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Symbiosis: federating municipalist movements in North America for real democracy

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That the Commune can be the place for self-government is not a new idea for radical social movements in North America. For decades, the social thinker Murray Bookchin (1921-2006) has developed, advocated and given life to the idea of libertarian municipalism, also dubbed

Communalism in reference of the revolutionary events of the 1871 Paris Commune. As the politics of social ecology – a perspective that understands ecological issues as social ones, and that sees human domination over nature as stemming from the idea of domination of humans over humans – [libertarian municipalism](#) advocates for a radical restructuring of our social, economic and political institutions. By proposing that political and economic affairs be handled directly and face-to-face by popular assemblies gathering all residents of an area at the municipal level, and by confederal councils of delegates with recallable and imperative mandates from these assemblies at the confederal level, this revolutionary theory aims at abolishing both the state and capitalism. For decades, these ideas have been spread by the Institute for Social Ecology (ISE), an organization co-founded by Murray Bookchin and based in Vermont in the United States, through popular education and networking of social ecologists and communalists.

While contesting capitalist logics and practicing direct democracy through popular assemblies and systems of strict delegation were the master words of the alterglobalization movement starting in Seattle in 1999, and of Occupy Wall Street in 2011, what libertarian municipalism proposes is to institutionalize these popular assemblies and radical democratic institutions on the long term and to give them political legitimacy. What is more, Bookchin proposes to connect these institutions with each other through a confederation, also called co-federation or federation, to be sufficiently strong to challenge the state and capital. It intends to do so through creating a situation of dual power between on the one hand, the confederation of communes, and on the other, the state.

After the election of Trump in 2016, the necessity to create such a dual power situation was felt more acutely than ever. While this election directly led to the creation of several communalist movements such as the Seattle Neighborhood Action Coalitions, Olympia Assembly and Portland Assembly as a community answer to Trump, it also led to the growth and radicalizing of other organizations, such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and its Libertarian Socialists Caucus (LSC) explicitly advocating for a [dual power strategy](#). Creating a convergence of both existing and new organizations with a municipalist and socialist focus became therefore a priority. It is in this context that, during the 2017 summer intensive organized by the ISE, communalists have decided to give life to this form of organizing by creating [Symbiosis](#), a collective dedicated to the creation of a confederation across North America.

Creating a confederation of municipalist movements in North America

For over two years, Symbiosis members have dedicated tremendous amount of time and energy in the organization of a [Congress](#) of municipal movements with the explicit purpose of creating such a revolutionary vehicle to federate municipalist efforts. To organize a directly democratic confederation in a directly democratic way, mechanisms such as participatory preparatory conference, regular town hall meetings and referenda, were held to give the opportunity for member organizations to shape the Congress.

In the perspective of launching a “continental confederation of local movements building dual power through radical democracy”, the plan was for delegates of local groups, assemblies, social movements and grassroots organizations across North America to meet on September 18-22, 2019 in Detroit, Michigan, to create the structure that would federate them. In other words, Symbiosis is not a mere gathering or network of individuals, but an action-oriented platform composed of delegates from member organizations and aiming at creating a legitimate structure of coordination of their action, strategy and political practice. From 125 people who attended the Congress, half were delegates from 40 organizations. Besides Symbiosis at-large delegates, *member* organizations (local and grassroots institution-building movements that will be the decision-making body of the confederation) included, among others, [Cooperation Jackson](#), [Cooperation Northfield](#), [Olympia Assembly](#), [Carbondale Spring](#), local chapters of Symbiosis (Montreal, New York City and [Portland](#)), or [La Asamblea de Pueblos del Istmo en Defensa de la Tierra y el Territorio](#) (Oaxaca). More than 50 cities were represented, from 25 states and 3 countries (Mexico, USA, Canada). A meticulous system of delegate's allocation based on membership size allowed a balanced representativity of each group. Other organizations were present as *partner* organizations such as the [Institute for Social Ecology](#), [Demand Utopia](#), [Black Socialists of America](#), [DegrowUS](#) and [DSA-LSC](#).

One striking feature of this network of activists and organizations is the great variety of functions, purposes and activities in which they are involved: food justice, housing, energy, social and solidarity economy, education, ecology, security, healthcare, disaster relief, labour organizing, media, technology, participative research, neighborhood democracy, etc. Most of the groups are multi-issues, some of them are affinity groups (Neighborhood Anarchist Collective), while others are part of larger political parties (like DSA-LSC). What ties these groups together is a common struggle for real democracy, the need to organize beyond the local level, and a will to create a large collective force from below embedded in shared values.

The “Points of unity” challenge

Even though all the people attending the Symbiosis Collective shared a broad “Radical Left” sensibility, a common opposition to the state, capitalism and other systems of oppression (racism, sexism, colonialism etc.), and a common interest in “municipalism”, the great variety of groups, personal experiences, political formations and ideological idiosyncrasies cannot easily be said to share the same revolutionary strategy. Socialists, marxists, anarchists, antiracists, social ecologist, degrowth partisans and other Leftwing families do not always fit easily together.

Overall, and in addition to their common framework of dual power, most of the people present at the Congress share a commitment towards direct democracy, self-determination, anti-hierarchy, anticapitalism and ecology perspective. In contrast with “European municipalism” embodied in Spanish rebel cities like Barcelona, which are more oriented towards electoral politics and social change from “inside the institutions”, “North-American municipalism” is mostly based on the strategy of dual power outside of the state institutions, with a more anarchist sensibility closer to Murray Bookchin’s version of libertarian municipalism. In any case, the non-sectarian attitude and the mind-openness to ideological plurality of all the delegates helped to foster a space for discussions beyond “bookchinities” and anarchists.

