The Unity of Ideals and Practice

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A practice that is in accordance with social anarchist ideals is the only way of making giving our ideals relevance to people who are unfamiliar with them. Ideals easily turn into daydreams—or worse—when they stand in flat contradiction to the realities of one's practice. By separating ideals from practice, crusading movements with erstwhile high ideals, like Christianity and even various socialisms, have historically wrought enormous social harm. Without a practice that can embody our ideals, those ideals easily become mere creatures of the imagination and can be adopted or cast off at will—or, worse, be used to add spice to commonplace political behavior that has nothing in common with social anarchism.

—March 25, 1997

empowering citizens' assemblies with the structural authority to regulate the municipality's affairs.

I do not expect for a single moment that these activities will be recognized by existing city governments, many of which have functions that are distinctly statist or that rely on state support. Nor do I believe that social anarchists who initiate such assemblies will be more than a minority among the citizens who participate in them. But a sphere of potential political power, discussion, and education will have been created in which, over time and with much effort, a counterpower could develop in opposition to the state and, with enough support in the economic realm, the corporations. This dual power, once it gained the support of a large number of people, could ultimately constitute a force to confront the state and the capitalist system and replace them with a libertarian communist society.

The practice that I am suggesting is consistent with the social anarchist ideal of the "Commune of communes." Indeed, I find it difficult to conceive of any other public practice that potentially challenges the state machinery and capitalist system in a libertarian fashion. After many decades in labor unions and direct-action organizations such as the civil rights movement, the Clamshell Alliance (a mass antinuclear organization), and the New Left, and as a participant in the formation of the American Greens (before they decided to engage in national politics), I share the social anarchist conviction that parliamentary politics is inherently corruptive. To confine antistatism to the realm of ideals without seeing its immediate relevance to practice risks making a mockery of both ideals and practice. Choosing a reformist parliamentarism and a statist form of "political" activity, including participation in parties, amounts to saying the capitalism and the state are here to stay, and that we are essentially compelled to submit ourselves to authoritarian institutions—allowing for a modicum of room to maneuver within limitations that are tolerable to the modern bourgeois social order.

I

Recently I have begun to encounter, especially among young people, individuals who call themselves "leftists" but who have little or no awareness of the most basic features of the Left's longstanding analysis of capitalism, or of the history of the revolutionary movements that have stood in fundamental opposition to bourgeois society. It distresses me that the ideological contours that have long defined capitalism and the Left are being forgotten today, as well as the most critical insights of libertarian socialism and revolutionary anarchism. Given this spreading social amnesia, I find that before I can summarize my political and social ideals, I must briefly outline the trajectory of capitalist society and the responsibility of the revolutionary Left, since my own ideas are integrally embedded in the tradition of that Left.

Certain basic concepts are fundamental to traditional leftists, especially to social anarchists, and when I encounter people who call themselves social anarchists, I must assume that, if their politics is to have any meaning, they still uphold these concepts. I must assume that social anarchists, like other leftists, understand that capitalism is a competitive market system in which rivalry compels bourgeois enterprises to continually grow and expand. I must assume they understand that this process of growth is absolutely inexorable, driven by the "competitive market forces" of production and consumption – as the bourgeoisie itself acknowledges. Nor can these "forces" be eliminated as long as capitalism exists, any more than a class-dominated economy could ever put an end to the exploitation of labor. Social anarchists, I must assume, understand that if capitalism continues to exist, it will yield catastrophic results for society and the ecological integrity of the natural world. So inherent are these features to capitalism that to expect the capitalist system not to have them is to expect it to be something other than capitalist.

Further, I must assume that social anarchists, like other leftists, believe that if humanity is ever to attain a free and rational society, capitalism must be completely destroyed. Social anarchists are distinctive among leftists, however, in maintaining that the social order that must replace it must be a collectivist, indeed a libertarian communist society, in which production and distribution are organized according to the maxim "From each according to ability, to each according to need" (to the extent, to be sure, that such needs can be satisfied given the existing resources of the society). Social anarchists agree, I must assume, that such a libertarian communist society cannot be achieved without the prior abolition not only of capitalism but of the state, with its professional bureaucracy, its monopoly over the means of violence, and its inherent commitment to the interests of the bourgeoisie.

