

THE PROMISE OF RADICAL MUNICIPALISM¹

By Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D. & Khulda bat Sarah

“Radical municipalism”—foreign to many Americans, less so to Europeans—has recently gained recognition in the United States. This may make it a virtual canary in the coal mine, for attention paid to this brand of activism may signal a sea-change in our national mood, revealing the depth of our despair.

Enter the radical municipalists who have given up on state and federal government. They see the top-down initiatives of government as having failed to remedy poverty, oppression, injustice, and environmental plundering. For them, it was a short step from disappointment to wholesale rejection of hope based on “neoliberal capitalism.”² It’s no coincidence, then, that they are moved by the libertarian municipal confederalism envisioned by Murray Bookchin (d. 2006).³

The Promise

The consensus among radical municipalists is that cities, given their political scale and accessibility, provide the ideal platforms to launch a post-capitalist movement. Their aim is to get rid of centralized, hierarchical government and corporate institutions. In their view of radical democratization, confederated directly democratic municipalities will fill the gap.

One such municipality is Barcelona.⁴ It has been described by radical municipalists as refashioned “. . . to break the bounds of traditional party politics and to challenge institutional politics as they currently exist. . . .”⁵ by cultivating oppositional power from the bottom up. “Thrilling promises keep being made: reinventing democracy, re-modeling institutions into structures for self-organization, overcoming national exclusions, building bridges into post-capitalism and so on.”⁶

But does radical municipalism make sense for the United States? Does it fit our history, our constitutional form of government and mixed economy, and the challenges we’re facing as a nation?

Strategic Shortfalls

The radical municipalists want not only to change our form of government and to break free from our reliance on capitalism. They also hope to end the United States

of America as a nation-state.⁷

But they seem not to have articulated a strategy to accomplish that. How will they, for example, deal with the political sensibilities of our citizens regarding the end of the U.S.A.? And how will they circumvent the requirements of the U.S. Constitution? Radical municipalists may have in mind to build enough power to seize control of the cities, but they tell us nothing of what they think it will take to succeed in major urban municipalities in the United States.

We can expect, for example, that the organized opposition to radical municipalism in a city like Los Angeles would be huge. Bankers, developers, realtors, landowners, media conglomerates, and corporations generally, in anticipation of attempts to “municipalize” their assets, would all turn out to oppose it.

The ideological rhetoric of radical municipalism may soar, but the methodology on the ground is inexplicably pedestrian. Its advocates seem not to fully comprehend what’s required to countervail the power of entrenched opposition to their ideological and institutional objectives. They fail to articulate an informed, street-wise understanding of urban politics, specifically how corporations and the wealthy dominate municipal public powers.⁸

We imagine, based on their writing and rhetoric, they have little hands-on experience of the last century’s professional labor, community, and faith-based organizing in the U.S. They don’t acknowledge the demands of recruiting, educating and training professional organizers, or the need to institutionalize the kind of fundraising mechanism—like union dues, faith-community tithe, or government tax—that makes possible an accelerating, long-term, national movement.

Additionally, the failure to do base-building can distance radical activists from the face-to-face relationships needed to understand citizens’ day-to-day hopes and challenges. This would include their self-interested political perspectives and dependence on conservative-oriented institutions for employment. Without these understandings, ideologues are likely to be leading a parade with few followers.

But even more critically, radical ideologues seem to be unconscious of or indifferent to the indispensable role played by religious moral vision and morally inspired action, which are the underpinning of virtually all popular movements that achieve substantial progress for the commonweal.

More surprising is that the radical municipalists, as far we can tell, make no distinction between (1) municipalities in polycentric systems, such as our own structure of local, state, and national governments, which are mandated by the U.S. and state constitutions, and (2) municipalities in monocentric states, such as the U.K. and much of the rest of the world.

In the U.K. and virtually everywhere else in Europe, municipalities exist (more or less) as extensions of unitary national governments, which are often administered by liberal parties. These national governments can mandate progressive changes in virtually all local governments.

In the U.S., however, municipalities are mandated by the 50 state governments and subject to their legislatures, which are often dominated by reactionary Republicans elected from rural districts. These municipalities demand a much more sophisticated, long-range organizing strategy.

Municipalities Take Over

The radical municipalists may see municipalities as the ideal platform from which to launch their movement, but they say little or nothing about who or what will take the place of state and federal government.

Murray Bookchin, whom many regard as the father of radical municipalism, rejected institutional power exercised by governments above the municipal level. He believed “. . . we must . . . end domination and hierarchy at every level. . . .”⁹ But he did not say who or what would ensure the lawful behavior needed for political and economic life to continue between municipalities and beyond them.

