Communalism, the Democratic Dimension of Anarchism

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happening on an epidemic scale today.[12] It would be ironic, indeed, if an individualist anarchism and its various mutations, from the academic and transcendentally moral to the chaotic and the lumpen, in the course of rejecting democracy even for "a minority of one," were to further raise the walls of dogma that are steadily growing around the libertarian ideal, and if, wittingly or not, anarchism were to turn into another narcissistic cult that snugly fits into an alienated, commodified, introverted and egocentric society.

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[12] A detailed discussion of the differences between the social domain, which includes the ways in which we associate for personal and economic ends; the public sphere or political domain; and the state in all its phases and forms of development can be found in my book Urbanization Without Cities (1987; Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992).

control by vested interests (such as workers' control, private control, and more dangerously, State control), it may justly be regarded as the processual actualization of the libertarian ideal as a daily praxis.[11]

The fact that a Communalist politics entails participation in municipal elections — based, to be sure, on an unyielding program that demands the formation of popular assemblies and their confederation — does not mean that entry into existing village, town and city councils involves participation in state organs, any more than establishing an anarchosyndicalist union in a privately owned factory involves participation in capitalist forms of production. One need only turn to the French Revolution of 1789–94 to see how seemingly state institutions, like the municipal "districts" established under the monarchy in 1789 to expedite elections to the Estates General, were transformed four years later into largely revolutionary bodies, or "sections," that nearly gave rise to the "Commune of communes." Their movement for a sectional democracy was defeated during the insurrection of June 2, 1793 — not at the hands of the monarchy, but by the treachery of the Jacobins.

Capitalism will not generously provide us the popular democratic institutions we need. Its control over society today is ubiquitous, not only in what little remains of the public sphere, but in the minds of many self-styled radicals. A revolutionary people must either assert their control over institutions that are basic to their public lives — which Bakunin correctly perceived to be their municipal councils — or else they will have no choice but to withdraw into their private lives, as is already

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on a mystification of criminality, asociality, intellectual incoherence, anti-intellectualism and disorder for its own sake is simply lumpen. It feeds on the dregs of capitalism itself. However much such behavior invokes the "rights" of the ego as it dissolves the political into the personal or inflates the personal into a transcendental category, it is a priori in the sense that has no origins outside the mind to even potentially support it. As Bakunin and Kropotkin argued repeatedly, individuality has never existed apart from society and the individual's own evolution has been coextensive with social evolution. To speak of "The Individual" apart from its social roots and social involvements is as meaningless as to speak of a society that contains no people or institutions.

Merely to exist, institutions must have form, as I argued some thirty years ago in my essay "The Forms of Freedom," lest freedom itself — individual as well as social — lose its definability. Institutions must be rendered functional, not abstracted into Kantian categories that float in a rarefied academic air. They must have the tangibility of structure, however offensive a term like structure may be to individualist libertarians: concretely, they must have the means, policies and experimental praxis to arrive at decisions. Unless everyone is to be so psychologically homogeneous and society's interests so uniform in character that dissent is simply meaningless, there must be room for conflicting proposals, discussion, rational explication and majority decisions — in short, democracy.

Like it or not, such a democracy, if it is libertarian, will be Communalist and institutionalized in such a way that it is face-to-face, direct, and grassroots, a democracy that advances our ideas beyond negative liberty to positive liberty. A Communalist democracy obliges us to develop a public sphere — and in the Athenian meaning of the term, a politics — that grows in tension and ultimately in a decisive conflict with the State.

Confederal, antihierarchical, and collectivist, based on the municipal management of the means of life rather than their

to attend municipal assemblies or function as active participants in them—and question how "practical" such assemblies could be—in large cities like New York, Mexico City, and Tokyo, may I suggest that a Communalist approach raises the issue of whether we can indeed change the existing society at all and achieve the "Commune of communes."

If such a Communalist approach seems terribly formidable, I can only suspect that for life-style anarchists the battle is already lost. For my part, if anarchy came to mean little more than an aesthetics of "self-cultivation," an titillating riot, spray-can graffiti, or the heroics of personalistic acts nourished by a self-indulgent "imaginary," I would have little in common with it. Theatrical personalism became too much in style when the sixties counterculture turned into the seventies New Age culture—and became a model for bourgeois fashion designers and boutiques.

