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Municipalization

Community Ownership of the Economy

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In my article, "Toward a Libertarian Municipalism,"[1] I advanced the view that any counterculture to the prevailing culture must be developed together with counterinstitutions to the prevailing institutions — a decentralized, confederal, popular power that will acquire the control over social and political life that is being claimed by the centralized, bureaucratic nation-state.

Through much of the nineteenth century and nearly half of the twentieth, the classical center of this popular power was located by most radical ideologies in the factory, the arena for the conflict between wage labor and capital. The factory as the locus of the "power question" rested on the belief that the industrial working class was the "hegemonic" agent for radical social change; that it would be "driven" by its own "class interests" (to use the language

[1] *Our Generation* (Vol. 16, Nos. 3–4, Spring-Summer 1985, pp.9–22), available from Our Generation, 3981 Ste.- Laurent Blvd., Montreal H2W IY5, Quebec, Canada

of radicalism during that era) to "overthrow" capitalism, generally through armed insurrection and revolutionary general strikes. It would then establish its own system of social administration — whether in the form of a "workers' state" (Marxism) or confederal shop committees (anarchosyndicalism).

In retrospect we can now see that the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39 was the last historic effort by a seemingly revolutionary European working class to follow this model.[2] In the fifty years that have passed (almost to the very month of this writing), it is apparent that the great revolutionary wave of the late thirties was the climax and the end of the era of proletarian socialism and anarchism, an era that dates back to the first workers' insurrection of history: the uprising by the Parisian artisans and workers of June, 1848, when the barricades were raised under red flags in the capital city of France. In the years that have followed, particularly after the 1930s, the limited attempts to repeat the classical model of proletarian revolution (Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Poland) have been failures, indeed, tragic echoes of great causes, ideals, and efforts that have faded into history.

Apart from insurrectionary peasant movements in the Third World, no one, aside from some dogmatic sectarians, takes the "models" of June, 1848, the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolution of 1917, and the Spanish Revolution of 1936 seriously — partly because the type of working class that made those revolutions has been all but demobilized by technological and social change, partly because the weaponry and barricades that gave these revolutions a modicum of power have become merely

[2] For an overview of the Spanish Civil War after fifty years, see my articles "On Spanish Anarchism," *Our Generation* (1986) and "The Spanish Civil War: After Fifty Years" in *New Politics* (Vol. 1, No. 1, New Series; Spring, 1986), available from New Politics, 328 Clinton St., Brooklyn NY 11231. For background on the subject, see *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Period* by this writer, formerly a Harper & Row book, currently distributed by Comment Publishing Project, P. 0. Box 158, Burlington VT 05402.

control over its own material life, although not in a parochial sense that turns it into a privatized city-state, it has economic power, a decisive reinforcement of its political power.

symbolic in the face of the immense military armamentorium commanded by the modern nation-state.

There is another tradition, however, that has long been part of European and American radicalism: the development of a libertarian municipal politics, a new politics structured around towns, neighborhoods, cities, and citizens' assemblies, freely confederated into local, regional, and ultimately continental networks. This "model," advanced over a century ago by Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin among others, is more than an ideological tradition: it has surfaced repeatedly as an authentic popular practice by the Comuneros in Spain during the 16th century, the American town meeting movement that swept from New England to Charleston in the 1770s, the Parisian sectional citizens' assemblies of the early 1790s, and repeatedly through the Paris Commune of 1871 to the Madrid Citizens' Movement of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Almost irrepressible whenever the people have gone into motion, libertarian municipalism always reappears as movements from below — all radical dogmas based on the proletariat notwithstanding to the contrary — such as the "local socialism" to which people have turned in England today, radical municipal coalitions in the United States, and popular urban movements thoughout Western Europe and North America generally. The bases for these movements are no longer the usual strictly class issues that stem from the factory; they consist of broad, indeed challenging issues that range from the environmental, growth, housing, and logistical problems that are besetting all the municipalities of the world. They cut across traditional class lines and have brought people together in councils, assemblies, citizens' initiative movements, often irrespective of their vocational roots and economic interests. More so than any constellation of issues, they have done something which traditional proletarian socialism and anarchism *never* achieved: they have brought together into common movements people of middle-class as well as working class backgrounds, rural as well as urban places of residence, professional as well as

unskilled individuals, indeed, so vast a diversity of people from conservative as well as liberal and radical traditions that one can truly speak of the potential for a genuine people's movement, not merely a class-oriented movement of which industrial workers have always been a minority of the population.[3] Implicitly, this kind of movement restores once again the reality of "the people" on which the great democratic revolutions rested ideologically until they became fragmented into class and group interests. History, in effect, seems to be rebuilding in the real world what was once a tentative and fleeting ideal of the Enlightenment from which stemmed the American and French revolutions of the eighteenth century. For once, it is possible of conceiving of majoritarian forces for major social change, not the minoritarian movements that existed over the past two centuries of proletarian socialism and anarchism.