He did, however, see the necessity for a higher level of municipal *administration*, beyond the local assembly. This higher level would be administered by representatives, designated by the assemblies, who would act without legislative or policy-making powers.

But did he, then, imagine that such confederations¹⁰ would be responsible for the details of public policy now enforced by the states and nation? In California, such an arrangement would make representatives from municipalities responsible for 29 statutory codes, including vehicle, criminal, commercial, elections, family, food and agriculture, and health and safety—to name a few. And then there are all the federal statutory codes, which govern interstate commerce, aviation, postal service, etc. There’s no end to it.

Further, did Bookchin anticipate what would happen if municipalities were to take over private enterprise? Should we expect, for instance, that municipalities would assume ownership of previously national airlines, trucking firms, and railroads?

What about natural resources? Are we to assume

that the confederations would be able to settle conflicts over the uneven distribution of resources such as water and mineral-rich wilderness land?

What about atomic waste?

More importantly, did Bookchin also imagine that municipal confederations would cooperate to raise an army in the event of a threat to the country by a foreign power? Or are we to assume that when the nation-state no longer exists, we won’t have armed forces. In effect, will the land and all it contains be open for the taking by any malevolent force, internal or external? And if there’s no nation-state, would citizens still have “constitutional” rights? And if those rights were violated, what independent judicial power could be called upon to protect them?

What, precisely, qualifies local assemblies to be the sole arbiters of policy that affects much larger geopolitical constituencies?

Tactics as Strategies

Perhaps, understandably, radical municipalists have decided to participate *in* city governments—not to protest against them or negotiate with them. They have replaced strategy with the tactic of winning municipal elections. However, they don’t say how, practically, they will convert the citizenry into a radical electorate to achieve those victories.

The radical municipalists apparently believe that their ideology and democratization rhetoric will, in time, achieve the desired effect—a colossal institutional transformation. They often express enthusiasm for urban municipalities that are becoming democratized, which they believe is “. . . happening in practice in towns and cities all over the world.”¹¹ Their belief mirrors Bookchin’s futurism, which appears to be ungrounded in any realistic social strategy or social action methodology. What we’re seeing in the much-heralded activity in Barcelona, for example, are informal neighborhood assemblies that serve as the infrastructure of a progressive national political party. This partisan-party development is far from an effective way to permanently end the predations of largely unregulated capitalism.¹²

One thing in all this is clear: electing liberals, progressives, or radicals to public office never produces institutionalized directly democratic assemblies. Elected officeholders, regardless of their politics or policy preferences, would as soon catch the plague as diminish their own institutional power.

We, personally, would like to see cities governed more progressively, but we don’t have any illusions that electing progressives is going to bring about structural change that will permanently empower the grassroots citizenry or undo the institutionalized inequality of power that is poisoning American life.

In the final analysis, the success or failure of radical municipalism in the United States may depend less on its own limitations or organized opposition to it than on a lack of citizen support, electoral or otherwise. It’s highly unlikely to become a popular movement large

enough to overcome the entrenched power of what amounts to a brotherhood of billionaires¹³ and their political and corporate cronies.

Nonpartisan Public Power

The radical municipalists may be engaged by the vision of directly democratic municipal assemblies, but we have not been able to find much in their writings about the essential role of public powers.¹⁴ Possibly that's because they have only seen them applied by representative governments corrupted by capitalist interests. Without public powers, those local assemblies amount to nothing more than informal gatherings of similarly interested individuals who may decide to submit a proposal to their local government that *does* exercise public powers.

In fact, beyond New England and Switzerland, directly democratic assemblies with institutionalized public powers are nonexistent.¹⁵ Moreover, the popular assemblies that do exist within municipal districts and neighborhoods are not promising as institutionalized means of radical, progressive or liberal *structural* empowerment.¹⁶ These celebrated assemblies will not fulfill the promise of radical municipalism because, without exception, they are designed to be advisory, impermanent, without vested public powers, and toothless.¹⁷

The radicals wax enthusiastic about the history of directly democratic assemblies that “. . . began small, local, and seemingly up against impossible odds.”¹⁸ But they seem to ignore the fact that such assemblies were almost always “crushed” by judicial, police, and military forces, controlled by elites who used national partisan parties—both right and left—to centralize the public power in their own hands.¹⁹

More importantly, institutionally empowered directly democratic assemblies, by definition, are nonpartisan. The assumption of the radical municipalists, however, is that their assemblies will be politically progressive. The radicals may claim to be dedicated to giving a voice to the aspirations of the people, but it's clear they expect those aspirations and that voice to agree with them, to be anti-capitalist, libertarian, and ecologically progressive.