Social anarchists agree, I must further assume, that the state must be replaced by a democratic political realm, one that comprises "communes" or municipalities of some kind that are in confederation with one another. Anarchosyndicalists believe that it is essentially workplace committees and libertarian unions that will structure these confederations. Anarchocommunists advance a variety of other forms, and my own will be summarized later. But when I meet a social anarchist, I assume that he or she shares these minimal, underlying common principles: the basic analysis of capitalism and its trajectory that I have described, as well as the imperative to replace competitive market-oriented social relations with libertarian institutions. Didactic as my presentation may seem, I contend that to abandon any of these principles is to abandon the defining features of social anarchism, or of any revolutionary libertarian Left. To be sure, it is not easy to advance such ideas today. Former leftists who have themselves surrendered some of these principles in order to accommodate themselves to the existing society incessantly sneer at revolutionary leftists who still maintain them, accusing them of being "dogmatic,"

power by the community from the state and the corporations. Most leftists are so committed to exercising their infinitesimal influence through statist institutions that social anarchists are uniquely positioned to redefine a practical politics that is consistent with their highest ideals. They alone can demand the development of community power—real, institutionalized, and concrete power—in opposition to the state. They alone can try to create confederal organizations at the local and regional levels that have political tangibility and that constitute a sphere for a public debate on all the issues that concern community members.

The "commune," or in more contemporary language, the municipality, has always been the building block of a social anarchist vision of a libertarian society. Not only has the municipality antedated the state historically; it has often been the antithesis of the state in struggles between towns and feudal lords, absolutist monarchies, and centralistic institutions created by elitist revolutionaries such as the Jacobins and their heirs, the Bolsheviks. The tension between the municipality and the state is a longstanding historical one, and although it is more recent, the tension between the confederation and the modern nation-state is no less compelling. What I am suggesting is that a new libertarian politics has to be formulated and put into practice that calls for a restoration of political power to people in their municipalities, in opposition to the state. The practice of my version of social anarchism involves not only radical participation in protests, as I have described them, but the building of a movement that aims to create this kind of face-to-face democracy. Social anarchists, I submit, should raise the demand for the empowerment of citizens in towns and cities in the form of directly democratic assemblies, rewrite their city charters (where they have them) to legally empower these assemblies with the authority to make far-reaching decisions about their immediate concerns, and—yes!—even run candidates for local town and city councils with a view toward creating or legally

We can no more countervail and confront the state by entering into it than we can countervail and confront the corporations by entering into them. A counterpower has to be established against both the state and capitalism. It must draw on a variety of forces, some of them quite traditional but readapted to present exigencies, to oppose the entire system of what can properly be called state capitalism.

This counterpower can be created only out the great masses of people who feel neglected and denied economically and politically, and alienated and oppressed by statist institutions. At this level of social sensibility, the classical lines of proletariat and petty bourgeoisie are waning in importance. The industrial worker who, like the professional, may at any time be phased out of his or her occupation by a new technological advance; the retailer whose existence is being threatened by huge corporate chains; the educator who is being supplanted by electronic means of instruction—such instances are almost unending in number—are faced with the loss of a place in the existing society.

From this increasingly socially undefined mass, united by residence and facing the problems of a deteriorating community infrastructure, pollution, insufficient child care, overwork, proliferating malls, and the destruction of city centers, the problems of capitalism are being pooled into a fund that is no longer definable exclusively along traditional class lines. At the same time, at least in the United States, inequalities of income and wealth are wider than they have ever been in history. Most ordinary people understand that there are those who "have" and those who "have not"; those who are obscenely wealthy, and those whose income, educational opportunities, access to health care, and social mobility are dwindling at a terrifying pace.

