

Urban Democracy

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***Local Freedom Presupposes
Society-Wide Freedom.
But Society-Wide Freedom Also
Presupposes Local Freedom***

Urban democracy is illusory as long as mayors, town directors, city councils – no matter how well-meaning – are under inescapable and unchecked pressure from regional, state or federal governments to cut spending, and from business to lower taxes and offer other incentives, or face an exodus of companies as well as forfeiting any chances to attract investors that offer additional employment opportunities.

Urban democracy is a necessity if democracy in society at large is to be real. Without meaningful ways for ordinary people to influence and shape the most vital conditions of their lives in their immediate surroundings, the democratic process is a mere façade, and political democracy is offering only the – perhaps illusory – promise of our potential, as ordinary citizens, to achieve real democratization, a real say, in our own affairs.

Urban Democracy – Making It An Issue

Local freedom presupposes society-wide freedom. But society-wide freedom also presupposes local freedom. In countries like Britain, the U.S., in France, Italy, today's Germany – aren't we free? What sense does it make to speak about URBAN DEMOCRACY. Why should we make it an issue?

For one thing, there is a truth in it that no matter how “free” we are, we never feel free enough. The concept is oceanic, without bounds. The reality finds us conditioned. There are those of us who, like the author of these lines, revolted against sayings that were preached, in certain circles, even by governments: “Freedom is insight into necessity.” Today, neo-liberal “pragmatists” try to tell us something similar. Freedom to them is to bow to the necessities of the market place. To face the realities and adapt to them. A student of Niclas Luhmann, Niels Werber, summed up a central position of *systemic* thought by quoting the well-known theoretician who wrote that the “differences which the economy produces and leaves us as a heritage cannot become the object of political choice.” Werber added, “It is possible to elect parties, but you cannot elect economic success or technological progress.”

But isn't this the old fallacy that the economy is by no means a political economy?

When we leave the course of economic development to economic forces as such, we disempower ourselves. On the local level, this is observed by the budgetary constraints under which so many communities presently are in often increasing fashion and actually have been, in many cases, during these last few decades.

On the national level, the almost complete capitulation of governments before what is called “globalization,” the increasing political power of huge corporations and of international institutions at their service, has been bemoaned, decried, defended as inescapable.

Local and national constraints go hand in hand. The political decisions, on the nation level, not to attempt to stem the tide and intervene in the economic sphere, has its effects on the local level.

The idea itself that economic and technological progress are outside the political sphere, that they are no legitimate object of political debate and of choices made, is a partisan view, of course. Classical economists of the 18th and 19th century knew why they preferred to speak of political economy (économie politique; Politökonomie). Marx and those in his tradition knew it. For Keynes, it was obvious that politics and the economy were linked, that the economy could be and should be the object of political discussion and political choices made.

Of course, you can, by way of political decisions, worsen or improve the (pre-)conditions of expanded reproduction of the economic base. You can change, through a politically selected (legal, fiscal, budgetary, regulatory, etc.) frame of reference, the (pre-)conditions that further or slow the development of a technological progress and you can contribute to a frame of reference that encourages technologies which are either (to a large part) destructive or much less destructive, much more humane and environmentally sustainable.

Guild regulations were relatively effective for centuries to obstruct the application of new mechanical equipment in the production process. 18th century absolutist monarchies in Western Europe for a time illegalized and obstructed the processing of Indian calicoes. The political conditions of East-West conflict in the late 1940s and the 1950s accelerated not only the growth and development of a military nuclear sector but contributed to the development of the civilian nuclear sector that professed a dedication to the ‘peaceful’ use of nuclear energy while supplying the plutonium the military was eager to obtain. We all know to what extent technological progress, often of dubious usefulness, was driven by the arms race of the post WWII decades. (Examples include the innovative application of new industrial materials [titanium, for instance], the invention of the computer and the introduction of the internet.)

Whether the way the economy is functioning profits a few or is benefiting the large majority, if not all of humanity, is a matter of political decisions. It’s a matter of choices you make, we make, everyone of us makes.

But the ‘recognition’ that nation-states are powerless, that you can’t swim against the current of globalization, that municipalities as well as social service institutions (the health service, schools and universities, all institutions related to social security, to old-age pensions, etc.) have to ‘tighten their belt,’ is rooted in experience, of course. Again and again, we come across examples of apparent disillusionment when reformers in recent decade, in a more or less outspoken manner (or perhaps, more or less meekly) attempted to challenge what were, not the eternal laws of the economy, but powerful business interests.

When the French socialist candidate, François Mitterrand, won the presidential election for the first time in 1981, hopes were high among the left. The French social-democrats of the *Parti Socialiste* and their coalition allies were aiming at reforms which the enthusiastic voters expected to be carried through. The resistance of French employers forced the Mitterrand government to backtrack. With the next election, the inevitable result became clear: disappointment of voters that had supported Mitterrand’s bid for change resulted in abstentionism and the defeat of the left. During his second presidency, the PS leadership showed that they had ‘learned their lesson’ not to govern against capital but seek its cooperation.

Similarly, when Clinton came into office first, he attempted to push for more general Medicare coverage. The ‘health industry’ opposed this vigorously. The reform attempt backfired. Conservatives in the Senate and the House dug out the so-called Whitewater scandal to keep Clinton busy. The attempt at Medicare reform foundered in the Senate and the House and was shelved for good.

Likewise, the in-coming Schroeder-Lafontaine government in Germany had promised decisive reforms to reverse the scandalous redistribution of wealth from the many to the precious few that had occurred during the years of Kohl’s chancellorship. The election had been won with that promise of ‘social justice.’ Shortly later, Lafontaine was sacked. He seemingly had sympathized with the Tobin tax, with a strong, internationally coordinated effort of major governments to regulate international financial markets. The reasoning behind it was that political choices can matter; they can help avoid the kind of extreme developments that precipitated the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. The German chancellor, Schroeder, ruled instead that it doesn’t make sense to pursue a government policy “against the economy.” He meant, “against business.” “Against the vested interests of capital.”

Of course, Mitterrand, Clinton, and Schroeder learned it the hard way. They learned that even carefully reformist proposals can hit upon strong resistance. They decided that it is better for their political survival, for their chances of being reelected, to cave in.

But does this mean that it is impossible to stand up successfully against Capital’s resistance against reform?

If this were the case, the fight for the 12-hours-day, the ten-hours-day, the eight-hours-day could not have been won. Children would still toil in coal mines; there would be no paid vacations. No sick-leave, no maternity leave. No paid leave to further your professional education. They would not have condoned unions or even the general suffrage. The liberal, *laissez-faire* state of 'normalcy' gave way, step by step, to the 'welfare state' between 1850 and 1950. It all went against the grain of "economic constraints." It reshaped the parameters, the operative frame of reference of entrepreneurs in highly industrialized societies.

So what broke this 'covenant' by which social conquests for the majority of employed people and their families had been traded against a tacit agreement to accept capitalism and to preserve 'social peace'?

It seems that two factors have played a decisive role.

One is the trend towards what has been called the 'global factory.' Large North American, West European, and Japanese corporations stepped up their efforts since the early and mid-seventies to rely on subcontractors based mainly in Taiwan, South Korea, and Hong Kong. They found dictatorial regimes, no (or no real) labor unions, cheap but often well-trained, well-educated labor, low environmental standards. They hoped to evade in this way what was called the 'profit squeeze' at the time. The competition increasingly introduced in this way between First World labor and Third World labor (both employed under specific circumstances, in countries which initially had very different cost-of-living structures) furthered and still furthers 'restructuring' processes in the First World; that is to say, industries for which cheap replacements could be found in the Newly Developing Countries, were tendentially scrapped. (As wages went up in Taiwan, S. Korea, H.K., new suppliers were discovered, China being currently the most important.)

