

Introduction to

From Urbanization to Cities: The Politics of Democratic Municipalism (AK, 2021)

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“From Commercy, we call for the creation of popular committees throughout France, which function in regular general assemblies. Places where speech is liberated, where one dares to express oneself, to educate oneself, to help one another. If there must be delegates, it is at the level of each local Yellow Vests’ popular committee, closer to the voice of the people. With imperative, recallable, and rotating mandates. With transparency. With trust.”

– The Yellow Vests of Commercy, November 30, 2018.

Ideas travel through time and place. Especially inspiring ones. From Murray Bookchin’s typewriter in the United States of 1985, to a group of Yellow Vests occupying the Commercy city center in northeastern France some thirty years later, ideas about organizing at the local level in face-to-face popular assemblies, about educating oneself to debate and decide on public matters, about de-professionalizing politics through delegates with imperative and recallable mandates have become material and real.

The New Municipal Agenda Bookchin elaborated in *From Urbanization to Cities* has given direction to the deep democratic aspirations of people in struggle around the world. In particular, Bookchin’s thought has been a resource for the Yellow Vests, a grassroots protest movement for political and economic reform, inspiring the Commercy Yellow Vests to call on their fellow protesters throughout France to organize in popular assemblies and reject representative government. In addition to popular assemblies at the city level, the Yellow Vests also created confederal egalitarian structures to enable collective decision-making: the Assembly of Assemblies, as well as the Commune of Communes—as Bookchin urges in his 1998 essay “A Politics for the Twenty-First Century.”

Even after the Yellow Vest movement was brutally repressed at the national level, the struggle for direct democracy continued locally. Some Yellow Vests decided to create a citizens’ assembly and run a list for the municipal elections. They voted to tie candidates’ mandates to the decisions of the local popular assembly—one of the strategies Bookchin proposed to radically restructure local politics in order to prioritize direct democracy. And what started in Commercy has shown itself to be much more than a local phenomenon. The Yellow Vest movement is just one of the many international struggles that are planting the seed of what Bookchin calls “libertarian municipalism” in the minds of people who are discontented with the practice of representative government. From the surge of municipalist movements across Europe, to the popular assemblies growing in countries throughout the Americas, to the Kurdish-led democratic confederalism of Rojava in Northeast Syria, more and more communities are bringing to life the ideas Bookchin unearthed from his study of popular history so many decades ago.

That human beings possess an intrinsic tendency to organize democratically in popular assemblies at the level of the city is the essential message of *From Urbanization to Cities: The Politics of Democratic Municipalism*. Such a tendency has unfolded throughout the centuries, from the Neolithic to the present, passing through classical Athens, medieval towns, *comuneros* in Early Modern Spain, New England town meetings, the Paris Commune of both 1792 and 1871, and the Russian, German, Spanish, and Hungarian revolutions. What Bookchin shows us in this important book is that, throughout history, there is an enduring

legacy of communal popular assemblies as a form of self-government, and of the city as the arena in which to develop politics and citizenship, despite the rise of the nation-state. Especially in times of social unrest, the assembly form of democracy has been the preferred vehicle for the community to act on its future.

These popular assemblies answer a human aspiration: to make political decisions on a directly democratic face-to-face basis. Indeed, Bookchin concludes that it is not a given that history inexorably leads to the creation of the nation-state, its coercive apparatus, and its professional, representative government. Rather, Bookchin posits that there exists an unfolding tendency of human beings towards egalitarian and democratic institutions. The masterstroke of Bookchin in this book is to show us how the given state of affairs—the nation-state as the main political unit, representative government as the way to exercise power—is in no case inevitable, but is instead a constructed status quo designed to favor hierarchy. And if it is constructed, then it can be undone.

To counter the nation-state, Bookchin has proposed a clear vision of what the city ought to be, instead of what it is. For that purpose, he offers a historical account of the role cities played decades, centuries, even millennia ago. Arriving in the present, he offers us a sharp analysis of the rise of urbanization in the modern era, a process generated by the combination of the forces of the nation-state, capitalism, and industrialism. The modern city expands and explodes into a vast homogeneous and anonymous megalopolis, destroying social bonds and threatening the very integrity of city life.

But he also demonstrates how urbanization is not an inherent feature of cities, but a socially avoidable one, showing us that cities do not need to be ever-growing gigantic impersonal agglomerations dominating nature and ruling us rather than allowing us to rule ourselves. They can be, and in fact used to be, a place for the exercise of direct democracy—that is, a place for us to meet, debate, and decide what we want to do collectively, rather than leaving this task to the “professional” politicians.