Without in any way ignoring the elementary insults that the present society inflicts on the poor and underprivileged, libertarian municipalism raises the issue of a popular reclamation of

dismissing the coherence they prize as "totalitarian," and impugning their resolute social commitment as "sectarian." Moreover, in a time when social and political ideas are being blurred beyond recognition, principled leftists are advised repeatedly to relinquish their militancy – and presumably succumb to the mindless incoherence and pluralism that is commonly hallowed in the name of "diversity." Most of all, they are subjected to pressures to renounce the Left and blend in with the accommodation that is prevalent today, as so many of their former comrades have done. Despite these personal and cultural pressures, social anarchists, I believe, must not allow their views and activities to be fragmented and thrown into the postmodern scrap heap of unrepentantly contradictory ideologies, any more than they should embrace the bourgeoisie in a love festival of class collaboration. In such times it is all the more imperative that a socially oriented, revolutionary libertarian Left firmly maintain its own integrity and ideals. If those ideals are to be maintained, there are lines that social anarchists cannot cross and still remain social anarchists.

This assertion, let me emphasize, is not an expression of intolerance. It is an appeal to preserve specificity, clarity, and self-definition against an overwhelming cultural decadence that blurs serious distinctions in the intimidating name of a specious "diversity," "harmony," and "compromise," as a result of which the clarification of important political differences becomes impossible to achieve.

Nor am I trying to cast the issues that social anarchists face or the practice they should follow in needlessly harsh "either-or" terms. When a corporation or state takes action to worsen working conditions, reduce wages, or deny poor and vulnerable people the elementary amenities of life, social anarchists should raise their voices in protest and join in actions to prevent such measures from being executed. In short, they should fight exploitation and injustice on every front and become part

of a variety of struggles for eliminating economic, social, and ecological abuses wherever they occur, at home or abroad. Social anarchists are no less humane in response to human suffering and no less outraged by social afflictions than the best-intentioned reformists. But their actions should not be limited merely to advancing remedial measures – which the bourgeoisie can usually adopt if it chooses to, with little loss to itself. Indeed, bourgeois society is sometimes more than willing to ameliorate social afflictions within its own framework, all the better to conceal broader social problems or to neutralize the danger of wider social unrest.

There is a major difference, in my view, between the way social democrats, liberals, and other well-meaning people engage in everyday struggles and the way social anarchists and other revolutionary leftists do. Social anarchists do not divorce their ideals from their practice. They bring to these struggles a dimension that is usually lacking among reformists: they work to spread popular awareness of the roots of the social affliction – patiently educating, mobilizing, and building a movement that shows the connections between the abuses that exist in modern society and the broader social order from which they stem. They are profoundly concerned with showing people the sources of their afflictions and how to consciously act to remove them completely by seeking to fundamentally change society.

Disseminating this understanding, which in the past went under the name of class consciousness (an expression that is still very relevant today) or, more broadly, social consciousness, is one of the major functions of a revolutionary organization or movement. Unless social anarchists take the occasion of a protest to point to the broader social issues involved, unless they place their opposition in this context and use it to advance the transition to a rational social order like libertarian communism, their opposition is adventitious, piecemeal, and essentially reformist.

IV

Whatever mystique surrounds the role of the state in maintaining "public order" and adjusting social dislocations—including the growing abuses produced by modern capitalism—the commitment of state institutions is to the advancement of corporate (read: class) interests. The modern state remains the indispensable means by which corporations can expand and assert their power.

At a time when much is made of the "globalization" of capitalism, it is tempting for leftists to focus primarily on corporate power and, instead of opposing the state, to look to it as a means to restrain rapacious global corporations. To do so is to overlook a basic fact about the state: that it serves the interests of wealth and property. That corporations are authoritarian institutions does not justify strengthening the state to oppose them. Corporations have always been authoritarian. Some two centuries ago, during the Industrial Revolution, individual factory owners made decisions—often as arrogantly as a modern CEO—that profoundly affected the lives of hundreds of people. Having been on union negotiating committees myself and observed the predatory behavior of managers and capitalists, it surprises me that leftists today can be surprised by the authoritarian relations that exist in factories and corporations.