IV

Anarchism is on the retreat today. If we fail to elaborate the democratic dimension of anarchism, we will miss the opportunity not only to form a vital movement, but to prepare people for a revolutionary social praxis in the future. Alas, we are witnessing the appalling desiccation of a great tradition, such that neo-Situationists, nihilists, primitivists, antirationalists, anticivilizationists and avowed "chaotics" are closeting themselves in their egos, reducing anything resembling public political activity to juvenile antics.

None of which is to deny the importance of a libertarian culture, one that is aesthetic, playful, and broadly imaginative. The anarchists of the last century and part of the present one justifiably took pride in the fact that many innovative artists, particularly painters and novelists, aligned themselves with anarchic views of reality and morality. But behavior that verges

I

Seldom have socially important words become more confused and divested of their historic meaning than they are at present. Two centuries ago, it is often forgotten, "democracy" was deprecated by monarchists and republicans alike as "mob rule." Today, democracy is hailed as "representative democracy," an oxymoron that refers to little more than a republican oligarchy of the chosen few who ostensibly speak for the powerless many.

"Communism," for its part, once referred to a cooperative society that would be based morally on mutual respect and on an economy in which each contributed to the social labor fund according to his or her ability and received the means of life according to his or her needs. Today, "communism" is associated with the Stalinist gulag and wholly rejected as totalitarian. Its cousin, "socialism" — which once denoted a politically free society based on various forms of collectivism and equitable material returns for labor — is currently interchangeable with a somewhat humanistic bourgeois liberalism.

During the 1980s and 1990s, as the entire social and political spectrum has shifted ideologically to the right, "anarchism" itself has not been immune to redefinition. In the Anglo-American sphere, anarchism is being divested of its social ideal by an emphasis on personal autonomy, an emphasis that is draining it of its historic vitality. A Stirnerite individualism — marked by an advocacy of lifestyle changes, the cultivation of behavioral idiosyncrasies and even an embrace of outright mysticism — has become increasingly prominent. This personalistic "lifestyle anarchism" is steadily eroding the socialistic core of anarchist concepts of freedom.

Let me stress that in the British and American social tradition, autonomy and freedom are not equivalent terms. By insisting the need to eliminate personal domination, autonomy focuses on the individual as the formative component and lo-

cus of society. By contrast, freedom, despite its looser usages, denotes the absence of domination in society, of which the individual is part. This contrast becomes very important when individualist anarchists equate collectivism as such with the tyranny of the community over its members.

Today, if an anarchist theorist like L. Susan Brown can assert that "a group is a collection of individuals, no more and no less," rooting anarchism in the abstract individual, we have reason to be concerned. Not that this view is entirely new to anarchism; various anarchist historians have described it as implicit in the libertarian outlook. Thus the individual appears ab novo, endowed with natural rights and bereft of roots in society or historical development.[1]

But whence does this "autonomous" individual derive? What is the basis for its "natural rights," beyond a priori premises and hazy intuitions? What role does historical development play in its formation? What social premises give birth to it, sustain it, indeed nourish it? How can a "collection of individuals" institutionalize itself such as to give rise to something more than an autonomy that consists merely in refusing to impair the "liberties" of others — or "negative liberty," as Isaiah Berlin called it in contradistinction

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[1] L. Susan Brown: The Politics of Individualism (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1993), p. 12. I do not question the sincerity of Brown's libertarian views; she regards herself as an anarcho-communist, as do I. But she makes no direct attempt to reconcile her individualistic views with communism in any form. Both Bakunin and Kropotkin would have strongly disagreed with her formulation of what constitutes "a group," while Margaret Thatcher, clearly for reasons of her own, might be rather pleased with it, since it is so akin to the former British prime minister's notorious statement that there is no such thing as society — there are only individuals. Certainly Brown is not a Thatcherite, nor Thatcher an anarchist, but however different they may be in other respects, both have ideological filiations with classical liberalism that make their shared affirmations of the "autonomy" of the individual possible. I cannot ignore the fact, however, that neither Bakunin's, Kropotkin's nor my own views are treated with any depth in Brown's book (pp. 156–62), and her account of them is filled with serious inaccuracies.