Resultant continuous mass unemployment in the First World since the mid-70s meant intensified pressure on trade unions and people employed in the economy to duck low and accept sometimes substantial cuts in real wages over extended periods of time. Labor laws were rewritten here and there. Thus, the "economy" proved to be a field of political choices made, albeit against labor. "Flexibility" and "deregulation" were in demand. They were all meant to secure improved conditions for the "employment of capital" (better [or *verbesserte*] *Verwertungsbedingungen* of capital). It is in this context that Capital, in the First World, financed transition from largely liquidated "old industries" transplanted to the NICs (parts of Northern Mexico and coastal China among them, today) to technologically advanced "new industries" that require workers with different skills and (up to now) in much smaller number.

The alleviation of the profit squeeze had been temporarily achieved. Near-monopoly access to new technologies has meant extra-profits to a number of temporarily very successful corporations. Over time, as the technology becomes more widespread, these profits will again approach average levels.

The unemployment crisis has been mastered nowhere in the First World, not even in the U.S. where cuts in real wages between the 70's and the 90's were among the sharpest. (In the U.S., the percentage of 'redundant' people driven into illegality and into prisons is enormous, compared with the situation in Western Europe.)

The fact is that the majority of citizens in the First World – employees and their dependents, faced with increased stress, reduced or stagnating real wages, heightened job insecurity – have been on the defensive since the early or mid 70s.

A second factor has been co-responsible for this, **the break-down of etatist, bureaucratic, anti-democratic 'state socialism' in 1989.**

'Real socialism,' as it was called in the East Bloc, had become a strange mix in the 70s and 80s, of a now milder variety of authoritarian, paternalistic dictatorship by the party, ineffective and voluntarist bureaucratic planning, consumer good shortages, attempts to prop up the consumer good sector, an unaffordable attempt to sustain one's own role in the U.S-Russian arms race, plus (not unimportant) a minimum of 'social security' that surpassed that of all countries in the West in a few ways. People, for one thing, could not lose their jobs (except for, especially, dissident intellectuals). In the framework of East-West competition, the benefits of the post-'45 'welfare state' were at least in part meant to strengthen the loyalty of 'workers', of 'leftists' etc. to their Western, capitalist society. It was part of the game of the 'carrot and the stick.' With the demise of the East, that necessity of offering an especially thick carrot to front line countries (that had been behind the Marshall plan aid to W. Germany, and behind support for economic post-war recovery in S. Korea, Taiwan, and Japan) suddenly disappeared. The bosses could afford to be more outspoken. With the disappearance of the 'external enemy' of the 'Capitalist camp,' the 'class struggle' came out into the open again. It was the bosses who tightened the screw. Employees and their unions remained largely defensive, reminding them of the old agreement to value 'social peace.'

The demise of the East is important for another reason. It was before the background of Soviet 'Marxist-Leninist' theatrical 'revolutionism' that the opposition between 'reformists' and conservatives in the West remained meaningful.

*Robert Kramer, the U.S. film-maker in French exile for much of his professional life, has called 'real socialism' **that perversion of a humane dream.** It is true that it made a mockery of the hopes of many working*

people, artists, and intellectuals. Soviet society, a handful of years after the October revolution, was turning into a society where dissenters were censured and threatened to be shot. A few years later, old high-ranking communists were shot, thinkers, poets, filmmakers were censured or pushed to conform, workers put under a kind of military discipline. In the end, tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands were killed or perished in GULAGS from hunger and cold. Today, critics of this inhumane régime blame it for the death of millions. Perhaps they are right. But perhaps they include those roughly twenty million inhabitants of the former Soviet Union who perished as a consequence of the German attack in 1941. They are half-right in doing so. The strategy of defending the 'Soviet fatherland' betrays one crucial fact: a human life was not worth much. Perhaps, a country with a leadership, less authoritarian would have paid a lesser price. But there is another aspect to the story of a 'perverted dream.' The brutal traits of the system were not present from the beginning. Even though the revolutionaries had suffered extreme brutality under Czarism, inhumane retribution initially was not the norm. It was a civil war, propped up by outside military intervention (the involvement of British, French, and Japanese troops, plus U.S. hostility to the new government) which led to a feeling of being in an extreme situation which required extreme measures of legitimate self-defense. As in the French revolution of 1789, a beleaguered revolution resorted to terror (or perhaps, counter-terror). It set loose a dynamics which went out of control, or rather which became systematic when the inner circle of those in power (in the end, Stalin) discovered that state-terror was a functioning means of preserving personal power, eliminate challenges to one's power, and run the country according to one's personal insights, whims, and wishes. What the leadership needed, like any minoritarian ruling clique (or ruling class) was a somewhat privileged, slightly broader stratum on which to lean on: the bureaucracy, privileged party cadres, directors of state-owned enterprises, and so on.

The experience of the terrible cost of a revolution gone astray has discredited all attempts to try anything but the reformist way, in post-war Europe (and not only here).

In Western Europe, immediately after 1945, reformist solutions seemed the alternative. The aftershock of the Hitler-Stalin pact, the simmering awareness of the dictature's ugly face in Soviet Russia discredited the radical left. The economy grew considerably until the end of the 60s, a reflection of the post-war demand that to no small part was due to the havoc that had been created by the war. By 1973, the engine ran out of steam. The era of improved living standards for ordinary, employed citizens and their dependants came to an end. (It is possible to say that a Kondratjev cycle had been completed between the outbreak of the Korean war, with its concomitant boom and the mid-70s.)

The political experience of W. Europe since the mid-70s is stamped by the failure of reformists to make good on their promises and fundamentally better the lot of the majority affected by the long economic stagnation.

Again and again, it had been the unemployment crisis that that has made voters look for help from conservative and, in turn, from reformist parties.

They have again and again been disappointed. The effects are obvious. More and more voters abstain during elections. The 'trust' in politicians is at an all-time low. Even mainstream politicians talk of the 'crisis of democracy.

The long era of mass unemployment in the Industrialized West is a crisis commonly referred to as a 'structural crisis', a crisis related to a process of restructuring, of capital seeking ways out of a profit squeeze, and ways out of a contradiction between the huge funds it has amassed and the impossibility to employ them all fruitfully: this is the background, after all, of increased investment abroad, of funds flowing into currency speculation, into property speculation, into junk bonds, into newly emerging markets such as parts of the Third World where not all of this capital flows into the productive sphere.

For those unhappy with the imperfections and injustice of our societies, after the war, reformism (Attlee, instead of Churchill) seemed the alternative to 'revolution.'

A booming post-war economy in W. Europe seemed to sustain the hopes set in social democratic reformism. Reformists revised their tenets, adapting somewhat more liberal, market-oriented tenets, in the belief that a booming capitalism repaid them. The employed majority experienced real improvements in many ways, although democracy reduced their role largely to being faithful supporters of their reformist parties during elections. As ever, democracy ended at the factory gates and the entrance of shop and office buildings.

The downturn of the Kondratjev cycle since the mid 70s brought the latest revision of reformist tenets.

Keynesianism was largely discarded and neo-liberalist monetarism was embraced. Instead of stressing the opportunities that the 'free market economy' held in store for the strata they were meant to represent, the constraints were now stressed. Belt-tightening became the word of the day. New voter strata were approached among those who were economically successful, even during a period of prolonged mass unemployment. The unemployed were told to ask themselves if they were not, in part, to blame for the distress they found themselves in.

Since the mid-90s, with the prolonged American boom that seemingly announces an upturn out of the extended 'trough' of the Kondratjev cycle, it has become fashionable among 'reformist' as well as conservative cycles to denounce the 'greed factor,' show off newly gained riches, and (as the symptomatic affair of a former French foreign minister seems to suggest) to openly crave riches and privilege.

