized and its overall management placed in the hands of popular assemblies. In past revolutions efforts at "workers' control" over factories and farms were frequently plagued by parochialism and evolved into forms of collectivistic capitalism. By contrast, communalism calls for the full administrative coordination of all public enterprises by confederal committees, whose members are the responsible voices of the popular assemblies; without the assent of the citizenry as a whole in a confederation-wide vote, no policy-making confederal decision can be valid.

Pragmatically, a communalist polity requires a written constitution and, yes, regulatory laws, to avoid a structurelessness that would yield mindless anarchy. The more defined the rights and duties of citizens are, the more easily can they be upheld as part of the general interest against the intrusion of petty tyrannies. It is not the clarity of definitions that has oppressed humanity; rather, wrong definitions have been used cannily to uphold privilege and domination. Indeed, constitutions and laws served to free the ancient bondsman of arbitrary despotism and even women of patriarchal control. From the earliest times oppressed peoples have raised the demand for constitutions and laws; in their absence "barons" (to use Hesiod's term in the seventh century BCE) arbitrarily inflicted rule and terror on the masses. Anarchist demands to eliminate law as such, without providing for substantive ways to avoid the oppressions of structurelessness and arbitrary behavior, have produced mayhem and tyranny more reliably than liberty and autonomy. Historically, constitutions and laws have indeed been oppressive, often grossly so, but this raises the question of their content, not the fact of their existence. Indeed, only a peculiarly egocentric mentality will assume that a rationally constituted society and a rationally formulated body of laws must necessarily violate personal autonomy and hence social freedom. Nothing more clearly sheds light on the individualistic basis of present-day anarchism and its Proudhonesque origins

than this personalistic fear of any limitation on individual behavior. Taking recourse to biologistic "instinct" as a guide to a libertarian lifestyle, rooting freedom in human nature and in prehistory, anarchists inadvertently petrify freedom rather than ensure it.

Communalism's concept of the free municipality (in contrast to the primitivistic, technophobic anarchic image of "autonomy") is, I would argue, a product of reason in history, or what I have called the "legacy of freedom," and indeed the *embodiment* of reason institutionally and legally. It is reason *constituted* in institutions, embodied in the functioning of these institutions—that is, in their constitution and their laws, as well as in citizens, and their personal life-ways, productive activities, and intersubjective relations or "socializations." To reduce constitutions and laws ipso facto to trammels that bind free will is to make a mockery not only of reason but of humaneness—for what remains of the human being, after this reduction, is little more than animality and biology. It thereby negates the historic function of the free city except as a habitation of a peculiar kind, and in the spirit of William Morris (whose utopia *News from Nowhere* is by no means a credit to a rational vision of society), the less we have of it, the better!

Communalism, in effect, declares that each individual should act with full regard for the needs of all, and that democracy decidedly includes the rights of a dissenting minority to freely and fully express itself. Within a confederation over broader regional areas the decisions of individual assemblies merge with those of all the assemblies; thus the popular decisions of the entire confederation are taken as a single assembly.

Assuredly, a failure to deal rationally and humanely with necessity, which cannot be evaded in any aspect of life, is the most certain path to oppression and worse. Pure anarchism, whose crude individualism regards the ego as a natural entity rather than a socially formed subject, tends to negate everything about capitalist society and seek out its opposite without any qualifications, as though a libertarian society is the mere negation of bourgeois society. In its most extreme form, this express individualism demands the disbanding of society as such; hence the fascination of so many anarchist writers with primitivism, their technophobic outlook, their aversion to regulation of any kind, and indeed their hatred of necessity. Must even the self-regulatory features of social life really be abolished in favor of reliance on an alleged instinct for mutual aid or, more startling, on custom? Beyond such mechanism, anarchism in fact relies on old socialist tenets, such as workers' control and direct democracy, which it has picked up and, in the best of cases, eagerly embraced as its own.

Communalism demands great advances in theory (not its denigration) as well as permanent activity (in the form of firmly established institutions, deeply rooted in a community and marked by their continuity)—not ad hoc escapades that dissipate after a demonstration, riot, or the establishment of a "temporary autonomous zone." If activism is reduced to demonstrations, riots, and TAZs, then revolution is nothing but a few hours of frolicking, after which the real authority of the state and ruling class takes over. Capitalism has nothing to fear from frolicking; indeed, its fashion designers and lifestyle specialists are only too eager to turn juvenile expressions of dissent into highly merchandisable commodities.

No less disturbing is the passion that many devotees of pure anarchism exhibit for consensus as a form of decision-making. The veneration of individual autonomy can become so radical that it would permit no majority, no matter how large, to override even "a majority of one," as some anarchist writers have put it. In this extreme fetishization of individualism, the core anarchic concept of the all-sovereign ego stands, in all its splendor, against the wishes of the majority. By permitting the self-sufficient ego, by its merest inclinations, to override the wishes of the com-

munity, anarchism becomes untenable. Coordinated political organization become impossible, as it did in Spain in 1933, when part of the Nosotros affinity group, led by Buenaventura Durruti, chose to lead an insurrection in Saragossa (which was doomed), while others like Juan García Oliver, his trusted *compañero*, simply abstained and discouraged others from giving military aid to their comrades in the Aragonese city.