Inasmuch as capitalist enterprises constitute the most basic elements in the capitalist scheme, it is naive to assume that the statist institutions that exist to serve them can be deployed to significantly control them, still less challenge them. The drift of present-day leftists into statist politics with the intention of restricting the power of capital is vitiated by a basic contradiction: the very state machine that they suppose can control the bourgeois forces of production and expansion is precisely the machine that capital has in great part created to extend its control over social life.

by popular assemblies. Even if one were to divide up a city like New York or Paris or Mexico City into neighborhoods and set up neighborhood assemblies, this criticism goes, the assemblies would still be too large for decision-making to be viable. But such proposals often presuppose that the entire population—infants, the infirm, the debilitated elderly, children, the insane—will participate in local assembly or will want to attend. In 1793 Paris, a city with a population of more than 700,000 people, was divided into forty-eight sections, producing an assembly democracy in one of the most remarkable communalist revolutions in history. Nor was this sectional democracy forgotten in the revolutions in Paris of 1848 and 1871, by which time the city's population had swollen to about two million.

Moreover, this kind of criticism assumes that all parts of a large city will develop politically at the same pace; that everyone, even in the most favorable logistical circumstances, will want to attend every assembly meeting; and finally, that the modern city will always remain as it is unto eternity. The politics advanced by libertarian municipalism involves a process—a protracted one, to be sure—in which basic changes will be made unevenly. Some neighborhoods and towns can be expected to advance more rapidly than others in political consciousness. Allowances must be made for institutional variations—possibly temporary, possibly permanent—that are not foreseeable today. At the present time we are at a point where only the initiation of an anarchist or communalist politics is possible; it will have to find its own momentum over a span of years, during which urban life is likely to undergo considerable institutional and ultimately physical decentralization.

In the course of demonstrating how specific social abuses can be traced to capitalism as such, social anarchist practice, in my view, must increasingly make apparent that, if those abuses are to be fully remedied, it is society as a whole that must be changed. Whether a given reform is attained or not, the issue that generates the need for it must be expanded, cast in ever broader social terms, and linked with less obvious but related social abuses until a whole emerges from apparently disconnected parts and challenges the validity of the existing social order.

On the other hand, to ask that social abuses be addressed merely by reforms and that they be resolved by the state is to deepen the mystification, to abet the legitimation, and to gloss the ideological patina so indispensable for the existence of the entire system. From 1848 to 1997, this reformist practice, whatever ideals it claims for itself, has been the most pronounced flaw of movements for change. Indeed, struggles conducted within the framework of the existing system – while they may yield many palliative reforms – ultimately perpetuate the mystification that capitalism can "deliver the goods" (as Marcuse put it) and that the state can rise above the conflict of contending interests to serve the public good.

II

In the United States, as in other Western countries today, there is no lack of social-democratic organizations and environmental groups that concern themselves with social and environmental problems – even if it means little more than lobbying powerful officials. Despite their tendency to compromise on key issues, these groups are visible and vocal. Inasmuch as they work within the framework of the state, they sometimes find places where the system bends to the needs of the poor and the vulnerable. The widely celebrated "realism" of these

groups, their lesser-evil politics, and their attempts to work ameliatively within the system sometimes lead to palliatives that seem to improve the lives of those who need help.

But the state rarely bends to popular demands for changes that are inimicable to the basic interests of the bourgeoisie. Despite the opposition of many labor unions and environmentalists as well as large sectors of the population, for example, the North American Treaty Organization (NAFTA) was passed by the Congress and signed by Clinton. Capital – big Capital – wanted NAFTA, and that was that! Doubtless there are states and states. Historically, there have been slave-owning states, feudal states, monarchical states, republican states, and totalitarian states. It would be naive to suppose that they are all alike just because they are states. Yet even the most rhetorically "free" and constitutionally constrained republics in the so-called First World – which we euphemistically call "democracies" – are class institutions. They are structured by their traditions, constitutions, laws, bureaucratic and judicial institutions, police, and armies to assure that the property, profit-making, competition, capital accumulation, and the economic authority of the bourgeoisie and other privileged strata are protected. This relationship is fundamental to the modern state.