The hopes of the 'classe politique' in Europe today rest on an economic upturn. But the American boom is giving way to a recession already. Growth rates in Europe, after long decades of infinitesimal growth, have hardly begun to approach an average 3 per cent when they are sagging already. The problem of mass unemployment is as yet unsolved. The segments of the population drifting into apathy, reliance on the dole, hopelessness are disturbingly large. The abyss is widening between the 'successful' and the silent majority of those who are stressed, exhausted, frightened to lose their job in the next recession. Well-paid politicians to a large part seem out of touch with the reality as experienced by this majority.

It is a dangerous time.

Right-wing populists are ready to step in once the pattern of alteration between openly conservative and so-called reformist governments falters. Reformists seemed to have a monopoly to channel dissent and take care of the disgruntled and underprivileged after 1945, in what was then, in the Cold War era, was called the Free World. They were (and were seen) as the alternative to a failed revolution that had promised to make life better and yet had made things worse.

Today this role of the only alternative to openly conservative forces is fast disappearing as social democrats become, in many ways, almost undistinguishable from neo-liberal conservatives.

On the other hand, the quest for change its still very much alive. People know today that in a democracy they have rights. They have the right to democratically increase their rights. There are the beginnings of involvement felt. There is an urge of those who are no experts or professional politicians to become more knowledgeable, and not to be excluded any longer from important decision making processes affecting their lives. They are discovering their voice. They are eager to join into the debates, to push for new solutions.

If 'left' means Russian communism or social-democratic reformism, people are rightly skeptical. The one turned inhuman and dictatorial. The other was, at least to some extent, co-opted by the powers that be.

The people who protest and awaken today have no need to call themselves 'leftists.'

They opt for democracy, knowing the difference between the rights it gives them and the terrors of dictatorships.

They opt for expanding these rights. Peacefully.

Democratically. With the right of self-defense (if necessary) that the American patriots of 1776 claimed. Or the Frenchmen of 1789. The ANC in South Africa, under apartheid.

But violence is a two-edged sword.

Those who use it tend to be deformed by its use (not all, perhaps, but too many), even when it is in defense of democratic rights against a minority that resorts to illegal means.

Today, there is no pretext to opt for violence in a liberal, democratic society.

Today, it is necessary however to watch carefully and oppose vocally the tendential encroachment on our democratic rights.

The alternative to the alternative between 'reformists' and 'conservatives' today is that between the old-style politicians and dedicated democrats, in the streets, in the factories, offices, shops, in our neighborhoods and schools and universities, opting for a determined, rational, and humane modernization and restructuring of our society (including the economy) in order to tackle the crisis symptoms of our society as best we can and realize (step by step) improvements which will enable the population to fully realize their civil rights.

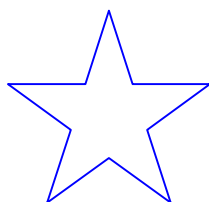
We start from scratch, nearly.

Knowing we are many.

Knowing we are dispersed.

Knowing we are awake, curious, eager to learn, also to learn by doing. To join together theoretical insights and our practice. We do not depart from a ready-made theory.

We digest theoretical insights, check them against our experience, adapt them to real and present needs. Theories must be in flux, they have to change with their exposure to the realities they are meant to explain.



***Local Freedom Presupposes
Society-Wide Freedom.
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Also Presupposes
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*Pushing for more meaningful democracy,
we know that an increased effort is necessary
on the national as well as the regional and
local level.*

*To be thrown back on one level doesn't
Necessarily mean an equal set-back on other
levels. Advancing here, we may temporarily be
defeated there. We are facing specific conditions
on each level, in different nations, regions,
and localities. But we are bound to seek unity,
in diversity, the world over.*

URBAN DEMOCRACY

is an international, non-profit internet
journal
published irregularly, available free-of-
charge.

**We propose to create a forum
of international, democratic debate
for the people,
for their grass roots organizations,
for concerned scientists
and those engaged in politics
who have decided to put the goal
of strengthening political
participation
of ordinary citizens on the top
of their agenda.**



Let us question the role of 'big money' in elections.

They are not going to steal again the democratic process from "us, the people."

The latest Presidential Election in the U.S. has seen the People cheated Out of its Democratic Rights

The influence of "big money" is far too large within the framework of our democratic process: The mere fact that it is contributing to a deformation of the democratic process, has been noted again and again. This criticism is at the root of "campaign reform" in the U.S., as it was at the roots of attempts to reform the financing process on which all major party organizations depend in Europe. The extent of the damage done by "big money" when funneled to the parties and candidates most accessible to the whims and wishes of "big business" becomes clear when we look at the example of soft money and the engineering of the recent Bush victory in the U.S., the example of money-laundering and millions and millions paid illegally to the Christian Democrats in Germany to keep Chancellor Kohl in office for 16 years, or the riddle posed by the STRAW MAN of Big Business in Italy: *How Did a Man Without Considerable Means Assemble the Most Important Private Television and Media Empire in Italy, in Order to Build A Political Coalition from Nothing and Become Prime Minister?*

Some Notes on the Latest U.S. Elections

On January 7, 2001, thirteen Democratic members of the U.S. Congress protested against the ascertained election results of the state of Florida. Twelve of them were Afro-Americans. One of them, Barbara Lee, said, "It was the Supreme Court and not the people of the U.S.A., who decided this election."

It is not by chance that opposition in Congress was voiced mainly by Afro-Americans. Afro-Americans are more frequently discriminated against than other minorities; like Native Americans, they are more likely to be poor and their chances on the job market are all but satisfactory. Never before in the last

twenty or thirty years had they attempted so decidedly to influence the political process by turning out as strongly as possible, on election day.

Liberals like the former Democratic Senator of New York, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, did not join in the protest. He is favoring cooperation between Democrats and Republicans in Congress, noting that “there is really no big ideological gulf” between them. Gore conceded. Clinton did not protest. The initial announcement that the FBI would be asked to look into irregularities of the Florida election was not followed by recognizable action, let alone results, as far as we can see.

It is the mainstream not of the people but inside the Democratic Party apparatus that is conscious of being not too far away from political positions represented by George W. Bush.

It is people from the mainstream of U.S. society, seemingly a majority of the population who looked with some (moderate) hope to Gore and the Democratic Party. They were people from all walks of life – working mothers employed by WALMART or phone companies, university professors, car industry workers, teachers, hospital workers, public utility employees, public sector employees generally, but also the overworked and suddenly ‘redundant’ specialists who only yesterday were contributing to the success of Silicon valley, college students, railroad workers, truckers, agricultural workers (including those seasonally called in from Mexico), finally even the illegal immigrants working in restaurants and sweatshops who could not vote.

They were all let down. The Democratic Party chose not to put up a fight and challenge, at least verbally, politically, during street rallies, a tricky political and politico-judicial process that cheated the majority of those who had voted for Gore.

It is not by chance that the Bush camp approached the U.S. Supreme Court to decide on the validity of hand-counts in Florida. Obviously there had been manipulations. Old and malfunctioning voting machines in areas with a heavy majority of Afro-Americans who would tend to lean to Gore. Purposefully misleading design of ballots to confound the underprivileged and ill-educated who might nevertheless be motivated to vote. Florida law allows for hand-counts. The state laws Governor Bush should know best, those of Texas, allow for hand counts in races as close as the Florida race. The Supreme Court pulled the brake on hand-counts. They would have resulted in a victory by the Democrats. If this is not the result of political bias, what is it? Most judges are conservative, most were nominated by either the father of George W. Bush (who profited by their decision), or by one of his Republican predecessors.