oping practice for recovering and enlarging on an unprecedented scale what is now a declining public sphere, one that the state has invaded and in many cases virtually eliminated.[10] If the large size of municipal entities and the decline of the public sphere are accepted as unalterable givens, then we are left with no hope but to work with the given in every sphere of human activity—in which case, anarchists might as well join with social-democrats (as quite a few have, for all practical purposes) to work with and merely modify the state apparatus, the market, and a commodity system of relationships. Indeed, on the basis of such commonsensical reasoning, a far stronger argument could be made for preserving the state, the market, the use of money, and global corporations than could be made merely for decentralizing urban agglomerations. In fact, many urban agglomerations are already groaning physically and logistically under the burden of their size and are reconstituting themselves into satellite cities before our very eyes, even though their populations and physical jurisdictions are still grouped under the name of a single metropolis.

Strangely, many life-style anarchists, who, like New Age visionaries, have a remarkable ability to imagine changing everything tend to raise strong objections when they are asked to actually change anything in the existing society—except to cultivate greater "self-expression," have more mystical reveries, and turn their anarchism into an art form, retreating into social quietism. When critics of libertarian municipalism bemoan the prohibitively large number of people who are likely

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dhist ashram. Nor is the "affinity group" a model—the Spanish anarchists used this word interchangeably with "action group" to refer to an organizational unit for the FAI, not to the institutional basis for a libertarian society.

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ably side-by-side with bourgeois self-centeredness and a moral relativism that renders any social action irrelevant, indeed, institutionally meaningless.

It is important to emphasize that libertarian municipalism—or Communalism, as I have called it here—is a developing outlook, a politics that seeks ultimately to achieve the "Commune of communes." As such, it tries to provide a directly democratic confederal alternative to the state and to a centralized bureaucratic society. To challenge the validity of libertarian municipalism, as many liberals and ecosocialists have, on the premise that the size of existing urban entities raises an insurmountable logistical obstacles to its successful practice is to turn it into a chess "strategy" and freeze it within the given conditions of society, then tally up debits and credits to determine its potential for "success," "effectiveness," "high levels of participation," and the like. Libertarian municipalism is not a form of social bookkeeping for conditions as they are but rather a transformative process that starts with what can be changed within present conditions as a valid point of departure for achieving what should be in a rational society.

Libertarian municipalism is above all a politics, to use this word in its original Hellenic sense, that is engaged in the process of remaking what are now called "electoral constituents" or "taxpayers" into active citizens, and of remaking what are now urban conglomerations into genuine communities related to each other through confederations that would countervail and ultimately challenge the existence of the state. To see it otherwise is to reduce this multifaceted, processual development to a caricature. Nor is libertarian municipalism intended as a substitute for association as such—for the familial and economic aspects of life—without which human existence is impossible in any society.[9] It is rather an outlook and a devel-

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to "positive liberty," which is substantive freedom, in our case constructed along socialistic lines?

In the history of ideas, "autonomy," referring to strictly personal "self-rule," found its ancient apogee in the imperial Roman cult of libertas. During the rule of the Julian-Claudian Caesars, the Roman citizen enjoyed a great deal of autonomy to indulge his own desires — and lusts — without reproval from any authority, provided that he did not interfere with the business and the needs of the state. In the more theoretically developed liberal tradition of John Locke and John Stuart Mill, autonomy acquired a more expansive sense that was opposed ideologically to excessive state authority. During the nineteenth century, if there was any single subject that gained the interest of classical liberals, it was political economy, which they often conceived not only as the study of goods and services, but also as a system of morality. Indeed, liberal thought generally reduced the social to the economic. Excessive state authority was opposed in favor of a presumed economic autonomy. Ironically, liberals often invoked the word freedom, in the sense of "autonomy," as they do to the present day.[2]

Despite their assertions of autonomy and distrust of state authority, however, these classical liberal thinkers did not in the last instance hold to the notion that the individual is completely free from lawful guidance. Indeed, their interpretation of autonomy actually presupposed quite definite arrangements beyond the individual — notably, the laws of the marketplace.