In order to overcome the well-known divisions among the Left around ideological issues, it was proposed to first agree on broad points of unity that would be collectively elaborated, discussed in working groups, and formally adopted in the assembly. Since this process usually takes a certain amount of time, the first challenge of the Congress was to suggest some points of unity proposals in advance, and let enough time for deliberation so that everyone can express their minds on these fundamental principles. But the limited time given by the agenda of the Congress created a problem: not all delegates had the time to think and propose their own points of unity, let alone read, analyze, discuss, amend or merge the proposals coming from several organizations: direct democracy, non-hierarchy, communal self-governance, confederation, ecology, liberatory technology, revolution, etc.

Some frustrations were expressed by those who wanted more time to meet each other, exchange, debate and reach agreement with a consensus decision-making process, rather than deciding through voting, moving forward through the loaded agenda of the Congress, and searching efficacy through the formal procedures adopted at the beginning of the assembly. By the end of the Congress, the points of unity have not been formally adopted, but a “temperature check” technique showed that the vast majority of people largely agreed with those principles: participatory and direct democracy, anti-hierarchy and oppression, communal and cooperative economics, mutual aid, ecology, dual power, communal self-governance and confederation (that the participants preferred to call federation), collective healing, and unity in diversity.

Finally, the assembly proposed to form a working group delegated with the task of creating a draft of points of unity for January 1st, 2020 to be brought for a vote to the entire membership of the federation. The inability to reach a clear consensus on points of unity through formal procedures during the Congress expressed a deeper problem arising from the tensions of democratically creating a new organization. Indeed, how to collectively agree on common principles within a large and diverse group of people that don't even know each other? How to reach agreement between delegates who did not have time to discuss why they want a confederation and what they want to do with it? How to make collective decisions on structure through formal procedures that not everyone agrees on, all this before the actual existence of this very structure?

The chicken and egg problem

The main paradox facing the creation of the Symbiosis Federation was anticipated by the organizers before the Congress and dubbed "the chicken and egg problem". On the one hand, they wanted to build a confederation of local groups by letting those groups determine the meaning, goals and the organizational form of that confederation. But on the other hand, the organizers had to build enough of the confederation to get the local organizations to join it, with a program, an agenda, and rules of procedure. This tension was lived in the first assembly, where many delegates expressed frustrations related to the process, rhythm of discussions and voting procedures. A significant number of delegates wanted to reorganize the whole agenda of the Congress, and to change the decision-making process that was too formal. In short, the assembly began right away with a conflict about the form, the content and the finalities of the Symbiosis Congress.

A disagreement on the very notion of democracy was expressed during the first assemblies. On the one hand, some people expressed the need to make more space for inclusive deliberations, know each other, "live" the democracy instead of immediately creating its structures. As theorized by a delegate of Carbondale Spring after the Congress in a text "Of Egg and Chicken", this "relational" understanding of democracy, involving a shared feeling of mutual recognition and egalitarian partnership between people trying to shape together a common world, was in conflict with another more formal vision of democracy. Animated by the need to come up with a formal ground for the federation at the end of the Congress, some people preferred to stick with the will to have efficient processes, to have a clear and realistic agenda, and to agree on common values/objectives and organizational structure and decision-making.

In short, participants lived a contradiction between two imperatives: the need to make things right, and the need to get things done in order to build the federation. This tension was hard for some people to deal with, and at one point, some delegates left the assembly to take a break and step out of the deadlock conversations. No major point or proposal were adopted in the assemblies, and at some point there was a shared fear that the Congress might not reach its goal of launching a confederation, until a sudden change of the format of the meeting made the whole difference by answering the frustration of many.

The German poet Friedrich Hölderlin once said: “But where the danger is, grows the saving power also”. The last evening before the end of the Congress, an extra assembly was organized and the delegate from Athens for Everyone facilitated a spokescouncil of the different working groups, as well as a circle assembly, where everyone had the chance to express their feelings, expectations, fears and hopes about the project of Symbiosis. Surprisingly, the group dynamic changed substantially, creating a “moment of resonance” of shared experience and collective wisdom, as if the new form of the conversation changed the very nature of the relationship between participants and regarding their collective purpose.



Assemblies taking place during the Symbiosis conference in Detroit. Photo: Sixtine van Outryve

The result of the congress: a federation in the making

The spokescouncil model was so efficient in solving tensions in the group that the next assembly on Sunday decided to get rid of the formal and “parliamentary” rules of procedure and to take the spokescouncil form for the last assembly as well as for the Symbiosis structure itself. Indeed, organized in several circles – the first composed of people reporting back from their working groups on various themes, the second of delegates and the third of observers – and with time dedicated for comments and questions on each working group’s propositions, the last assembly was both democratic and efficient to coordinate the work produced during the whole congress. The outcome is the creation of several working groups to continue the work started during the Congress across geographical distance, among other on points of unity, decision-making, structure, but also on skillshare, political education, finance, communication, recruitment and to gather people of the global majority, and to offer proposals that would be voted upon by the constituency, that is, local organizations, as well as transition team to coordinate these efforts.



Photo by: Sixtine van Outryve

Beyond these tangible results for the creation of the federation, materialized in the will to organize another Congress, what this Congress did was to create a space for delegates from various organizing and ideological backgrounds to come together, to think together, and, eventually, to create a shared understanding of how they wanted to work to collectively create a revolutionary vehicle – that is, a real federation in the making.

Featured image taken during the Symbiosis conference.

Photo by: Sixtine van Outryve.

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