Academic and professional proponents of municipal reform argue, however, and they cite peer-reviewed research, that direct democracy is much more likely to produce conservative or reactionary commitments. Our experience is that the demos in this country is neither inherently progressive nor reactionary on issues—it is nonpartisan.

The Promise of Direct Democracy

Whatever the benefits of directly democratic assemblies, we are not going to eliminate the nation-state for the sake of a radical ideology. That would be a mistake of historic proportions and it is a political absurdity. Moreover, we are not going to trade a mixed economic system for one that is libertarian. That would be another monumental mistake. Both proposals would strain credulity to the breaking point for almost all Americans.

What we should be seeking in both the political and economic spheres is (1) a mixed economy, as we have now, but with substantially more governmental regulation of capitalism;²⁰ and (2) a deepening of democracy through the institutionalization of public powers in directly democratic, nonpartisan assemblies, acting as a lower tier of metropolitan government.²¹

Thankfully, the United States has a four-century-old model of direct democracy, which is based on a common moral-spiritual vision of public life, a shared history of building family and community, a recognition of the need for mutual aid to deal with common problems, and a practice of *advisory* leadership.²²

That tradition conclusively demonstrates that partisan ideologues are *persona non grata* in directly democratic assemblies. As confirmed in the experience of “open” New England towns, ideological purists—capitalist, socialist, libertarian, or whatever—find themselves without intellectual maneuvering room in the pragmatic dialogue and decision-making of the demos.

A Strategy for Direct Democracy

How can we build on our four-century history of direct democracy in New England to achieve directly democratic metropolitan government throughout the country?

Whatever else we might say, institutionalizing directly democratic assemblies with public powers will require a strategic, multi-decade, professionally organized movement—not simply an ideological vision.²³

If the directly democratic assemblies of the future are to emerge as nonpartisan, the organizing that promotes their formation must have a history of nonpartisanship. The assemblies they organize must have a commitment to equality, equity, accountability, efficiency, and economy.

Lastly, the vanguard organizing ideally would be undertaken by recognized and respected professional-organizer networks that do the following:

- Establish durable organizations in long-lived communities of shared values and interests in virtually every major metropolitan area of the country;
- Promote a compelling moral-spiritual vision;
- Recruit and train thousands of leaders and members;
- Develop in-depth knowledge and skills with which to mentor grassroots leaders;
- Mobilize tens of thousands of citizens in disciplined actions to challenge and negotiate with decision-makers;
- Sustain decades-long, multi-issue campaigns aimed to serve the commonweal;²⁴
- Include diverse populations in their membership, leadership, and professional staff; and
- Educate the public to understand and support political and social movement.

In face-to-face democracy, as de Tocqueville observed: “. . . people both learn the skills of citizenship and develop a taste for freedom; thereafter they form an active rather than deferential, apathetic, or privatized

constituency for state and national representation, an engaged public for national issues.”²⁵

Our organizing mission for this century should be to rebuild the institutions of democracy at their roots. We can begin by ensuring that every citizen is permanently empowered to act politically, as a fully endowed

human being and as a member of a directly democratic assembly with institutionalized public powers. Nothing we have been doing can take the place of institutionalizing directly democratic political roles, rights, and resources for every citizen.

¹ This article has been updated since originally published in *Social Policy*.

² See David M. Kotz, *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberal Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

³ For our critique of Bookchin, see “Should We Revive Murray Bookchin,” *Social Policy*, 48(3):17-22 (Fall 2018) [http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/BOOKCHIN_REVIVAL.pdf].

⁴ We have chosen not to discuss Rojava, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, in the more or less autonomous region of Northern Syria, because we believe the developments there cannot be generalized to industrialized Western democracies that have powerful, stable national governments.

⁵ Masha Gessen, “Barcelona’s Experiment in Radical Democracy,” *The New Yorker* (August 6, 2018) [<https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/barcelonas-experiment-in-radical-democracy>].

⁶ Norma Tiedemann, “Why is municipalism thriving?” *engagée*, 6/7:53-54 (April 30, 2018) [https://issuu.com/engage/docs/engage_e_6_7_issuu]. According to Antonia Casellas in “Urban Development, Power Coalitions and Citizen Participation in Barcelona: A Narrative from a Critical Geography Approach,” *Boletín de la Asociación Geógrafos Españoles*, 70:457-462 (2016), p. 461: “. . . preference formation in local politics has emphasized economic growth above redistributive policies. This dynamic is criticized by community groups, but their ability to influence urban policies has been limited. Since the early 1990s, citizen participation in urban policies has lost the capacity to act and influence the urban agenda. As demonstrated by the nature of the projects in the city, beyond the protocol of the participatory process, citizens’ participatory inclusion does not influence the decisions of policy makers because they lack the capital or technical resources valued by growth coalitions. As a result, community participation has been excluded from the mechanisms that generate the city’s visions and strategies.”