The Legal Hassle and Its Implications

The legal hassle and some of its details could all be followed in the press.

Bias is apparent everywhere. The so-called ‘butterfly’ tickets that proved so (purposefully) misleading were not challenged in court.

Ballots punched incompletely by malfunctioning voting machine were not counted. (Later review by members of the press showed that the uncounted, partly punched ballots went largely to Gore, even by a 9 to 1 ratio.)

But the applications for absentee ballots filled in incorrectly (and

therefore invalid) were allowed to be completed by Republican functionaries before being sent out to registered Republican voters. Had both the imperfectly punched ballots (favoring Gore) and the absentee ballots illegally completed by functionaries of the Republic Party been excluded from the vote count, the victory in the Presidential race would have gone to Gore. In some Southern Florida counties, there were street protests with people carrying placards saying, "They stole our votes!"

Whose Democratic Rights Were Most Clearly Rescinded?
The role played by Big Money

**"They stole
our votes!"**

It is the underprivileged who this time were most decidedly trying to make a difference by turning out and opposing Bush and his agenda of redistribution of tax dollars from the poor to the rich.

In Florida, the malfunctioning voting machines were found exactly in those congressional districts and in those voting precincts which were heavily inhabited by Black-American Florida citizens.

In addition, people were not allowed to register if they had been sentenced, many years ago, for misdemeanors or very minor 'crimes.'

It is not the Corporate executive responsible for the waste dump on which houses were built (as in Love Canal, N.Y. or in Texas) who is losing his civil rights for what he did to the poisoned and perhaps dying residents who had not been told about the chemical time bomb under their homes. It is not the bunch of local politicians whose complicity made the subdivision of the poisoned company property and the sale of the plots possible. It's the badly paid employee or the man just fired and looking for a job. And what he is punished for may well be a driving offense or a hoax played to a classmate, years ago, when he was a high school student.

In Kansas City and in East St. Louis, working people queued up for hours to vote, many of them being sent home without having voted when election offices closed. In one case, the attempt to keep them open for a few additional hours was stopped by an injunction asked for by the Republican Party. It is a scandal that working people are unable to vote because they have not been given (sufficient) time off.

It is the underprivileged who suffer from the continued existence of a legal frame of reference that allows for such flawed conditions under which citizens are asked to exercise their democratic rights.

The Origins of the Campaign for Campaign Reform

Campaign reform has been on the agenda of several Western democracies for years. In the U.S., William Pfaff, a well-known columnist, noted some time ago that reform was in fact unlikely as democracy had fallen effectively into the hands of the rich. He claimed it was impossible to change the system where you have to be rich (and / or accept large contributions from the rich) in order to win any major race. He said that those who have come into office in this way today are sitting in Congress, writing the laws. They are appointing the Supreme Court judges. No way out.

This is not exactly what Thomas Paine or Thomas Jefferson had in mind when American democracy was still young. But even then, the propertied classes were eager to defend their interests by exerting undue influence on the political course the country was taking. Today, in order to run for the office of Senator or President with any chance of success, you have to spend millions. It has become a rule that the affluent run for office, those who can at least finance part of the considerable campaign cost out of their own pocket while approaching equally rich 'friends' for loans or contributions. George W. Bush is a good example, an oil

millionaire. Buddies from the oil industry contributed heavily. Of course they are buying a stake. As to the Clintons, they were not poor when they began their political career. She was a successful lawyer, he was a law professor. But in terms of the usual prerequisites for a political career, they were underfunded. Some of us will still remember the investment that Hillary Clinton made, investing a few ten thousand dollars and cashing in a few hundred thousand after some time. Perhaps the figures are only approximates, the ratio of investment and returns was so unbelievable. Legally, it may have been okay. But common sense tells us this whole transaction was merely a cover-up for a campaign contributions. The people who originate from the circles of millionaires are not classified as crooks even when they engage in dubious speculations like George W., in the case of a certain Texas (was it basketball?) club.

The Whitewater affair in which the Clintons were involved (no matter how ‘innocently’) in their attempts to finance their political career was blasted into the open by the Conservative media. Car stickers were sold, ‘Impeach Billary,’ even before the Lewinsky affair.

Straightforward talk from the ‘common people’ sometimes was rather outspoken, ‘He’s a crook.’ Who? George W., because of his Texas manoeuvres? No, the upstart.

Of course, Clinton’s ‘progressive’ role is more than dubious. He gave us a glimpse of his real self when he was asked to commute a death sentence, as governor of Arkansas, in exactly the period when he was running for President. It wouldn’t have looked good with voters. It would have diminished his chances of winning. He refused. He refused again, during the last days of his Presidency, to sign a pardon for Pelletier, the Native American in prison now for 25 years already. For the alleged murder of an FBI agent at Wounded Knee. The Canadian government appealed for a reversal of that sentence. The Pope appealed for clemency. The FBI witness whose ‘observations’ had led to the guilty verdict said publicly that she had been 50 miles away from the scene. And that the FBI had threatened to take away her child if she didn’t cooperate. No pardon for Pelletier. But a pardon for Marx Rich. The arms dealer who funneled arms to the Pinochet dictatorship and the South African apartheid regime. Rich’s ex-wife made a huge contribution to Hillary Clinton’s senatorial race. In return?

In a way, both major parties have depended on questionable outside contributions, on lobbyists buying influence, on “big money” eager to assert itself in politics for its own good. The money that came from Mr. Huang, Mr. Rich, and others was as questionable as the money the oil industry has been contributing to the Bush campaign.

Well-informed journalists have claimed that the U.S. government, using the CIA as a link, channeled several million dollars to the newly started PSOE of Felipe Gonzales and to the Popular Party of Aznazar via the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation and the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation, in order to influence the electoral decisions of Spanish citizens in the period following Franco’s death. Similar operations occurred in Portugal in the 1970s. Hints to this effect have also come recently from people involved in the ELF scandal, like Karlheinz Schreiber (now a fugitive living in Ottawa, awaiting extradition to Germany). In France, more than \$100 million have vanished from the accounts of the ELF Aquitaine oil corporation. Judges in Geneve (Switzerland) suspect that it was used to channel funds to the parties then governing in France, Mitterrand’s Parti Socialiste and Kohl’s Christian Democrats. As we see, influence buying is not a game played only in the United States. Senator McCain and others in the movement for campaign reform are right in saying that “big money” should not be allowed to buy our democracy, even if it is a supposedly “friendly” takeover.

But we should be warned. After the “Flick scandal,” the West German parliament rewrote campaign finance laws. It did not prevent the “Leuna scandal” and the recently discovered

accounts of laundered (“black”) money the Christian Democrats had relied on illegally in Lichtenstein and elsewhere.

Campaign Reform is Not Enough

It is positive that Senator McCain of Arizona and a few other Senators and Congressmen are genuinely pushing for campaign reform. But will they be successful to enact a law? And if yes, will that law make a real difference? Or will it have loopholes and be wishy-washy enough for the scandals to continue, albeit in other form?

Perhaps what is needed is your pressure, locally. It is a broad movement for rejuvenated democracy. It is a public outcry against the undemocratic, in fact antidemocratic, role played by Corporate America.

Why Did the Election Matter At All To Those Who Turned Out Strongly?

Both among Democrats and Republicans voter turn-out was low. It is a sign of the crisis of democracy that roughly 50% of those who might vote abstain in U.S. presidential elections nowadays.

Still, the Democratic party profited from the mobilization of certain segments who traditionally support them: trade union members and ethnic minorities. Not that it contributed much to register their support. The unions (especially the United Auto Workers Union) and again, especially, Black American organizations like the NAACP understood that for them, conditions might worsen in the case of a Bush victory.

