

A Politics for the Twenty-First Century

It would be helpful to place libertarian municipalism in a broad historical perspective, all the more to understand its revolutionary character in human affairs generally as well as its place in the repertoire of antistatist practices. The commune, the town or city, or more broadly, the municipality, is not merely a "space" created by a given density of human habitations. In terms of its history as a civilizing tendency in humanity's development, the municipality is integrally part of the sweeping process whereby human beings began to dissolve biologically conditioned social relations based on real or fictitious blood ties, with their primordial hostility to "strangers," and slowly replace them by largely social and rational institutions, rights, and duties that increasingly encompassed all residents of an urban space, irrespective of consanguinity and biological facts. The town, city, municipality, or commune (the equivalent word, in Latin countries, for "municipality") was the emerging civic substitute, based on residence and social interests, for the tribal blood group, which had been based on myths of a common ancestry. The municipality, however slowly and incompletely, formed the necessary condition for human association based on rational discourse, material interest, and a secular culture, irrespective of and often in conflict with ancestral roots and blood ties. Indeed, the fact that people can gather in local assemblies, discuss

Blood
tie



and share creatively in the exchange of ideas without any hostility or suspicion, despite disparate ethnic, linguistic, and national backgrounds, is a grand historic achievement of civilization, one that is the work of centuries involving a painful discarding of primordial definitions of ancestry and the replacement of these archaic definitions by reason, knowledge, and a growing sense of our status as members of a common humanity.

In great part, this humanizing development was the work of the municipality—the increasingly free space in which people, as people, began to see each other realistically, steadily unfettered by archaic notions of biological ties, tribal affiliations, and a mystical, tradition-laden, and parochial identity. I do not contend that this process of civilization, a term that derives from the Latin word for city and citizenship, has been completely achieved. Far from it: without the existence of a rational society, the municipality can easily become a megalopolis, in which community, however secular, is replaced by atomization and an inhuman social scale beyond the comprehension of its citizens—indeed, the space for class, racial, religious, and other irrational conflicts.

But both historically and contemporaneously, citification forms the necessary condition—albeit by no means fully actualized—for the realization of humanity's potentiality to become fully human, rational, and collectivistic, thereby shedding divisions based on presumed blood affiliations and differences, mindless custom, fearful imaginaries, and a nonrational, often intuitional, notion of rights and duties.

Hence, the municipality is the potential arena for realizing the great goal of transforming parochialized human beings into truly universal human beings, a genuine *humanitas*, divested of the darker brutish attributes of the primordial world. The municipality in which all human beings can be citizens, irrespective of their ethnic background and ideological convictions, constitutes the true arena of a libertarian communist society. Metaphorically speaking, it is not only a desideratum for rational human beings, without which a free society is impossible, it is also the future of a rational humanity,

humanity's
potentiality
in the
city

the indispensable space for actualizing humanity's potentialities for freedom and self-consciousness.

I do not presume to claim that a confederation of libertarian municipalities—a Commune of communes—has ever existed in the past. Yet, no matter how frequently I disclaim the existence of any historical “models” and “paradigms” for libertarian municipalities, my critics still try to saddle me with the many social defects of Athens, revolutionary New England towns, and the like, as somehow an integral part of my “ideals.” I privilege no single city or group of cities—be they classical Athens, the free cities of the medieval world, the town meetings of the American Revolution, the sections of the Great French Revolution, or the anarchosyndicalist collectives that emerged in the Spanish Revolution—as the full actualization, still less the comprehensive “models” or “paradigms,” of the libertarian municipalist vision.

Yet significant features—despite various, often unavoidable distortions—existed among all of these municipalities and the federations that they formed. Their value for us lies in the fact that we can learn from all of them about the ways in which they practiced the democratic precepts by which they were guided. And we can incorporate the best of their institutions for our own and future times, study their defects, and gain inspiration from the fact that they did exist and functioned with varying degrees of success for generations, if not centuries.

At present, I think it is important to recognize that when we advance a politics of libertarian municipalism, we are not engaged in discussing a mere tactic or strategy for creating a public sphere. Rather, we are trying to create a new political culture that is not only consistent with anarchist communist goals but that includes real efforts to actualize these goals, fully cognizant of all the difficulties that face us and the revolutionary implications that they hold for us in the years ahead.