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[2] Liberals were not always in accord with each other nor did they hold notably coherent doctrines. Mill, a free-thinking humanitarian and utilitarian, in fact exhibited a measure of sympathy for socialism. I am not singling out here any particular liberal theorist, be he Mill, Adam Smith or Friedrich Hayek. Each had or has his or her individual eccentricity or personal line of thought. I am speaking of traditional liberalism as a whole, whose general features involve a belief in the "laws" of the marketplace and "free" competition. Marx was by no means free of this influence: he, too, unrelentingly tried to discover "laws" of society, as did many socialists during the last century, including utopians like Charles Fourier.

Individual autonomy to the contrary, these laws constitute a social organizing system in which all "collections of individuals" are held under the sway of the famous "invisible hand" of competition. Paradoxically, the laws of the marketplace override the exercise of "free will" by the same sovereign individuals who otherwise constitute the "collection of individuals."

No rationally formed society can exist without institutions and if a society as a "collection of individuals, no more and no less" were ever to emerge, it would simply dissolve. Such a dissolution, to be sure, would never happen in reality. The liberals, nonetheless, can cling to the notion of a "free market" and "free competition" guided by the "inexorable laws" of political economy.

Alternatively, freedom, a word that shares etymological roots with the German Freiheit (for which there is no equivalent in Romance languages), takes its point of departure not from the individual but from the community or, more broadly, from society. In the last century and early in the present one, as the great socialist theorists further sophisticated ideas of freedom, the individual and his or her development were consciously intertwined with social evolution — specifically, the institutions that distinguish society from mere animal aggregations.

What made their focus uniquely ethical was the fact that as social revolutionaries they asked the key question — What constitutes a rational society? — a question that abolishes the centrality of economics in a free society. Where liberal thought generally reduced the social to the economic, various socialisms (apart from Marxism), among which Kropotkin denoted anarchism the "left wing," dissolved the economic into the social.[3]

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[3] See Kropotkin's "Anarchism," the famous Encyclopaedia Britannica article that became one of his most widely read works. Republished in Roger N. Baldwin, ed., Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets: A Collection of Writings by Peter Kropotkin (Vanguard Press, 1927; reprinted by Dover, 1970).

For an "ecstatic experience," visitors to New York's Lower East Side (near St. Mark's Place) can dine, I am told, at Anarchy Café. This establishment offers fine dining from an expensive menu, a reproduction of the famous mural The Fourth Estate on the wall, perhaps to aid in digestion, and a maitre d' to greet Yuppie customers. I cannot attest to whether the writings of Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, Fredy Perlman and Hakim Bey are on sale there or whether copies of Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed, The Fifth Estate or Demolition Derby are available for perusal, but happily there are enough exotic bookstores nearby to buy them.

Communalism is defined as "a theory or system of government [sic!] in which virtually autonomous [sic!] local communities are loosely in a federation."[8] No English dictionary is very sophisticated politically. This use of the terms "government" and "autonomous" does not commit us to an acceptance of the State and parochialism, let alone individualism. Further, federation is often synonymous with confederation, the term I regard as more consistent with the libertarian tradition. What is remarkable about this (as yet) unsullied term is its extraordinary proximity to libertarian municipalism, the political dimension of social ecology that I have advanced at length elsewhere.

In Communalism, libertarians have an available word that they can enrich as much by experience as by theory. Most significantly, the word can express not only what we are against, but also what we are for, namely the democratic dimension of libertarian thought and a libertarian form of society. It is a word that is meant for a practice that can tear down the ghetto walls that are increasingly imprisoning anarchism in cultural exotica and psychological introversion. It stands in explicit opposition to the suffocating individualism that sits so comfort-

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[8] Quoted from The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978).

In short, we must recover not only the socialist dimension of anarchism but its political dimension: democracy. Bereft of its democratic dimension and its communal or municipal public sphere, anarchism may indeed denote little more than a "collection of individuals, no more and no less." Even anarcho-communism, although it is by far the most preferable of adjectival modifications of the libertarian ideal, nonetheless retains a structural vagueness that tells us nothing about the institutions necessary to expedite a communistic distribution of goods. It spells out a broad goal, a desideratum — one, alas, terribly tarnished by the association of "communism" with Bolshevism and the state — but its public sphere and forms of institutional association remain unclear at best and susceptible to a totalitarian onus at worst.