It would be mistaken to presume that the affluent all vote for the Republican ticket. But it is a certain fact that affluent Republicans are more likely to turn out strongly than, for instance, poorer Republicans faced with the harsh realities of life.

It is in fact true that in the case of Republican as well as Democratic supporters, people who are either affluent or well-educated or both are more likely to vote than to stay at home. Of course, the “people who own everything” do not exist. Today, large corporations with industrial, trading, leasing, and financial subdivisions, large banks and insurance companies, holding companies who own large tracts of land (either in cities or the countryside) are no longer family businesses. Small and medium, sometimes large family businesses still exist. But large corporations, in all sectors of what is often called “big business,” depend on outside funds, on share ownership. What is still true, despite the massive amounts of money collected and invested by pension funds and, of course, mutual investment funds that cater also to small, ‘middle class’ or ‘working class’ shareholder, is that ownership and control of important and probably decisive chunks of the American economy is still in a few hands.

Perhaps more so than ever.

The ‘propertied classes’ cast their ballot for a good reason. They also buy influence by writing out large checks meant to support candidates of the Republican as well as, to some extent, also the Democratic Party for good reason. They are taking care to defend their best interest. A mule with a sack of gold can climb up any city wall, they said in ancient times. Soft money does a lot, for those who care to use it in their own best interest.

But the majority of voters who turn out to cast their vote for the Republican party aren’t multi-millionaires or even millionaires. Perhaps a greater percentage of the affluent upper middle classes votes for the Republican ticket. But that is not necessarily so. Certainly not among liberal professionals in New York City, or professors at Berkeley. A lot of those who go for the Republicans are simply identifying themselves for various reasons as

'Conservative'. Or they are attracted by single issues the Republicans are harping on. Perhaps there are also those who are gullible enough to follow trends produced by the media and hand their vote to the supposedly 'stronger', 'more attractive,' or 'smarter' side.

Last not least, there are the swing voters and those who abstain not because they find it impossible to get time off, but because they just don't care. What makes swing voters vote one way or the other? Why do people abstain? These questions can be reduced to an essential one:

The Really Worthwhile Question: Why Do Most People Stick With Either the Republicans or the Democrats?

Ralph Nader's Greens almost everywhere remained below 5%. Other parties (like the Third Party Ventura supported a short while ago) or the Socialists got negligible support. Why do people stick with one or the other of the two major parties?

Despite the problem of enormous and still increasing abstentionism, the Democratic Party and Republican Party undisputably are the only major parties of the U.S., the parties between which each race is decided, at least on the national level. (Regionally, there have been always exceptions, from Eugene V. Debs to Ventura, who is currently the governor of Minnesota.)

In the presidential election of fall, 2000, Ralph Nader's Greens almost everywhere remained below 5%. Other parties (like the Third Party Ventura supported a short while ago) or the Socialists got negligible support.

From the point of view of a critical outside observer, the really worthwhile question thus is: why do most people stick with either the Republicans or the Democrats when these parties are so obviously catering to big business, letting them down, again and again?

Not that the majority of U.S. citizens unquestionably identify as Republicans or Democrats. Loyalty to these parties is more than moderate. Distrust of politicians (or, as many say, "those in Washington") is widespread. Local radio stations broadcast surveys registering popular opinion as to "whom you can trust." The fire department, in such surveys, typically scores well – 60 percent and above. The police scores less well, but still double digit figures. The federal government scores disastrously low percentage points.

From the point of view of a critical outside observer, the really worthwhile question is: why do most people stick with either the Republicans or the Democrats when these parties are so obviously catering to big business, letting them down, again and again?

Of course, registered Republicans and registered Democrats are minorities. Of course many citizens are 'independent' or 'swing voters,' people who split tickets or who voted for Democrats the last time and for the Republicans today. And vice versa. But that keeps the positions of both major parties intact, guaranteeing simply the rhythm where now one party is in power and after a certain period of time, the other (on the national level).

Apart from changing over from the one major party that disappointed you the last time to the other party, the only seemingly real "alternative" is to strengthen the bloc of those who abstain. But this underpins the pattern of alternation between Democratic presidents and

Republican presidents as well. It weakens democracy, the experts say. But it underpins the status quo. Bush is president, even if he received the support of less than 25% of adult Americans who theoretically might have registered to vote and might have cast their vote.

What is behind this stability, this (cautious) “loyalty” to one or the other party?

Conviction?

Inertia?

An ingrained, kind of customary choice, family tradition?

An outdated memory of once existent “ideological” differences?

Or is it just that people pragmatically ask

, «What do others have to offer? »

Nader’s environmentalists, for instance?

For a Siberian trapper nowadays, the life of a squirrel hunted down in the wintry taiga is worth 50 cents. In Post-Gorbachev Russia, he is having a hard time making a living. So his attitude is, “It’s the squirrel or me!” Don’t nag him with environmentalist advice if you’re a middle class liberal making good money.

The safeguarding of the environment is not enough when you are a small-town store owner in Priest River, Northern Idaho who is hard-pressed to make ends meet and pay property and other (state, federal, and local) taxes. Or a White Sulphur Springs (MT.) lumberjack out of work part of the winter time and afraid that logging restrictions on federal lands will put him out of his job for good. Or perhaps a farmer in Nebraska or Iowa struggling to survive the latest turn of the farm crisis.

For a Siberian trapper nowadays, the life of a squirrel hunted down in the wintry taiga is worth 50 cents. For the struggling storekeeper, the indebted farmer, the lumberjack hard-squeezed because of irregular income, a \$150 or even \$500 tax rebate is good money saved. Did not Butler and the other chaps who were sentenced fairly recently to long terms in jail (because of cheque fraud and other crimes) go down the road of individual rebellion

For the struggling storekeeper, the indebted farmer, the lumberjack hard-squeezed because of irregular income, a \$150 or even \$500 tax rebate is good money saved.

garnished with right-wing, militia style phrases directed against the “Feds” (which is to say, against “Washington”, especially the IRS, as the tax collecting agency, and against the FBI which sent its agents to have the law enforced)? And this mainly because they were near-bankrupt, hadn’t paid outstanding taxes, and were thus facing the confiscation and auctioning off of

their small family farms (the only safe haven they had, in these hinterlands with few job chances and without noteworthy rental houses, where it is well-nigh impossible to be “on the dole”)?

How many struggling, hard-working people are there in this ‘rich country’ who see themselves as “sturdy and independent-minded” and “too proud to be on the dole.” While their poor rural hinterland communities do not have the tax base to pay out welfare money anyway, resorting instead to peer pressure to keep people ‘independent’ of help. Even when in dour need.

Is it not understandable that these people resent the urban poor who receive (and perhaps trade in) food stamps, who receive welfare cheques and perhaps are ‘lucky’ enough to live in public housing where rents are subsidized and social problems accumulate... The hinterlanders, those from small villages and country towns in the West and part of the Midwest do not really ‘dig’ liberal promises of more welfare – a social safety net paid for, they think, out of their hard earned tax dollars. A social safety net they will never have a

chance to enjoy if they remain stuck where they are, in the economically by-passed regions of their vast country. What they ask for is tax relief. If the rich, if corporations, if multi-millionaires profit so much more by it, what can you do? What they need is a reduction of their too heavy tax burden. What they resent is the real inequality of refused support for them, while the liberals seem to pander to the urban poor in the big cities, for tactical, electoral reasons. Living (often enough) hard lives, these people who form the backbone of massive voter support in staunchly Republican states (like Wyoming, like Montana or Idaho, like Nebraska, Kansas, etc. etc.) have a point to make. People in economically cut-off, depressed, struggling small-town America or rural America, whether it be Clarksdale, Mississippi or Redmond, Oregon, may be let down by Corporate America. Silently, they resent it, some taking refuge to racism (against Afro-Americans), to anti-semitism (against “the Jews” who supposedly “run” or “dominate” Wall Street, the New York banks). Openly, they show patriotism because if you have nothing or not much to be proud of, no economic success, no financial “achievement” to pride yourself with, at least you have patriotism. You can be proud to be an American, part of the mightiest nation on earth, part of a country marching at the forefront of technological and scientific advances. Here, you have the “ideological” background for Republican strength in much of small-town America.