The question of the state has been an issue of profound importance for anticapitalist revolutionaries, including social anarchists, throughout in the history of socialism. Marxists are at least consistent when they engage in parliamentarism, since Marx left us with no doubt that he thought the state was necessary, even after a proletarian revolution, in order to establish socialism, and in 1872 he even declared that it was possible to use the bourgeois parliamentary system to legislate socialism into existence in Britain, America, and possibly the Netherlands – to which Engels later added France.

When the people do not retain political power for themselves, that power is claimed by the state – conversely, whatever power the state does not have must be claimed by

It seems to me that if we were to deny that humanity is capable of creating a direct-democratic society like the one outlined by libertarian municipalism, we would have to sacrifice our commitment not only to social anarchism but to any kind of humanistic and rational society. Syndicalism, to be sure, offers an alternative—a society organized around workers' control of economic production. If I felt that this alternative could be achieved in a consistently libertarian fashion, I might welcome it as a possible road to a social anarchist society. What troubles me is that syndicalism has been beleaguered by vocational particularism; nor is there reason to believe that syndicalist unions can avoid the hierarchical structures that are endemic to a society structured around factories.

As vital as the role of working people is in transforming society, the era has passed when the industrial proletariat enjoyed the hegemonic role assigned to it by Marxists as well as syndicalists. Social anarchists, in my view, have to take a wider view of the social conditions and of the people who are likely to be involved in any libertarian transformation of society. In any case, working people are people as well as workers: They live in communities, experience problems of pollution, education, the logistics of city life, and the like. They are not creatures of the workplace alone—they are also civic or municipal beings, with all the concerns that such people have outside the workplace.

Indeed, as any close study of past revolutions reveals, every popular uprising has had not only an economic and social dimension but a profound municipal dimension as well. It would be impossible, in fact, to understand how workers, peasants, and even radical sections of the middle-class could have been mobilized into revolutionary crowds without considering the neighborhoods and communities that formed the basis for a political culture in their places of residence.

Critics of libertarian municipalism sometimes object that today's cities are far too large to accommodate self-government

wishes of the majority is a form of personal tyranny that would render any society dysfunctional.

Nor is libertarian municipalism a political philosophy based on a localism that presupposes that a municipality can exist autonomously, on its own. Quite to the contrary, in modern society all communities must rely on each other, and regions on other regions, to meet their needs. Social anarchism, I believe, offers a plausible alternative to the claims made by the state—namely confederation, whereby interdependencies can be fostered in a libertarian manner. Libertarian municipalities would send delegates, mandated and recallable, to a confederal council to carry out the policies established by individual assemblies. The decisions these councils would make would be purely administrative; indeed, they would be expressly prohibited from making policy decisions, which would remain the exclusive province of the popular assemblies. Confederation is a system not of representation but of coordination. It is predicated, so far as policy-making is concerned, on decision-making by the overall majority of the citizens in the communities of the confederation.

As a form of anarchist communalism, libertarian municipalism calls for the municipalization of the economy: popular municipal assemblies themselves would take control of the productive forces within their precincts. The municipalization of the economy is to be distinguished from its nationalization (which merely reinforces statism and leads quite easily to totalitarian systems of management) and from a syndicalist approach that would place the economy in the hands of worker-controlled collectives (which often foster collective capitalist enterprises). In a municipalized economy the citizenry in their respective assemblies would make economic decisions, guided not by occupational interests, which might easily bias such decisions in favor of particular enterprises, but by the interests of the community as a whole.