I wish to propose that the democratic and potentially practicable dimension of the libertarian goal be expressed as Communalism, a term that, unlike political terms that once stood unequivocally for radical social change, has not been historically sullied by abuse. Even ordinary dictionary definitions of Communalism, I submit, capture to a great degree the vision of a "Commune of communes" that is being lost by current Anglo-American trends that celebrate anarchy variously as "chaos," as a mystical "oneness" with "nature," as self-fulfillment or as "ecstasy," but above all as personalistic.[7]

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[7] The association of "chaos," "nomadism," and "cultural terrorism" with "ontological anarchy" (as though the bourgeoisie had not turned such antics into an "ecstasy industry" in the United States) is fully explicated in Hakim Bey's (aka Peter Lamborn Wilson) T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone (New York: Autonomedia, 1985). The Yuppie Whole Earth Review celebrates this pamphlet as the most influential and widely read "manifesto" of America's countercultural youth, noting with approval that it is happily free of conventional anarchist attacks upon capitalism. This kind of detritus from the 1960s is echoed in one form or another by most American anarchist newssheets that pander to youth who have not yet "had their fun before it is time to grow up" (a comment I heard years later from Parisian student activists of '68) and become real estate agents and accountants.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Enlightenment thought and its derivatives brought the idea of the mutability of institutions to the foreground of social thought, the individual, too, came to be seen as mutable. To the socialistic thinkers of the period, a "collection" was a totally alien way of denoting society; they properly considered individual freedom to be congruent with social freedom and, very significantly, they defined freedom as such as an evolving, as well as a unifying, concept.

In short, both society and the individual were historicized in the best sense of this term: as an ever-developing, self-generative and creative process in which each existed within and through the other. Hopefully, this historicization would be accompanied by ever-expanding new rights and duties. The slogan of the First International, in fact, was the demand, "No rights without duties, no duties without rights" — a demand that later appeared on the mastheads of anarchosyndicalist periodicals in Spain and elsewhere well into the present century.

Thus, for classical socialist thinkers, to conceive of the individual without society was as meaningless as to conceive of society without individuals. They sought to realize both in rational institutional frameworks that fostered the greatest degree of free expression in every aspect of social life.

II

Individualism, as conceived by classical liberalism, rested on a fiction to begin with. Its very presupposition of a social "lawfulness" maintained by marketplace competition was far removed from its myth of the totally sovereign, "autonomous" individual. With even fewer presuppositions to support itself, the woefully undertheorized work of Max Stirner shared a similar

disjunction: the ideological disjunction between the ego and society.

The pivotal issue that reveals this disjunction — indeed, this contradiction — is the question of democracy. By democracy, of course, I do not mean "representative government" in any form, but rather face-to-face democracy. With regard to its origins in classical Athens, democracy as I use it is the idea of the direct management of the polis by its citizenry in popular assemblies — which is not to downplay the fact that Athenian democracy was scarred by patriarchy, slavery, class rule and the restriction of citizenship to males of putative Athenian birth. What I am referring to is an evolving tradition of institutional structures, not a social "model."[4] Democracy generically defined, then, is the direct management of society in face-to-face assemblies — in which policy is formulated by the resident citizenry and administration is executed by mandated and delegated councils.

Libertarians commonly consider democracy, even in this sense, as a form of "rule" — since in making decisions, a majority view prevails and thus "rules" over a minority. As such, democracy is said to be inconsistent with a truly libertarian ideal. Even so knowledgeable a historian of anarchism as