Let me note here that the “neighborhood” is not merely the place where people make their homes, rear their children, and purchase many of their goods. Under a more political coloration, so to speak,

new
political
culture



a neighborhood may well include those vital spaces where people congregate to discuss political as well as social issues. Indeed, it is the extent to which public issues are openly discussed in a city or town that truly defines the neighborhood as an important political and power space.

By this, I do not mean only an assembly, where citizens discuss and gird themselves to fight for specific policies; I also mean the neighborhood as the center of a town, where citizens may gather as a large group to share their views and give public expression to their policies. This was the function of the Athenian agora, for example, and the town squares in the Middle Ages. The spaces for political life may be multiple, but they are generally highly specific and definable, not random or ad hoc.

Such essentially political neighborhoods have often appeared in times of unrest, when sizable numbers of individuals spontaneously occupy spaces for discussion, as in the Hellenic agora. I recall them during my own youth in New York City, in Union Square and Crotona Park, where hundreds and possibly thousands of men and women appeared weekly to informally discuss the issues of the day. Hyde Park in London constituted such a civic space, as did the Palais-Royal in Paris, which was the breeding ground of the Great French Revolution and the Revolution of 1830.

And during the early days of the 1848 revolution in Paris, scores (possibly hundreds) of neighborhood assembly halls existed as clubs and forums and potentially formed the basis for a restoration of the older neighborhood sections of 1793. The best estimates indicate that club membership did not exceed 70,000 out of a total population of about a million residents. Yet, had this club movement been coordinated by an active and politically coherent revolutionary organization, it could have become a formidable, possibly a successful force, during the weeks of crisis that led to the June insurrection of the Parisian workers.

There is no reason, in principle, why such spaces and the people who regularly occupy them cannot become citizens' assemblies as well. Indeed, like certain sections in the Great French Revolution,

they may well take a leading role in sparking a revolution and pushing it forward to its logical conclusion.

A problem exists in anarchist communist theory: it fails to acknowledge that a political sphere, distinguishable from the state and potentially libertarian in its possibilities, must be acknowledged and its potentialities for a truly libertarian politics explored. We cannot content ourselves with simplistically dividing civilization into a workaday world of everyday life that is properly social, as I call it, in which we reproduce the conditions of our individual existence at work, in the home, and among our friends, and, of course, the state, which reduces us at best to docile observers of the activities of professionals who administer our civic and national affairs. Between these two worlds is still another world, the realm of the political, where our ancestors in the past, at various times and places historically, exercised varying, sometimes complete control over the commune and the confederation to which it belonged.

It is a lacuna in anarchist communist theory that the political was conflated with the state, thereby effacing a major distinction between a political sphere in which people in varying degrees exercised power, often through direct assemblies, over their civic environment, and the state, in which people had no direct control, often no control at all, over that environment.

If politics is denatured to mean little more than statecraft and the manipulation of people by their so-called "representatives," then a condition that has acquired varying forms of expression in the classical Athenian assembly, popular medieval civic assemblies, town meetings, and the revolutionary sectional assemblies of Paris, is conveniently erased and the multitudinous institutions for managing a municipality become reducible to the behavior of cynical parliamentarians or worse. It is a gross simplification of historical development and the world in which we live to see the political simply as the practice of statecraft. Just as the tribe emerged long before the city, so the city emerged long before the state—indeed, often in opposition to it. Mesopotamian cities, appearing in the

politics
vs
Statecraft
↓

land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers some six thousand years ago, are believed to have been managed by popular assemblies long before they were forced by intercity conflicts to establish state-like institutions and ultimately despotic imperial institutions. It was in these early cities that politics, that is, popular ways of managing the city, were born and may very well have thrived. The state followed later and elaborated itself institutionally, often in bitter opposition to tendencies that tried to restore popular control over civic affairs.

Nor can we afford to ignore the fact that the same conflict also emerged in early Athens and probably other Greek poleis long before the development of the state reached a relatively high degree of completion. One can see the recurrence of similar conflicts in the struggle of the Gracchi brothers and popular assemblies in Rome against the elitist Senate and, repeatedly, in the medieval cities, long before the rise of late medieval aristocracies and the Baroque monarchies of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Kropotkin did not write nonsense when he pointed to the free cities of Europe, marked not by the existence of states but by their absence.