⁷ Not all of Bookchin’s admirers expect libertarian municipal confederations to replace the nation-state. See, for example, Damian White, “Murray Bookchin’s New Life,” *Jacobin* (July 11, 2016) [<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/07/murray-bookchin-ecology-kurdistan-pkk-rojava-technology-environmentalism-anarc/>], in which he asserts: “Rather than fetish a municipal route to social change, this will have to involve many partners at many spatial scales of politics to facilitate social, technological, and ecological transformations. Most critically, the state—where it exists and where it is still relatively open to influence by progressive forces—is going to play a *central role* in this transition.”

⁸ That is, the powers exercised by governments, including law-making, taxing, appropriating and spending public funds, policing, taking property by eminent domain, and marketing bonds that pay non-taxable interest.

⁹ Quoted in Debbie Bookchin, “Radical Municipalism: The Future We Deserve,” *ROAR*, Issue #6 (July 21, 2017) [<https://roarmag.org/magazine/debbie-bookchin-municipalism-rebel-cities/>].

¹⁰ Bookchin’s vision of directly democratic municipalities requires the establishment of larger confederations, which would enable essential government functions beyond the municipality. What the radical municipalists may not recognize is that the U.S. has had two notable and widely studied experiences of failed confederation: the first, the Articles of Confederation, the new country’s first constitution; and the second, secessionist Confederate States of America. Although the reasons for their failures are obviously complex, we know generally that governance of large populations by confederation of lesser jurisdictions is a recipe for division and immobilization. The United Nations is a perfect example of a dysfunctional confederation.

¹¹ Luke Carter, “Radical Municipalism: Fearless Cities,” *Stir to Action* (Autumn 2017) [<https://www.stirtoaction.com/article/fearless-cities>].

¹² We recognize the value of building or rebuilding partisan-party infrastructure, which has been amply demonstrated by the Democratic sweep of the 2018 mid-term election. See Charlotte Alter, “How the Anti-Trump Resistance Is Organizing Its Outrage,” *Time* (October 18, 2018) [time.com/longform/democrat-midterm-strategy/]. It’s reasonable to assume, however, that this Democratic infrastructure-building project, largely driven by outrage over Trump, will have little or no longevity beyond the 2018 top-down-driven mobilization. As noted by Henry Giroux, “Trump and the Ghosts of the Past in Fascist America,” *Tikkun* (November 6, 2018) [<https://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/trump-and-the-ghosts-of-the-past-in-fascist-america>]: “. . . elections may offer some immediate relief if not short-term checks on authoritarian power, but in the long run they will do little to alter its fundamental structures, institutions, power, and grasp on the American public.”

¹³ See Benjamin I. Page, Jason Seawright, and Matthew J. Lacombe, “Stealth Politics by U.S. Billionaires,” Paper prepared for delivery at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, September 2-6, 2015 [https://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/imce/ForbesStealthPoliticsAPSA2015August27FINAL_Updated.pdf], and *Billionaires and Stealth Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018). Our reference to a “brotherhood” is meant to convey not only that U.S. billionaires have common interests about which they communicate with one another, both formally and informally, but that they have a common purpose, plan, and operation, with roots extending back more than a century and a half, and on which they have been singularly focused for much of the latter half of the 20th century and up to the present. It is in their libertarian-ideological and material-interest DNA to unalterably oppose “. . . any group [such as unions and political reformers] or government meddling with the market” (loc. 36 in citation below), and to use any available means to manipulate law and policy to insulate themselves and their wealth from government regulation—thus enjoying, deservedly in their opinion, the benefits of their elite status as an entirely unencumbered propertied class. See Nancy MacLean, “*Democracy in Chains, the Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017) [Kindle version].

¹⁴ Bookchin believed, however, “The present nation-state would have to be eliminated and its powers devolve to citizens in assemblies . . . [and] to make a serious revolution, you needed to gain active, concrete, vested, structural, legal political power.” See Janet Biehl, “Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy,” speech given at the conference on Challenging Capitalist Modernity—Alternative Concepts and the Kurdish Quest (February 3-5, 2012, Hamburg University), New Compass (February 16, 2012) [new-compass.net/articles/Bookchin-öcalan-and-dialectics-dmocracy].