The “materialistic” background is that these people struggle on, depending (for the most part) on nobody but themselves. They see it as a disgrace to accept welfare. Quite a few of them need every dollar to make ends meet. Their’s is a hard life. The promise to reduce taxes is a good, a serious promise to them, one they do not take lightly.

The democrats have their most solid base in metropolitan areas, in the industrial heartland extending from Chicago to Philadelphia, and with minorities.

So we see the really important fact how the U.S. populace is split in half – some clutching the straw offered by conservatives (aside from ideological issues artificially fanned, it is mainly the promise to reduce taxes: “Read my lips, no new taxes!”), some clutching the straw offered by Democrats (most often, the promise of extended health insurance coverage and safe old age benefits).

Of course, other issues play a role.

It is clear that for arch-conservatives and the Christian Coalition, the “liberals” inside the Democratic Party are taboo. It is because of ideological reasons that they vote Republican. For the arch-conservatives and for the Christian Right, the questions of abortion and school prayer matter a lot. Often, a rigid and authoritarian moral stance is behind the attempt to outlaw abortion under all or almost all circumstances, regardless of the fact that it would still be practiced (under more dangerous circumstances for the women concerned). Inversely, many liberals assume a laissez-faire point of view, with regard to abortion. (Similarly, genetical engineering and experimentation with embryos is seen coolly as a matter to be resolved by scientists.) And of course, they oppose school prayers (in order to safeguard the separation of church and state and avoid discriminating against Non-Christian denominations or non-believers).

Others, racists, seemingly see the Democratic Party leadership in Washington as “pandering” to “non-white” minorities. They are exasperated because of their bigotted fear that “Anglos” or “Caucasians” may become a minority. In view of how California and Texas were twisted away from Mexico, it is indeed ironic to see Mexican immigrant labor swell the ranks of the non-Anglo population in California where (according to the latest census) so-called “Whites” have recently dropped below the 50 percent mark.

For many Democratic voters, there are real and all but fantastic issues that keep them attached to that party while hoping that its electoral success might make a real difference in their lives.

Progressive Democrats (though not the Clinton administration, it seems) have supported “affirmative action” as a necessary measure of compensatory justice.

In a number of larger towns, like Albuquerque, N.M., progressive Democrats have stuck to their insight into the necessity of public housing. This at a time when it has become unfashionable even in Democratic circles to support a state role in the upkeep and expansion of the public housing sector.

Some time back, progressive Democrats embraced rent control, especially in New York. Some maintain now it failed because it ‘discouraged’ house owners to carry out maintenance work and investors to invest in housing in present or potential areas affected by rent control. As it is, rent control is apparently not a sufficient instrument if not supported by additional measures that enforce the reasonable upkeep of rented properties by their owners and that affect land price developments and investment decisions. Legal indifference to sky-rocketing land (and thus house) prices is among the main factors behind the exploding development of rents in growth zones such as the [S.F.] Bay Area, a phenomenon that in turn occasions an increase in the proportion of average wage earners who find it hard to make ends meet and of the working poor who are squeezed out of the housing market and end up as homeless.

The fact remains that support for affirmative action, support for public housing, support for rent control, for the right to abortion, for expanded Medicare, for a safer social security net instead of tax reductions benefiting (mainly) the rich are all relating to important and tangible issues.

But the other fact also remains that the Democrats often enough do not deliver. Sometimes because they face a hostile Republican majority in Congress. Sometimes because seemingly their leadership doesn’t want to, they were just paying lip service to part of their electoral base.

Then, the more crucial fact has to be remembered that many other relevant issues cropping up in the material life of people are not even focused on. They simply remain out of sight.

The legal aspect of civil rights denied to minorities is legally tackled. The economic aspect of centuries of exclusion suffered by Afro-Americans or Native-Americans is neglected.

It is at best cosmetically touched upon.

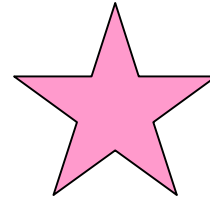
Affirmative action helped some bright minority students to go to college and perhaps find ways to fund their college education. Affirmative action helped some Afro-American and Hispanic-American contractors to get into the market of public road construction. But entire parts of town in the metropolitan areas are neglected. Here, health care is insufficient, more so than elsewhere. A cultural infrastructure often is absent if it is not produced by grass-root initiatives. For those without proper jobs (and they are the majority), the ‘food question’ is real. Factories have moved away or don’t want people from ‘slum zones.’ Other jobs are in scarce supply. Youngsters have no good school, no perspective to find jobs – except (all too frequently, in the informal ‘job market’ offered by organized crime. Police departments leave these areas to themselves. When they become active, it may in the way of

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an occupation force; it may be that they arrest or even kill innocent people (as in Los Angeles and New York City).

But this is not all.

The liberal reformists of the Democratic Party have fallen back behind their Keynesian promise to alleviate the ills of capitalism that again and again are felt by the majority of the population of even the rich countries, to a greater or lesser extent.



Today, the dominant factions of the Democratic Party, attached to their formally ‘Centrist’ platform, are in many ways comparable to the neo-liberals of the Republican mainstream. It was, after all, the Clinton administration that carried out “welfare reform.” Admittedly under pressure from Republicans, it purposefully took into account the current populist diatribes and the prejudice of its own blue-collar electoral base (the hard-working people mad at “loafers’ who “do not attempt to find work”).

The cliché of young, unwed Afro-American mothers giving birth to baby after baby in order to collect welfare checks made it into the press. What this cliché hid (and was meant to hide) is the grim reality of neglected neighborhoods, squalid streets, run-down houses, red-lined urban areas where mortgages for efforts to improve properties could not be obtained. What is hid (and was meant to hide) is the fact that many Black families fall apart when the husband, humiliated by the endless inability to find jobs, leaves his wife and kids. What it hid is job discrimination. It is the cruel reality of neglect, of denied opportunities, denied education, denied jobs. What this cliché, in its consequences, gave birth to is a metropolitan social reality where we increasingly see young working couples with their kids, sleeping in their car because their wages are not sufficient to pay for the most simple accommodation available on the housing market. Nobody should kid himself that only those belonging to so-called ethnic minorities are affected!

There is more to the defection of liberals from the ideal of righting social wrongs and attempting to increase social justice.

Today, many of them are ashamed to be linked to Roosevelt’s New Deal. Not because of its imperfections but because the common view of the media and the ‘classe politique’ is that it ‘went too far.’

The truth is, it stabilized Capitalism in times of dire crisis. The truth is, it left many grave problems unattended. For all the improvements it brought, it stopped short of real democratic reform. The people found the symbol of a real voice in Woody Guthrie’s songs, in many WPA Writers’ Projects. It didn’t find that real voice itself. In one thing, the conservatives a correct. It established a ‘benevolent’, paternalistic bureaucracy. Or at least, it increased the bureaucratic trends of modern society Max Weber had already described.

Today, a ‘New Deal’ type social awareness has become anathema. The bureaucratic ills of that period are attributed to the ‘Liberal left,’ as if Reagan’s or George W. Bush’s America had discarded its giant

Local (and regional) democracy must play a role in righting wrongs, in pointing out scandals, in airing grievances, in pushing for social change .