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[4] I have never regarded the classical Athenian democracy as a "model" or an "ideal" to be restored in a rational society. I have long cited Athens with admiration for one reason: the polis around Periclean times provides us with striking evidence that certain structures can exist — policy-making by an assembly, rotation and limitation of public offices and defense by a nonprofessional armed citizenry. The Mediterranean world of the fifth century B.C.E. was largely based on monarchical authority and repressive custom. That all Mediterranean societies of that time required or employed patriarchy, slavery and the State (usually in an absolutist form) makes the Athenian experience all the more remarkable for what it uniquely introduced into social life, including an unprecedented degree of free expression. It would be naive to suppose that Athens could have risen above the most basic attributes of ancient society in its day, which, from a distance of 2,400 years we now have the privilege of judging as ugly and inhuman. Regrettably, no small number of people today are willing to judge the past by the present.

between individualism and antistatist collectivism is becoming unbridgeable, in my view. A personalistic anarchism has taken deep root among young people today. Moreover, they increasingly use the word "anarchy" to express not only a personalistic stance, but also an antirational, mystical, antitechnological and anticivilizational body of views that makes it impossible for anarchists who anchor their ideas in socialism to apply the word "anarchist" to themselves without a qualifying adjective. Howard Ehrlich, one of our ablest and most concerned American comrades, uses the phrase "social anarchism" as the title of his magazine, apparently to distinguish his views from an anarchism that is ideologically anchored in liberalism and possibly worse.

I would like to suggest that far more than a qualifying adjective is needed if we are to elaborate our notion of freedom more expansively. It would be unfortunate indeed if libertarians today had to literally explain that they believe in a society, not a mere collection of individuals! A century ago, this belief was presupposed; today, so much has been stripped away from the collectivistic flesh of classical anarchism that it is on the verge of becoming a personal life-stage for adolescents and a fad for their middle-aged mentors, a route to "self-realization" and the seemingly "radical" equivalent of encounter groups.

Today, there must be a place on the political spectrum where a body of anti-authoritarian thought that advances humanity's bitter struggle to arrive at the realization of its authentic social life — the famous "Commune of communes" — can be clearly articulated institutionally as well as ideologically. There must be a means by which socially concerned anti-authoritarians can develop a program and a practice for attempting to change the world, not merely their psyches. There must be an arena of struggle that can mobilize people, help them to educate themselves and develop an anti-authoritarian politics, to use this word in its classical meaning, indeed that pits a new public sphere against the State and capitalism.

partly told,[6] but consensus practices finally shipwrecked this large and exciting organization with its Rousseauean "republic of virtue." It was also ruined, I may add, by an organizational laxity that permitted mere passersby to participate in decision-making, thereby destructuring the organization to the point of invertebracy. It was for good reason that I and many young anarchists from Vermont who had actively participated in the Alliance for some few years came to view consensus as anathema.

If consensus could be achieved without compulsion of dissenters, a process that is feasible in small groups, who could possibly oppose it as a decision-making process? But to reduce a libertarian ideal to the unconditional right of a minority — let alone a "minority of one" — to abort a decision by a "collection of individuals" is to stifle the dialectic of ideas that thrives on opposition, confrontation and, yes, decisions with which everyone need not agree and should not agree, lest society become an ideological cemetery. Which is not to deny dissenters every opportunity to reverse majority decisions by unimpaired discussion and advocacy.

III

I have dwelled on consensus at some length because it constitutes the usual individualistic alternative to democracy, so commonly counterposed as "no rule" — or a free-floating form of personal autonomy — against majority "rule." Inasmuch as libertarian ideas in the United States and Britain are increasingly drifting toward affirmations of personal autonomy, the chasm

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[6] Barbara Epstein, Political Protest and Cultural Revolution: Non-Violent Direct Action in the 1970s and 1980s (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), especially pp. 59, 78, 89, 94–95, 167–68, 177. Although I disagree with some of the facts and conclusions in Epstein's book — based on my personal as well as general knowledge of the Clamshell Alliance — she vividly portrays the failure of consensus in this movement.

Peter Marshall observes that, for anarchists, "the majority has no more right to dictate to the minority, even a minority of one, than the minority to the majority."[5] Scores of libertarians have echoed this idea time and again.

What is striking about assertions like Marshall's is their highly pejorative language. Majorities, it would seem, neither "decide" nor "debate": rather, they "rule," "dictate," "command," "coerce" and the like. In a free society that not only permitted, but fostered the fullest degree of dissent, whose podiums at assemblies and whose media were open to the fullest expression of all views, whose institutions were truly forums for discussion — one may reasonably ask whether such a society would actually "dictate" to anyone when it had to arrive at a decision that concerned the public welfare.