¹⁵ The one notable exception may be the Rojava model of Bookchin-styled direct democracy that exists in Syrian Kurdistan. But it does so largely in the absence of centralized state power, which we do not expect to be a permanent condition any more than it was in revolutionary Russia in the heyday of the soviets. See Michael Knapp et al., *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women’s Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), pp. 87-91.

¹⁶ The validity of this assertion is confirmed beyond doubt by a relatively recent series of scholarly articles that survey participatory and direct democracy at the municipal level in several European countries. See Pascal Delwit, Jean-Benoit Pilet, Herwig Reynaert, and Kristof Steyvers, eds., *Towards DIY-Politics? Participatory and Direct Democracy at the Local Level in Europe* (Brugge, Belgium: Vanden Broele Publishers, 2007).

¹⁷ As a practical matter, advisory neighborhood assemblies serve as “flack-catchers,” deflecting and bleeding off citizen discontent and demands from their respective city councils, without effecting any change in the top-down exercise of municipal power. Typically, neighborhood assemblies are the creations of city councils; and the assemblies present their policy preferences in the form of resolutions and recommendations to their councils. In Los Angeles, however, the neighborhood assemblies (misleadingly named “councils,” as if empowered) were created by charter amendment, but nevertheless are entirely lacking in vested public powers.

¹⁸ Kris Fowler, *Tessellating Dissensus: Autonomy and Radical Democracy* (Devon, U.K.: Masters Dissertation, Economics for Transition, Schumacher College in Partnership with Plymouth University, 2016-17), p. 63.

¹⁹ At the time of the Russian revolution, when the soviets defied the Bolshevik party, threatening their partisan power monopoly, they were crushed. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London and New York: Penguin Books/Viking Press, 1963), p. 258, in which she reminded us that “The name ‘Soviet Union’ has been a lie ever since. . . .”

²⁰ Clearly, the U.S. brand of capitalism has a long way to go to achieve a decent and dignified quality of life for the vast majority of the people. The possibility has been shown to be practicable in a mixed economy, one described as a “capitalist paradise,” by Finland. See Anu Partanen and Trevor Corson, “Finland Is a Capitalist Paradise,” *New York Times* (December 8, 2019). From the viewpoint of a contemporary political campaign, Elizabeth Warren has opined: “I like markets. I believe that capitalism can produce enormous value. But capitalism without rules is theft, and one of those rules should be progressive taxation. Everybody pays their fair share. And one of those rules should be you don’t get to crush the opposition. That’s not how markets work. And that’s a battle we had at the end of the 1800s and into the early 1900s, and it’s a battle we need to have again. The giants have grown and they exercise so much economic power, but they also exercise too much political power.” See the Editorial Board, “Elizabeth Warren, Senator from Massachusetts,” *New York Times* (January 14, 2020).

²¹ For a detailed exploration of the feasibility of this proposal, see our article, “Directly Democratic Metropolitan Government: Envisioning Beyond Oppression, Rebellion, and Reform,” *Social Policy*, 46(1):6-19 (Spring 2016) [http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/METRO_GOV.T.pdf].

²² The directly democratic assemblies elect “selectmen” (and women), as few as three or as many as 11, whose *advise* the assembly. “The officeholders call annual and special meetings, enact laws, and generally supervise a broad range of town activities. Their powers also extend to appointment of other town officials. *However, while the selectmen may plan roads and other public works and the tax assessments to pay for them, these plans and assessments do not have the force of law until the citizens ‘signify their satisfaction’ in an open town meeting.*” See our article, “Public Powers for the Commonwealth: A Challenge to Faith-Based Organizing,” *Social Policy*, 45(4):21-28 (Winter 2015), p. 24 [http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/PUBLIC_POWERS.pdf].

²³ For a review of the essentials of developing an organizing strategy, see our article, “Organizing + Lobbying = A Power Tool,” *Social Policy*, 48(1):18-25 (Spring 2018) and 48(2):9-13 (Summer 2018) [and a complete, combined version is available at http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/ORGANIZING+LOBBYING.pdf].

²⁴ The organizing must be sufficiently long-lived to produce well-proven leadership development practices, such as those we have proposed in “Community Organizing [Leadership Development] Strategy for ‘Swimming with Sharks,’” *Social Policy*, 47(4): (Winter 2017) [http://www.gatherthepeople.org/Downloads/LEADERSHIP_STRATEGY.pdf].

²⁵ See Hannah Fenichel Pitkin and Sara Shumer, “On Participation,” in Ricardo Blaug and John Schwarzmantel, eds., *Democracy, A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 455.

Click [here](#) for more community and congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here](#)!