The crucial fact is that years of dedication to your work, good qualifications, diligence, know-how mean nothing anymore when shareholder value means your plant is not deemed profitable enough by some analyst and has to close...

Should they decide your future?

bureaucracies.

The most crucial fact today is that U.S. capitalism has returned to the kind of 'individualism' Hoover exhorted. The spirit is triumphant, as it was in Hoover's time. The individual is seen as master of his or her fate. The end of history is near: they dream of stability, the disappearance of Capitalist crises. Didn't Hoover proclaim, briefly before the outbreak of the Great Depression, that "we in America are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land"? Tell it to today's "working poor." Tell them of the opportunities to strike it rich. Blame them if they don't make it.

The hard and sordid fact today is that in America, restructuring, cost cutting, sudden firing of thousand and tens of thousand by the large corporations mean unending psychological stress both for those kept and those fired. It means that years of dedication to your work, good qualifications, diligence, know-how mean nothing anymore when shareholder value and a short-termist obsession with profit become the idol of today's executives.

It is local (and regional) democracy that must play a role in righting wrongs, in pointing out scandals, in airing grievances, in pushing for social change .

The two halves of America's silent or not so silent majority (rural / small town America as well as metropolitan America) are each in its own way cheated out of their "pursuit of happiness" by Corporate America.

They must join hands if they want to surpass that dilemma.

There is a place in the local democracy movement for big city people as well as small-town folks, for recently arrived minorities as well as Americans who arrived 300 or 12,000 years ago, for Republicans as well as Democrats who crave change, who sincerely want a modernization of their society, a real advance of their democratic rights (which include the right to self-determination in all aspects of life, last not least on the local and regional level.

It is here where we can begin to find a voice and discuss ways in which the power of Corporate America can be checked.

Local (and regional) democracy must play a role in righting wrongs, in pointing out scandals, in airing grievances, in pushing for social change .

We know that municipal (and regional) democracy cannot but fail if society at large is not fully democratized, in the sense of meaningful influence and a real voice for the majority that is at present allowed only to vote while the important decisions are taken by professional politicians susceptible to the pressures of the few with a lot of money.

But we also know that society at large cannot be fully democratic if local (and regional) affairs are left unattended by local people failing to empower themselves to decide the very things that affect them in an essential way at their very own doorsteps.

Local reform, aiming at an increased say of the many in everything that is vital for their communities, is the prerequisite for democracy in our societies.

The legal and economic hindrances that we will encounter cannot all be removed by the isolated actions of local citizens for urban democracy – so we need to team up with other citizens in other communities (and regions), nationally and world-wide, to increase the pressure for a rational, humane modernization and conversion of our societies, in the sense of a more genuine democracy = rule of the people, by the people, for the people.

We propose a discussion.

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<p>The example of the "right of recall": We are looking for information on motions to recall representatives from city councils in American towns or from state legislatures. What were the issues? Was the attempt of recall successful? What did it take to make it successful? Is the legal provision that citizens can recall their representatives seen as an effective tool that enhances direct influence of citizens?</p>
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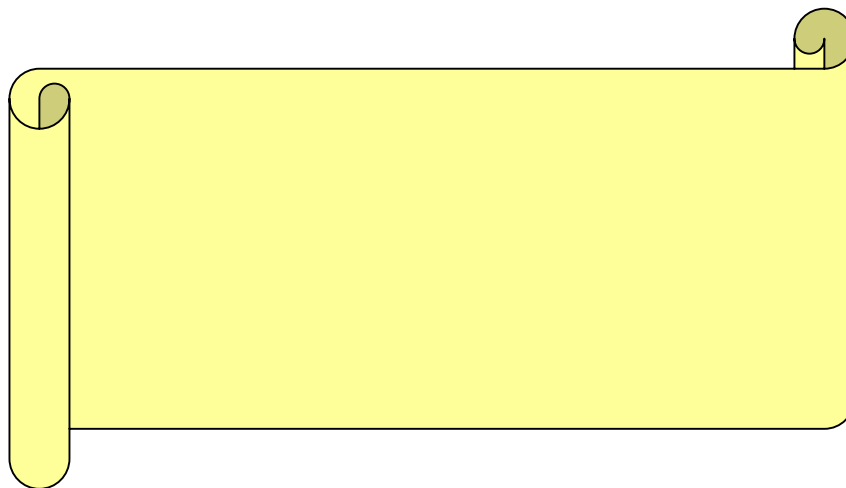
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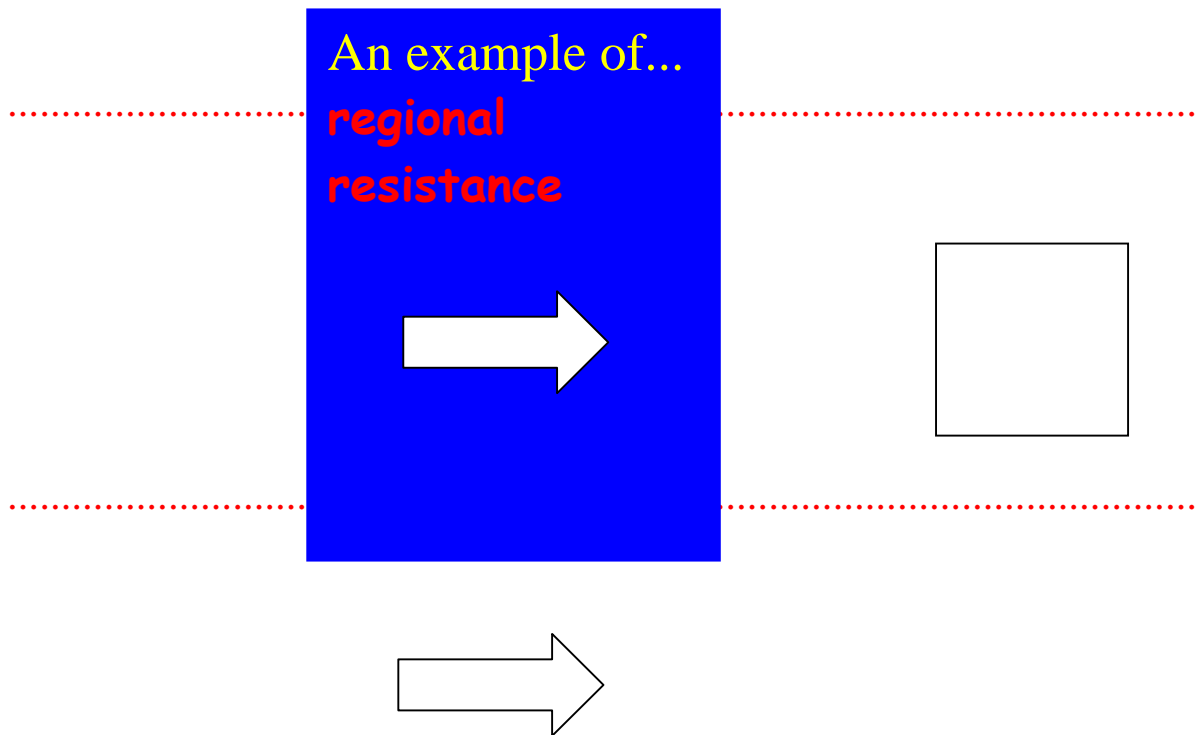
*But if people are awake
If they discover they have a voice
That they become well informed
And conscious of their interests...
Step by step, change can set in.*

More widespread,
more informed,
more intense participation
of ordinary citizens
in decisions of local importance
will strengthen *civil society*.
The individual benefits.
The community benefits.
The entire society benefits.



Regional Forum

We invite contributions from various parts of the world that are dealing with efforts to push for increased regional democracy !