How, then, would society make dynamic collective decisions about public affairs, aside from mere individual contracts? The only collective alternative to majority voting as a means of decision-making that is commonly presented is the practice of consensus. Indeed, consensus has even been mystified by avowed "anarcho-primitivists," who consider Ice Age and contemporary "primitive" or "primal" peoples to constitute the apogee of human social and psychic attainment. I do not deny that consensus may be an appropriate form of decision-making in small groups of people who are thoroughly familiar with one another. But to examine consensus in practical terms, my own experience has shown me that when larger groups try to make decisions by consensus, it usually obliges them to arrive at the lowest common intellectual denominator in their decision-making: the least controversial or even the most mediocre decision that a sizable assembly of people can attain is adopted — precisely because everyone must agree with it or else withdraw from voting on that issue. More disturbingly,

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[5] Peter Marshall, Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism (London: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 22.

I have found that it permits an insidious authoritarianism and gross manipulations — even when used in the name of autonomy or freedom.

To take a very striking case in point: the largest consensus-based movement (involving thousands of participants) in recent memory in the United States was the Clamshell Alliance, which was formed to oppose the Seabrook nuclear reactor in the mid-1970s in New Hampshire. In her recent study of the movement, Barbara Epstein has called the Clamshell the "first effort in American history to base a mass movement on non-violent direct action" other than the 1960s civil rights movement. As a result of its apparent organizational success, many other regional alliances against nuclear reactors were formed throughout the United States.

I can personally attest to the fact that within the Clamshell Alliance, consensus was fostered by often cynical Quakers and by members of a dubiously "anarchic" commune that was located in Montague, Massachusetts. This small, tightly knit faction, unified by its own hidden agendas, was able to manipulate many Clamshell members into subordinating their goodwill and idealistic commitments to those opportunistic agendas. The de facto leaders of the Clamshell overrode the rights and ideals of the innumerable individuals who entered it and undermined their morale and will.

In order for that clique to create full consensus on a decision, minority dissenters were often subtly urged or psychologically coerced to decline to vote on a troubling issue, inasmuch as their dissent would essentially amount to a one-person veto. This practice, called "standing aside" in American consensus processes, all too often involved intimidation of the dissenters, to the point that they completely withdrew from the decision-making process, rather than make an honorable and continuing expression of their dissent by voting, even as a minority, in accordance with their views. Having withdrawn, they ceased to be political beings — so that a "decision" could be made.

More than one "decision" in the Clamshell Alliance was made by pressuring dissenters into silence and, through a chain of such intimidations, "consensus" was ultimately achieved only after dissenting members nullified themselves as participants in the process.

On a more theoretical level, consensus silenced that most vital aspect of all dialogue, dissensus. The ongoing dissent, the passionate dialogue that still persists even after a minority accedes temporarily to a majority decision, was replaced in the Clamshell by dull monologues — and the uncontroverted and deadening tone of consensus. In majority decision-making, the defeated minority can resolve to overturn a decision on which they have been defeated — they are free to openly and persistently articulate reasoned and potentially persuasive disagreements. Consensus, for its part, honors no minorities, but mutes them in favor of the metaphysical "one" of the "consensus" group.

The creative role of dissent, valuable as an ongoing democratic phenomenon, tends to fade away in the gray uniformity required by consensus. Any libertarian body of ideas that seeks to dissolve hierarchy, classes, domination and exploitation by allowing even Marshall's "minority of one" to block decision-making by the majority of a community, indeed, of regional and nationwide confederations, would essentially mutate into a Rousseauean "general will" with a nightmare world of intellectual and psychic conformity. In more gripping times, it could easily "force people to be free," as Rousseau put it — and as the Jacobins practiced it in 1793–94.

The de facto leaders of the Clamshell were able to get away with their behavior precisely because the Clamshell was not sufficiently organized and democratically structured, such that it could countervail the manipulation of a well-organized few. The de facto leaders were subject to few structures of accountability for their actions. The ease with which they cannily used consensus decision-making for their own ends has been only