the masses. Modern political parties are either states in power or, when out of power, states waiting to take power. In order to function as statist organizations, the very exigencies of state power oblige them to replicate the state to one degree or another. They must, if they are to gain power, constitute themselves as top-down extensions of the state, just as capitalist enterprises must be organized to make profit at the public's expense, their claims to be performing a beneficent "public service" to the contrary notwithstanding. Indeed, the more parties and enterprises and even states cover themselves with a libertarian patina, the more insidiously they besmirch the very public trust they profess to hold most sacred. The early claims of the German Greens to be a "nonparty party" reflected a tension that could not continue to exist indefinitely once the Greens were elected to the Bundestag. Whatever may have been the best intentions of their spokespersons, participation in the state of necessity reinforced every party-oriented tendency in their organization at the expense of their "nonparty" claims. Today, far from being a challenge to the social order in Germany, the Greens are one of its props. This is the product not of any ill will on the part of individual Greens but rather of the inexorable imperatives of working within the state rather than against it. Invariably, it is the state that shapes the activities and structures of those who propose to use it against itself, not the reverse.

Social anarchists, in contrast to Marxists, regard the state as such as a great institutional impediment to the achievement of libertarian socialism or communism. In bourgeois republics, the practical demand of social anarchists to desist from participating in national elections reflects their commitment to delegitimate the state, to divest it of its mystique as an indispensable agency for "public order" and the administration of social life. What is at issue in social anarchist abstention from these parliamentary rituals is their attempt to expose the authoritarian basis of the state, to dissolve its legitimacy as a

"natural" source of order, and to challenge its claims to be a supraclass agency and to be the only competent institutional source of power—as distinguished from the incompetence of the masses in managing public affairs. This responsibility of social anarchism to demystify capitalism, the nation-state, and their interconnection – indeed to challenge their legitimacy as a priori "natural" phenomena – is not simply a matter of theoretical elucidation. To be relevant to people generally, it must be embodied in a practice that is publicly visible, one that can mutate the need for reforms of the existing system (which may be allowed) into the need for a revolutionary transformation of society (which the system must resist).

III

My own version of social anarchism, as many readers of Green Perspectives will already know, involves the creation of a direct face-to-face democracy in which people directly participate in the management of their community's affairs. In contrast to systems of "representative democracy" (the phrase is a contradiction in terms, I should emphasize), a libertarian democracy would be structured around popular assemblies, formed at the municipal level to replace existing municipal governments. These popular assemblies would be open arenas for popular decision-making for all adults in a given community to attend (or not attend, according to their wishes). Here the people themselves would make decisions about how their communities' affairs should be run. These assemblies would be transparent and entirely open to public scrutiny.

I have given this communalist system of civic self-management the name libertarian municipalism. As a political philosophy of direct democracy, it stands in marked contrast to the state, parliamentarism, and the principle of representation. It reserves the word politics for the self-administration of a community by its citizens in a face-to-face assembly. At the risk of repeating ideas familiar to readers, let me emphasize that this kind of politics stands in direct contrast to and indeed in sharp tension with statecraft, the top-down system of professional representation that is ultimately based on the state's monopoly of violence.

Basic to libertarian municipalism is the view that the town and city—which historically antedate the emergence of the state—represent the most basic arena of human consociation beyond the social realm of family, friends, and coworkers. The town or city neighborhood—the municipality—is the authentic realm of politics, in the direct-democratic sense from which the word is etymologically derived: the Athenian polis of the fifth century B.C.E. (I do not regard Athens as a "model" or "paradigm," still less as an "ideal" of a libertarian municipalist city, many of my critics' claims to the contrary notwithstanding. The shortcomings and oppressive features of ancient Athenian society and politics should not prevent us from exploring the working institutions of the municipal direct democracy that arose and persisted for a time in the self-managed Athenian polis.) Athens, in contrast to most cities in history, developed democratic institutions—especially the assembly, or ekklesia—and some of these institutions and standards of citizenship provide us with materials invaluable for forming a practical libertarian municipality.

There is a tendency within anarchism to reject democracy in any form as the imposition of the will of a majority on a minority. As distinguished from the socialistic tendency in anarchism that emphasizes social freedom, this essentially liberalistic tendency emphasizes instead personal autonomy. In my view, if any approach to decision-making is authoritarian, it is not majority rule but the requirement, as many of these individualistic anarchists propose, of attaining consensus in a large formal setting. The right of a single individual to obstruct the