Radical ideologues tend to view these extraordinary municipal movements with skepticism and try, when they can, to bring them into captivity to traditional class programs and analyses. The Madrid Citizens' Movement of the 1960s was virtually destroyed by radicals of all parts of the political spectrum because they tried to manipulate a truly popular municipal effort which sought to democratize Spain and give a new cooperative and ethical meaning to human urban association. The MCM became a terrain for strengthening the political aspirations for the Socialists, Communists, and other Marxist-Leninist groups until it was all but subverted for special party interests.

That libertarian municipal movements form the only potential challenge to the nation-state, today, and constitute a major realm

[3] This has always been the greatest defect of revolutionary working-class movements and accounts for the bitter civil wars which they produced in the few cases where they were particularly successful.

Moreover, no community can hope to achieve economic autarchy, nor should it try to do so unless it wishes to become self-enclosed and parochial, not only "self-sufficient." Hence the confederation of communes — the Commune of communes — is reworked economically as well as politically into a shared universe of publically managed resources. The management of the economy, precisely because it is a public activity, does not degenerate into privatized interactions between enterprises; rather it develops into confederalized interactions between municipalities. That is to say, the very *elements* of societal interaction are expanded from real or potential privatized components to institutionally real *public* components. Confederation becomes a public project by definition, not only because of shared needs and resources. If there is any way to avoid the emergence of the city-state, not to speak of self-serving bourgeois "cooperatives," it is through a municipalization of political life that is so complete that politics embraces not only what we call the public sphere but material means of life as well.

It is not "utopian" to seek the municipalization of the economy. Quite to the contrary, it is practical and realizable if only we will think as freely in our minds as we try to achieve freedom in our lives. Our locality is not only the arena in which we live out our everyday lives; it is also the authentic economic arena in which we work and its natural environs are the authentic environmental arena that challenges us to live in harmony with nature. Here we can begin to evolve not only the ethical ties that will link us together in a genuine ecocommunity but also the material ties that can make us into competent, empowered, and self-sustaining — if not "self-sufficient" — human beings. To the extent that a municipality or a local confederation of municipalities is *politically* united, it is still a fairly fragile form of association. To the extent that it has

merely an economy in the strict sense of -the word — whether as "business," "market," capitalist, "worker-controlled" enterprises. It becomes a truly *political* economy: the economy of the *polis* or the commune. In this sense, the economy is genuinely communized as well as politicized. The municipality, more precisely, the citizen body in face-to-face assembly absorbs the economy as an aspect of public business, divesting it of an identity that can become privatized into a self-serving enterprise.

What can prevent the municipality from becoming a parochial city-state of the kind that appeared in the late Middle Ages? Anyone who is looking for "guaranteed" solutions to the problems raised, here, will not find them apart from the guiding role of consciousness and ethics in human affairs. But if we are looking for counter*tendencies*, there is an answer that can advanced. The most important single factor that gave rise to the late medieval city-state was its stratification from within — not only as a result of differences in wealth but also in status positions, partly originating in lineage but also in vocational differentials. Indeed, to the extent that the city lost its sense of collective unity and divided its affairs into private and public business, public life itself became privatized and segmented into the "blue nails" or plebians who dyed cloth in cities like Florence and the more arrogant artisan strata, who produced quality goods. Wealth, too, factored heavily in a privatized economy where material differentials could expand and foster a variety of hierarchical differences.

The municipalization of the economy absorbs not only the vocational distinctions that could militate against a publically controlled economy; it also absorbs the material means of life into communal forms of distribution. From each according to his ability and to each according his needs" is institutionalized as part of the *public* sphere, not ideologically as a communal credo. It is not only a goal; it is a way of *functioning politically* — one that becomes structurally embodied by the municipality through its assemblies and agencies.

for the formation of an active citizenry and a new politics — grassroots, face-to-face, and authentically popular in character — has been explored in other works written by this writer and do not have to be examined, here.[4] For the present, it is necessary to ask a very important question: is libertarian municipalism merely a political "model," however generously we define the word "politics," or does it include economic life as well?