Indeed, even during periods of intense urbanization, working class people have recolonized community life, aided by the organized labor movement, forming what Bookchin called the “underground communal world” of the industrial era. In these assemblies and clubs, workers, middle-class people, and farmers met and kept political life alive even in highly centralized nation-states through the exercise of communal citizenship. These civic movements, which formed the foundation of radical uprisings throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, were the products of neighborhood and local life. When one looks at the Paris Commune of 1871, clubs and neighborhood assemblies were the basis of the political life of this revolution: they assembled to discuss important economic, political, and social matters and pushed for more radical measures; they held elected *communards* in check, as well as defended Paris on the barricades against the government army.

Bookchin aims to show us that the world we know today, a world of state domination, ecological destruction, and ever-expanding capitalism does not necessarily need to be. That it has been otherwise. That it *can* be otherwise. That we can create institutions to expand human tendencies towards solidarity, mutual aid, sharing, equality, cooperation, and civic life, rather than towards exploitation, individualism, accumulation, and competition. And if we want to ensure the survival of our species, we *must* take on this project.

Throughout his work, Bookchin offers us an arsenal of conceptual weapons to face and overcome current crises: ecological, social, migratory, and democratic. In other books, specifically *The Modern Crisis*, *The Ecology of Freedom*, and *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, he develops the idea of social ecology, an interdisciplinary philosophy that based on the assumption that human domination over nature stems from human domination over other human beings, and suggests that our relationship with each other and with the natural world can only be healed when we eliminate every form of hierarchy and domination and reclaim control over our everyday lives. To better understand how to do this, *From Urbanization to Cities* confronts the question of how to put the principles of social ecology into action in the political sphere, offering an emancipatory political philosophy, libertarian municipalism, that recovers the city as a place for the development of an egalitarian and democratic civic life, rather than for bureaucratic domination, capital expansion, and exploitation of nature.

The political philosophy of libertarian municipalism, later encapsulated by the term “Communalism” by Bookchin, asks anew two correlated questions: What is the main political unit for a people to govern itself? And how should public power be exercised? Bookchin answers these questions together, advocating for the municipality as the political unit to realize direct democracy, since it is the only place where the people can gather, deliberate, and directly make decisions together, rather than relying on representatives to exercise public power.

Such decisions are not limited to the political sphere, leaving the economic sphere unattended, as traditional theories of participatory or deliberative democracy too often tend to do. Bookchin asserts that the economic sphere must be subordinated to the political one, leaving the task to formulate economic policies regarding production, distribution, and consumption to the entire community through the popular assembly. A municipalized economy would give true meaning to Marx’s maxim, “From each according to his ability and to each according to his needs.”

For questions going beyond the scope of a single municipality, including economic ones, he proposes to organize confederal councils composed of delegates endowed with imperative and recallable mandates from their popular assemblies. These delegates would no longer be political professionals like our current representatives, but rather spokespersons conveying the decisions of their assemblies to the confederal council. In contrast with the nation-state, a confederal form of organizing a large territory might have avoided one of the greatest plagues of our era: fascism, and its ideology of national unity. With nationalism and fascism once more on the rise, understanding and unpacking the roots of the nation-state is a necessity if we are to fight it—an urgent project that Bookchin undertakes in this book. Thus, Bookchin not only analyzes how the nation-state was born, but also offers us an alternative to counter it by constructing a new way of living together.

Bookchin’s political philosophy charts a way out of the democratic crisis driving individuals away from politics, precisely because it aims at reconstructing the city as a place for people to develop a civic life and take their destiny into their own hands. It also puts forward another definition of citizenship: one that is no longer based on the arbitrary borders of the nation-state, but rather on political participation in the self-government of the city. With a new definition of citizenship beyond borders, Bookchin’s political philosophy offers the dynamite necessary to blow up the edifice of the nation-state. It also offers a reconstructive vision that protects immigrants from the limbo of apolitical existence, social exclusion, and economic

exploitation. It makes them, and all of us, citizens in the most complete sense of the term: that of being active participants in the political life of the municipality.