Indeed, let us also acknowledge that the state itself underwent a process of development and differentiation, at times developing no further than a loose, almost minimal system of coercion, at other times extending further into an ever-growing apparatus, and finally, in this century in particular, acquiring totalitarian control over every aspect of human existence—an apparatus that was only too familiar thousands of years ago in Asia and even in Indian America in pre-Columbian times. The classical Athenian state was only partially statist; it constituted a fraternity, often riven by class conflicts, of select citizens who collectively oppressed slaves, women, and even foreign residents. The medieval state was often a much looser state formation than, say, the Roman imperial state, and at various times in history (one thinks of the *comuneros* in Spain during the sixteenth century and the sections in France during the eighteenth), the state almost completely collapsed and direct democracies based on

City vs. State (historically)

X!
15th/16th
Importance

communalist political principles played a hegemonic role in social affairs.

Libertarian municipalism is concerned with the political sphere, including aspects of basic civic importance, such as the economic. It does not draw strict impenetrable barriers between the two to the point where they are implacably set against each other. Libertarian municipalism calls for the municipalization of the economy and, where material interests between communities overlap, the confederalization of the economy.

Nor are libertarian municipalists indifferent to the many cultural factors that must play a role in the formation of true citizens, indeed, rounded human beings. But at the same time, let us not reduce every cultural desideratum to the social sphere—to create the myth that the municipality can be reduced to a family—and ignore its overlap with the political. The distinctions between them will only be lost in that poststructural homogenization of everything, making their unique identities almost completely meaningless and potentially, in fact, totalitarian.

Thus, the libertarian municipalist arena may be a school for educating its youth and its mature citizens; but what makes it particularly significant, especially at this time, is that it is a sphere of power relations that must be crystallized against capitalism, the marketplace, the forces for ecological destruction, and the state. Indeed, without a movement that keeps this need completely in mind, libertarian municipalism can easily degenerate in this age of academic specialization into another subject in a classroom curriculum.

Finally, libertarian municipalism rests its politics today on the historically preemptive role of the city in relation to the state, and above all on the fact that civic institutions still exist, however distorted they may appear or however captive to the state they may be, institutions that can be enlarged, radicalized, and eventually aimed at the elimination of the state. The city council, however feeble its powers may be, still exists as the remnant of the communes with which it was identified in the past, especially in the Great French Revolution and the Paris Commune of 1871. The possibility

of re-creating a sectional democracy still remains, assuming either a legal or extralegal form. We must bear in mind that the French revolutionary sections did not have any prior tradition on which to rest their claims to legitimacy—indeed, they actually emerged from the elitist assemblies or districts of 1789, which the monarchy had created to elect the Parisian deputies to the Estates General—except that they refused to disband after they completed their electoral role and remained as watchdogs over the behavior of the Estates in Versailles.

We, too, are faced with the task of restructuring and expanding the civic democratic institutions that still exist, however vestigial their forms and powers may be; of attempting to base them on old or new popular assemblies—and, to be quite categorical, of creating new legal or, most emphatically, extralegal popular democratic institutions where vestiges of civic democracy do not exist. In doing so, we are direly in need of a movement—indeed, a responsible, well-structured, and programmatically coherent organization—that can provide the educational resources, means of mobilization, and vital ideas for achieving our libertarian communist and municipalist goals.

Our program should be flexible in the special sense that it poses minimum demands that we seek to achieve at once, given the political sophistication of the community in which we function. But such demands would easily degenerate into reformism if they did not escalate into a body of transitional demands that would ultimately lead to our maximum demands for a libertarian communist society.

Nor can we give up our seemingly utopian vision that the great metropolitan areas can be structurally decentralized. Cities on the scale of New York, London, and Paris, not to speak of Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Bombay, and the like, must ultimately be parceled into smaller cities and decentralized to a point where they are once again humanly scaled communities, not huge and incomprehensible urban belts. Libertarian municipalism takes its immediate point of departure from the existing facts of urban life, many of

#

→

what are these concepts?

#

which are beyond the comprehension of its residents. But it always strives to physically as well as politically fragment the great cities until it achieves the great anarchist communist and even Marxian goal of scaling all cities to human dimensions.

Perhaps the most common criticism that both Marxists and anarchists have presented is the claim that modern cities are too huge to be organized around workable popular assemblies. Some critics assume that if we are to have true democracy, everyone from age zero to one hundred, irrespective of health, mental condition, or disposition, must be included in a popular assembly—and that an assembly must be as small as an “affinity group.” But in large world cities, these critics suggest, which have several million residents, we would require many thousands of assemblies in order to achieve true democracy. In such cities, such a multiplicity of small assemblies, they argue, would be just too cumbersome and unworkable.