Communalist Organization

The establishment of an organization places certain constraints on the autonomy of its members, but that in itself does not necessarily make it authoritarian. "Libertarian organization" is not a contradiction in terms. In the early twentieth century leading Spanish anarchists had opposed the very formation of the CNT because it was an organization and as such demanded of its members the fulfillment of onerous duties. But organization as such is not authoritarian.

The formation of communalist political institutions depends on the formation of a communalist organization. How can one be established? It would be useful to provide a summary of some measures that will be necessary to create such an organization, as well as briefly describe the role it can be expected to play in a larger libertarian municipalist movement.

To begin with, politically concerned individuals who feel the need to explore communalist ideas and practices may form a study group in a given neighborhood or town. The study groups seek to inform and develop those interested in social and political change into fully competent individuals and leaders. At a time when the knowledge of philosophy, history, and social theory has retreated appallingly, the objects of study may range from immediate political issues to the great intellectual traditions of the past. Minimally, however, the group should give social theory and the history of ideas pronounced attention, particularly insofar as these subjects enlarge members' understanding of a municipalist approach to democracy and social change.

The study groups, whose members are by now composed of individuals who are committed to a serious exploration of ideas, should begin to function within the neighborhood, town, or city in which they are located. They seek to enter and remain in the public domain—to be a continual revolutionary presence by virtue of their ideas, their emphasis on organization, their methods, and their goals. Communalists refuse to withdraw from the public domain in the name of individual sovereignty, artistic expression, or self-absorption. They wear no ski masks, either metaphorically or physically, and do not allow mindless dogmatic assumptions and simplifications to stand in their way. They are always accessible and transparent, involved and responsible. They can be expected to establish a wellinformed, carefully structured organization, if possible with neighborhood branches.

The organization's goals should be carefully formulated into a concrete program, based on communalist principles, that consistently demands the formation of policy-making *municipal popular assemblies.* As a component of a minimum program, no issue is too trivial for communalists to ignore, be it transportation, recreation, education, welfare, zoning, environment, housing, public safety, democracy, civil rights, and the like. The primacy that communalists give to the establishment and development of popular assemblies does not mean that they ignore other issues of concern to the citizenry. To the contrary they resolutely fight—both within municipal institutions and outside them—for all steps to improve civic life in their communities and elsewhere. On specific issues, such as globalization, environmental problems, ethnic and gender discrimina-

tion, communalist organizations freely enter into coalitions with other organizations to engage in common struggles, but they should never surrender their ideological or organizational independence or their claim to their own independent action. Their identity, ideas, and institutions are their most precious possessions and must never be impugned in the interests of "unity."

Indeed, while working on these issues, they always seek to enlarge them, to reveal through a *transitional* program their deep-seated roots. They *escalate* cries for reforms into radical demands, seeking to expand every civil and political right of the people by creating the institutional power to formulate decision-making policies and see to their execution. The implications of solving these problems is a call for a revolution in social relations—that is, the achievement of a *maximum* program based on the confederation of municipalist assemblies in which property is steadily municipalized and subjected to coordination by confederal administrative bodies.[2]

The communalist organization, while always retaining its identity and program, initiates regular public forums to engage in discursive, face-to-face democratic exploration of ideas—partly to spread its program and basic ideas and partly to create public spaces that provide venues for radical civic debate, until actual popular assemblies can be established. While it will clearly become involved in local issues, its primary focus should be the public domain where real power is vested: municipal elections, which allow for a close association between communalist candidates (for city councils or their equivalents) and the people.

The ablest members of the communalist organization should stand in *municipal elections* and call for the changing of city charters so as to legally empower the municipal assemblies. The new communalist organization should expressly seek to be elected to municipal positions with a view to using charter or extralegal changes to significantly shift municipal power from existing state-like and seemingly representative institutions to popular assemblies as embodiments of direct democracy. Where no city charter exists that can be changed electorally, communalists should attempt (both educationally and organizationally) to convene direct democratic assemblies on an *extralegal* basis, exercising *moral* pressure on statist institutions, in the hope that people will, in time, regard them as authentic centers of public power with the expectation that they can thereby gain structural power. Communalism never compromises by advocating delegated or statist institutional structures, and in contrast to organizations such as the Greens, it refuses to exist within the institutional cage of the nationstate or to try to gild it with reforms that ultimately simply make the state more palatable.

A communalist group or movement that refuses to run candidates in municipal elections where it can, and thereby removes its focus on the centers of institutionalized municipal power, will shrivel into an ad hoc, rootless, sporadic, polymorphous form of anarchic protest and quickly fade away. It will be communalist in name only, not in content. It is concerned not with the locus of power but with mere defiance at best, which leads nowhere or terminates in frolicking with the system at worst. In the communalist vision, public assemblies in confederation are a means for destroying the state and capitalism, as well as the embodiments of a rational society. To hop from demonstration to demonstration without attempting to recreate power in the form of public assemblies by taking control of city councils (which means practicing politics in opposition to parliamentary statecraft) is to make a mockery of communalism.