Because it is the first public space we enter when we leave our private sphere, the only human-scaled entity, and also the first place where newcomers arrive, the city is the ideal locus in which people can become reconstituted from separate individuals into a community. By exploring how the city used to, and could again, be a democratic and unalienated arena where humans reach their full potential in reason, freedom, and creativity through discourse and collective decision-making, Bookchin aims at recovering two concepts: politics and citizenship. To be a citizen, one has to live in a *polis*, a village, town, or neighborhood, to convene popular assemblies where everyone can participate in politics. Through a genealogy of the state, he invites us to demystify and dismantle the state and its product, statecraft—the domain of professional politics—in order to recover the true meaning of politics as the art of deciding collectively the course of action of the community. By distinguishing politics from statecraft, he proposes a form of political engagement that ceases to pretend to know people's will, but that rather allows them to actually form such a will.

For Bookchin, politics consist not only of the direct self-government of the city by its residents, but also in the educational process of shaping individuals who can actively take part in such a self-government and act in the public interest, a capacity anesthetized by centuries of representative government. Education, which Bookchin calls *paideia* in reference to its crucial role in Athenian democracy, is fostered by participation in politics, not blind obedience to state laws and policies made by the ruling class. Indeed, in our contemporary society, individuals are considered passive, incompetent, and uninterested when it comes to politics, a mistaken anthropological inference about human nature as a result of an oppressive political system. As a consequence, places to experience participatory political education are lacking. Nonetheless, they can be found in the assemblies that flourish around the world during all kinds of political struggles, including that of the Yellow Vests—assemblies that are working to counter centuries of state conditioning. Even if these assemblies do not yet constitute the libertarian municipalist system Bookchin calls for, they can still play this necessary educational role.

But to reach such a communalist society, where should we begin? While this book aims mainly at convincing us that politics have previously been—and could be again—organized differently than the current nation-state and representative government, Bookchin does not leave us with only *ideals* of a democratic community. Even though he refuses to establish a one-size-fits all blueprint model of municipalist politics, in order to avoid having it transformed into an inflexible and rigid dogma, he fleshes out many details of a potential strategy, working with the situation he knows best, that of the state of Vermont in the United States. In later essays, most of them now collected in the book *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy*, Bookchin would expand on his theory of Communalism and propose concrete paths to enacting it.

Bookchin is well aware that the municipality—even when built around strong institutions of self-government to engage its citizens in public life—is not sufficiently strong enough to challenge the state. The strategy he proposes is therefore to create a system of dual power—referring to the 1917 Russian Revolution, where the provisional government shared power with the *soviets*—between, on the one hand, the confederation of communes based on local self-government, and, on the other, the nation-state, where the two would compete for political legitimacy. This situation of tension between the two forces is seen as a necessity in

Bookchin's dialectical thought. He insists that the confederation of communes and the state cannot coexist in the long term. Bookchin believes that the former could win and replace the state, insofar as the state would have been hollowed out of its legitimacy.

To dismantle the legitimacy of the state in favor of the confederation of self-governed communes, we need first to realize self-government at the level of the municipality. Bookchin proposes two strategies in order to do so: an extra-institutional and an institutional one. The extra-institutional strategy consists of creating radically new and alternative institutions by building extra-legal popular assemblies to manage communal affairs independently of the existing political system. The institutional strategy entails participating in existing legal municipal institutions, like city councils, by presenting candidates whose mandates would be tied to the popular assembly's will, in order to radically transform these institutions. The goal is for popular assemblies, making decisions via direct democracy, to inform all policy enacted by the city council. From a dual power perspective, consolidating the power of communal popular assemblies at the expense of the state through either of these strategies is necessary if we wish to build a confederation of communes, and create a communalist society.

Bookchin is attuned to offering a political philosophy that can be adapted, modified, extended, and interpreted according to local conditions. And this is exactly how people have put it into practice it across the world. Seeking to answer their deeply democratic aspirations, movements take Bookchin's ideas as inspiration and adapt them to the nuances of their local struggles. In turn, these movements, such as the radical feminist, democratic, and ecological revolution in Rojava, inspire others to follow suit.

This new edition of *From Urbanization to Cities* is timed perfectly to allow the potentialities inherent in Bookchin's work to be developed to their fullest by these ever-growing democratic political movements around the world. This book aims to show these movements that they are part of a broader trend in history, that of the underground communal world. It also encourages them to discover and recover this history, to find inspiration for their own struggles in past successes and failures. Because it proposes an answer to the crisis of democracy without falling into the trap of the nation-state's closed identity; because it enables an egalitarian communal form of economic production and distribution based on the municipalization of the economy; because it offers a means of relating to nature that does not rest on endless exploitation and subsequent destruction, Bookchin's Communalism has the potential to inspire a whole generation of people in quest of solidarity, equality, and democracy. This book is an essential guide for that journey.