But a large urban population is itself no obstacle to libertarian municipalism. Indeed, based on this kind of calculation—which would count all residents as participating citizens—the forty-eight Parisian sections of 1793 would have been completely dysfunctional, in view of the fact that revolutionary Paris had a total of 500,000 to 600,000 people. If every man, woman, and child, indeed, ever had attended sectional assemblies, and each assembly had had no more than forty people, my arithmetic tells me that about 15,000 assemblies would have been needed to accommodate all the people of revolutionary Paris. Under such circumstances, one wonders how the French Revolution could ever have occurred.

A popular democracy, to begin with, is not premised on the idea that everyone can, will, or even want to attend popular assemblies. Nor should anyone who professes to be an anarchist make participation compulsory, coercing everyone into doing so. Even more significantly, it has rarely happened—indeed, it has never happened, in my knowledge of revolutionary history—that the great majority of people in a particular place, still less everyone, engages in revolution. In the face of insurrection in a revolutionary situation, while

How Applicable to Large Modern cities?

what size? □

unknown militants, aided by a fairly small number of supporters, rise up and overthrow the established order, most people tend to be observers.

Having reviewed carefully the course of almost every major revolution in the Euro-American world, I can say with some knowledge that even in a completely successful revolution, it was always a minority of the people who attended meetings of assemblies that made significant decisions about the fate of their society. The very differentiated political and social consciousness, interests, education, and backgrounds among masses in a capitalist society guarantee that people will be drawn into revolutions in waves, if at all. The foremost, most militant wave, at first, is numerically surprisingly small; it is followed by seeming bystanders who, if an uprising seems to be capable of success, merge with the first wave, and only after the uprising is likely to be successful do the politically less developed waves, in varying degrees, follow it. Even after an uprising is successful, it takes time for a substantial majority of the people to fully participate in the revolutionary process, commonly as crowds in demonstrations, more rarely as participants in revolutionary institutions.

In the English Revolution of the 1640s, for example, it was primarily the Puritan army that raised the most democratic issues, with the support of the Levellers, who formed a very small fraction of the civilian population. The American Revolution was notoriously supported, albeit by no means actively, by only one-third of the colonial population; the Great French Revolution found its principal support in Paris and was carried forward by forty-eight sections, most of which were rooted in assemblies that were poorly attended, except at times when momentous decisions aroused the most revolutionary neighborhoods.

Indeed, what decided the fate of most revolutions was less the amount of support their militants received than the degree of resistance they encountered. What brought Louis XVI and his family back to Paris from Versailles in October 1789 was certainly not all the women of Paris—indeed, only a few thousand made the famous

march to Versailles—but the king's own inability to mobilize a sufficiently large and reliable force to resist them. The Russian Revolution of February 1917 in Petrograd, for many historians the "model" of a mass spontaneous revolution (and an uprising far more nuanced than most accounts suggest), succeeded because not even the tsar's personal guard, let alone such formerly reliable supports of the autocracy as the Cossacks, was prepared to defend the monarchy. Indeed, in revolutionary Barcelona in 1936, the resistance to Franco's forces was initiated by only a few thousand anarchosyndicalists with the aid of the Assault Guards, whose discipline, weaponry, and training were indispensable factors in pinning down and ultimately defeating the regular army's uprising.

It is such constellations of forces, in fact, that explain how revolutions actually succeed. They do not triumph because "everyone," or even a majority of the population, actively participates in overthrowing an oppressive regime, but because the armed forces of the old order and the population at-large are no longer willing to defend it against a militant and resolute minority.

Nor is it likely, however desirable it may be, that after a successful insurrection, the great majority of the people or even the oppressed will personally participate in revolutionizing society. Following the success of a revolution, the majority of people tend to withdraw into the localities in which they live, however large or small, where the problems of everyday life have their most visible impact on the masses. These localities may be residential and/or occupational neighborhoods in large cities, the environs of villages and hamlets, or even at some distance from the center of a city or region, fairly dispersed localities in which people live and work.

No—I do not think the large size of modern cities constitutes an insuperable obstacle to the formation of a neighborhood assembly movement. The doors of the neighborhood assemblies should always be open to whoever lives in the neighborhood. Politically less aware individuals may choose not to attend their neighborhood assembly, and they should not be obliged to attend. The assemblies, regardless of their size, will have problems enough without having