---

[2]The term "transitional program," coined by Trotsky in the 1930s, could be applied to any socialist program that seeks to escalate "reformist" demands to a revolutionary level. That the phrase was formulated by Trotsky does not trouble me; it is precise and appropriate, and its use does not make one into a Bolshevik.

Communalists seek to create a fully democratic society, but they never fetishize numbers, be it numbers of members, voters, participants in public assemblies, and the like. In a communalist polity it suffices that the doors of a public assembly are always open to the citizenry. If a majority of a neighborhood, town, or city choose to attend an assembly meeting and become participants in making important decisions, all the better, but if only a few are sufficiently interested in the political fate of their community to attend, so be it. The assembly's decisions carry the same weight, regardless of whether the number of people present is a dozen, a hundred, or several thousand. Political decisions should be made by politically involved citizens: Under no circumstances should poor attendance at a public assembly be an excuse to abandon a direct and discursive democracy in favor of anonymous voting at polls, which renders politics impersonal and non-discursive.

Communalist groups call for the popular assemblies—be they legally empowered or only morally empowered—to confederate, with a view toward replacing the state. In effect, communalists aim at establishing a *dual power* of citizen-constituted institutions that will challenge the authority, legitimacy, and policies of existing institutions. Throughout, municipal confederations should hold regular congresses and conferences, plenaries and committee meetings. As need arises, they establish extraordinary commissions to undertake specific tasks. Wherever assemblies elect delegates to coordinate a confederal association, they ensure that the delegates' powers are always mandated by their respective citizens' assemblies and that the delegates themselves are always subject to recall. Emerging libertarian municipalities must be united through the formation of well-organized and socially responsible confederations.

An organization that is more advanced theoretically and programmatically than the broader public movement of which it is part has every right to regard itself as a vanguard, just as the French term *avant-garde* denoted that certain artistic, musical, and other schools were more advanced in practice and thought. Obviously, such an acknowledgement does not confer upon a vanguard any special privileges, but it simply recognizes that their ideas and practical contributions can be expected to have a marked, indeed guiding, importance. An advanced, highly conscious political organization should provide leadership, yet always retaining its independence institutionally and functionally. By the same token, not everyone in an organization has the same level of experience, knowledge, wisdom, and leadership ability. Leadership that is not formalized will be informal, but it will not disappear. Many individuals in revolutionary groups were outright leaders, whose views had more significance than others; it is a disservice to perpetuate the deception that they were simply "influential militants." Leadership always exists, however much libertarians try to deny the fact by concealing its existence beneath euphemisms.

A serious libertarian organization would establish not only leaders but also means by which the membership may recall leaders whose views and behavior they oppose, and effectively modify their activities. On the other hand, frivolous opposition to leaders for its own sake should never be tolerated. One of the most scandalous features of anarchist organizations (when they exist) has been the dizzying individualism that permits neurotic personalities to disrupt meetings and activities as expressions of selfhood. Similarly, the use of ad hominem attacks, gossip, and personal rumors to undermine the influence of leaders and subvert serious ideas has done much to prevent anarchists from establishing effective organizations.

Finally, communalism is not simply a vehicle for establishing a communalist polity and the appropriate institutions. It is also an *outlook* that includes a philosophical approach to reality as well as society and toward the natural world as well as human development. It contends that

the ongoing crisis in our culture and values stems not from an overabundance of civilization but from an insufficiency of it. It defends technological development, *used rationally and morally*, as reducing labor and creating free time that potentially allows citizens to participate in public affairs, time for creativity, a reasonable abundance in the means of life, and even, in a rational and ecological society, the ability to improve upon the impact of natural forces. Post-scarcity abundance (not to be confused with the mindless consumerism fostered by capitalism) must be wisely tempered and controlled by municipal assemblies and the free confederal institutions that an emancipated society can create.

Above all, communalism stakes out a claim as a continuation of all that is emancipatory in the Enlightenment tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It firmly shares the Enlightenment's conception that freedom constitutes the defining potentiality of humanness: the potentiality for the self-elaboration of reason by rational praxis until humanity finally achieves the actualization of a truly rational society.

This self-actualization of humanity's potentiality for reason, creativity, and self-consciousness is more than a distant ideal; it is the one abiding goal that gives meaning to any effort to change the world. Indeed, the magnificent goal of advancing reason, creativity, and selfconsciousness in human affairs is all that gives meaning to the evolution of humanity itself as the potentially creative agent; in its absence the world has no meaning. This goal should hover over *every* transformative project that communalists undertake in their efforts to make an inhuman world into a human one and an irrational society into a rational one – favoring a commitment to truth and innovation, irrespective of what is so misleadingly called realism and adaptation. It is not by any pragmatic map but by this flame, which is fueled by reason's conception of "what should be" as against "what is," that humanity can fulfill its potentiality for reason and self-consciousness, thereby justifying itself in the scheme of things.

theanarchistlibrary.org