That a libertarian municipalist perspective is incompatible with the "nationalization of the economy," which simply reinforces the juridicial power of the nation-state with economic power, is too obvious to belabor. Nor can the word "libertarian" be appropriated by propertarians, the acolytes of Ayn Rand and the like, to justify private property and a "free market" Marx, to his credit, clearly demonstrated that the "free market inevitably yields the oligarchic and monopolistic corporate market with entrepreneurial manipulations that in every way parallel and ultimately converge with state controls.[5]

But what of the syndicalist ideal of "collectivized" self-managed enterprises that are coordinated by like occupations on a national level and coordinated geographically by .collectives" on a local level? Here, the traditional socialist criticism of this syndicalist form of economic management is not without its point: the corporate or private capitalist,"worker-controlled" or not — ironically, a technique in the repertoire of industrial management that is coming very much into vogue today as "workplace democracy"

[4] See "The Greening of Politics: Toward a New Kind of Political Practice," *Green Perspectives,* No. 1, January 1986 and "Popular Politics vs. Party Politics," Green Program Project Discussion Paper No. 2, both available from the Green Program Project, P. 0. Box 111, Burlington VT 05402. Also see the new supplemented edition of *The Limits of the City* cited in note 1 above.

[5] The absurdity that we can persuade or reform the large corporations — to "moralize" greed and profit as it were -is a typical example of liberal naivete which a thousand years of Catholicism failed to achieve. Movies like "The Formula" tell us more about corporate "morality" and "efficiency" than the flood of books and articles generated by many reform-minded periodicals.

and "employee ownership" and constitutes no threat whatever to private property and capitalism. The Spanish anarchosyndicalist collectives of 1936–37 were actually union-controlled and proved to be highly vulnerable to the centralization and bureaucratization that appears in many well-meaning cooperatives generally after a sufficient lapse of time. By mid-1937, union-man agement had already replaced workers' management on the shop floor, all claims of CNT apologists to the contrary notwithstanding. Under the pressure of "anarchist" ministers like Abad de Santillan in the Catalan government, they began to approximate the nationalized economy advocated by Marxist elements in the Spanish "Left."

In any case, "economic democracy" has not simply meant "workplace democracy" and "employee ownership." Many workers, in fact, would like to get away from their factories if they could and find more creative artisanal types of work, not simply "participate" in "planning" their own misery. What "economic democracy" meant in its profoundest sense was free, "democratic" access to the means of life, the counterpart of political democracy, that is, the guarantee of freedom from material want. It is a dirty bourgeois trick, in which many radicals unknowingly participate, that "economic democracy" has been re-interpreted as "employee ownership" and "workplace democracy" and has come to mean workers' "participation" in profit sharing and industrial management rather than freedom from the tyranny of the factory, rationalized labor, and "planned production," which is usually exploitative production with the complicity of the workers.

Libertarian municipalism scores a significant advance over all of these conceptions by calling for the municipalization of the economy — and its management by the community as part of a *politics* of public self management. Whereas the syndicalist alternative *re-privatizes* the economy into "self-managed" collectives and opens the way to their degeneration into traditional forms of private property — whether "collectively" owned or not — libertarian municipalism politicizes the economy and *dissolves* it into the civic do-

main. Neither factory or land appear as separate interests within the communal collective. Nor can workers, farmers, technicians, engineers, professionals, and the like perpetuate their vocational indentities as separate interests that exist apart from the citizen body in face-to-face assemblies. "Property" is integrated into the coummune as a material constituent of its libertarian institutional framework, indeed as a part of a larger whole that is controlled by the citizen body in assembly as *citizens* — not as vocationally oriented interest groups.

What is equally important, the "antithesis" between town and country, so crucial in radical theory and social history, is transcended by the "township," a traditional New England jurisdiction, in which an urban entity is the nucleus of its agricultural and village environs — not as an urban entity that stands opposed to them.[6] The township, in effect is a small region within still larger ones, such as the county and the "bioregion."

So conceived, the municipalization of the economy must be distinguished from "nationalization" and "collectivization" — the former leading to bureaucratic and top-down control, the latter to the likely emergence of a privatized economy in a collectivized form and the perpetuation of class or caste identities. Municipalization, in effect, brings the economy from a private or separate sphere into the public sphere where economic policy is formulated by the *entire* community — notably, its citizens in face-to-face relationships working to achieve a *general* "interest" that surmounts separate, vocationally defined specific interests. The economy ceases to be

[6] See Lewis Mumford's excellent discussion of the New England township in the *City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World; 1961, pp. 331–33). Mumford, unfortunately, deals with the township form as a thing of the past. My interest in the subject comes from yew of study in my own state, Vermont, where, despite many changes, the integration of town and country is still institutionalized territorially and legally around town meetings. Although this political form is waning in much of New England today, its workability and value is a matter of historical record, not of theoretical speculation.