Your proposal for discussion might refer, for instance, to the “decentralization” debate in France...

...in Belgium...

...in Scotland, or Wales...

... in Italy...

... in Catalunya... or Euzkadi (Pays Basque)...

It might deal with the Lüchow-Dannenberg case...

...or the history of the Wyhl case...

We hardly know anything about the roots of the conflict in Aceh; so you are welcome to put your point-of-view regarding the issues at stake on the table.

Not Against Each Other! But Together! ***The Quest for Increased Regional Democracy (Self-Rule)***

We support the quest for increased local and regional democracy, a greater say of the rank-and-file in their own affairs.

The effort to establish transparent institutions of grass roots democracy as well as institutions of rational, humane, democratic local and regional planning is becoming more and more necessary to counteract the irrational consequences of unfettered corporate power active in a global context (‘globalization’).

We have to counteract that offensive by another globalization: a global thrust for increased democracy of the people, by the people, for the people.

The debate on regionalism and decentralization has to be situated in this context of the awakening desire of a growing number of people, the world over, to oppose the so-called constraints of the market that we are told leave us choiceless. What we hope to do is to point out alternative choices. What we hope to do is to join hands and link our local and regional efforts to gain a greater say in affairs that directly concern us, that touch upon and materially, both culturally and economically, affect our lives. This struggle for increased democracy is going on in many countries, the world over.

‘Regionalism,’ as we understand it, is not provincialism.

It is not primarily backward looking, even though it values historic consciousness. It is not about withdrawal and refusal of cultural and economic exchange; it is about openness, but based on locally and regionally specific needs that are discussed and dealt with in a rational, humane, and democratic way. It rejects the internationalism of the huge trading corporations and their stranglehold on local, regional, and sometimes even national entities. (The history of the United Fruit Company in Central America is an example of what we mean by stranglehold and by rejection of ‘open doors’ that let the fox roam freely in the henhouse.) It rejects the universalism of UNIVERSAL MOTION PICTURES. Or of Hollywood generally, of CNN, and of certain, hegemonial WASPish values that boil down to a perverse interest in the accumulation of money (as a heavenly ‘sign’

that the successful will be 'saved'). We respect the old-fashioned New England farmer or clergyman who takes serious his WASPish values; they are part of his regional culture, part of his history. But we cannot take serious the yuppies writing in the New York media, or the New England millionaire transplanted to Texas (and no longer able to complete a sentence, or speak grammatically correct English), when they throw their mediocre utterances containing a simplistic world view at us, claiming they contain the quintessence of 'universal values.'

'Universal values,' as we see it, take on a specific form and content in specific regions, specific cultures, during specific historic periods. In view of cultural exchange (which no culture can do without), concepts of the European enlightenment like 'democracy' have figured in debates around the globe. But this does not mean that concepts of 'humanity', of 'dignity,' of sisterly or brotherly love, of mutual help have not, in the one way or the other, figured in the historic debates and the history of philosophy (or religion) of various cultures before the impact of the European enlightenment (often in distorted and paternalistic ways) could be felt. Humane, positive values take on (and have always taken on) the historically developed, changing forms of expression and the cultural nuances of a specific culture; the 'Allgemein menschliche' (the Generally Human) does not exist, except as an empty abstraction, as a banality. The form it takes is always concrete, that is to say, historically and culturally specific. We are one, as humanity, in our diversity; we are equal in our different talents. We crave freedom, increased democracy, mutual understanding in opening our ears to listen, in engaging in debate, putting before each other our different points of view.

The initiators of this platform of debate, by chance, are rooted in Europe. They are anti-European, at a time where the European Community is about to expand, seeing the EU as an instrument of powerful economic interests, having few illusions about the merely formal character of its democratic efforts. Even decentralization, in its member states, is controlled from above, it seems. And it is hardly expanding concrete democratic rights of the citizens... But perhaps we are wholly or partly wrong and have to learn our lesson, in this regard, too.

More importantly, we are anti-European in the way Artaud, or Buñuel were anti-European. We cannot idealize the heritage of a continent that was unable to undertake peaceful exchange, pursuing an expansionist, colonialist course since at least the 15th century that led to bloody genocide in North and South America, in Namibia, and elsewhere. The German fascist attempt to annihilate European Jewry had its bloody precursors. The photos of Congolese men, lined up with their hands hacked off because they had not paid the 'head tax' are unforgotten. The Herreros men, women, and children killed by German Imperial soldiers are unforgotten. Britain's 'liquidation' of the Sepoy rebellion is unforgotten. The 'Hunnenrede' of William II at the time of the 'Boxer rebellion' is unforgotten. To defend the better, more humane aspects of civilizations in the various parts of Europe, it is better to say a clear 'No' to European hegemonism. We welcome the abandoning of frontiers that separated Eastern and Western Europe, that separated France and Belgium and Germany and Poland. But why is not Russia brought into the union? Why not China? Why not India, Africa, South and Central America, the Northern part of the Western Hemisphere?

We are anti-European. A European Union turned into a fortress is too small a union. A European Union run by the bosses is too undemocratic a union. Europeans, unite! But not against the rest of the world! Europeans, unite! But not, to bolster a stronger, more powerful central state. We are skeptical of étatisme. We are skeptical of big bureaucracies. We know our democracies are a great conquest, a great historical achievement, won by struggles, paid for dearly. But they are hardly democratic enough. Much remains to be done.

Let's talk about the decentralization issue

Democracy cannot be content to be regional or local only.

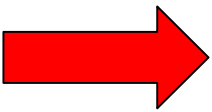
Regional or local democracy are important.

They mean, you debate and decide issues that are specific to your place, your locality, your region. The issues are close at hand, and the people confronted with local and regional problems have a direct interest. They may not know best, but they are the ones most affected by the decisions taken, the strategies decided on. They should be

heard. They should decide, after engaging in a learning and discussion process.

But of course we all know: Many things that affect us locally or regionally, affect also others outside our community or our region. Mediation, 'Vermittlung' is necessary. Contact, communication are necessary. Inter-community and inter-regional procedures and institutions of democratic grass roots democracy and rational, humane, democratic coordination and planning are necessary.

Our quest for local and regional democracy concerns the contradiction between a tendency to centralize power, to streamline organizations and advocate "bigness". And the contrary tendency to "decentralize." To give people locally and regionally a greater say. To accept that they ask, or may be asking tomorrow, for a greater say, in their own affairs.



Presently, the political motions that introduce decentralization are coming from "above," from a *classe politique* monopolizing political influence and political decision making processes in the 'center.' Their aim is to take the issues away from local and regional movements for greater citizen participation. Their aims is to mute dissent, to guide it into calm waters, to co-opt the spokeswomen and spokesmen of these movements, and to provide a legal framework for regional political decision making processes that is drafted by those 'up there' (in the political center) and that will guarantee that political efforts to search for truly alternative solutions to our problems will be reduced to 'harmless' child's play.

Public affairs
- the “res publica”,
the *chose publique*,
the *öffentliche Sache* –
should be decided
by all, not by a few...

Change comes slowly.
Sometimes *it accelerates, in a surprising way.*
It is under the pressure of situations
that people can be awakened by circumstance
and begin to take an interest in their own affairs,
“public affairs.”
The CULTURE of a society
can either discourage or encourage this.
CIVIL SOCIETY, as we see it, requires a CULTURE of
participation, where as many as possible are committed,
engagé, engagiert. To be committed means also to learn, to
communicate. It means to act, to intervene.

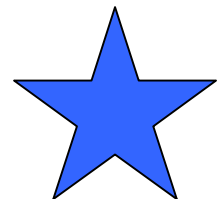
Local democracy and present budgetary constraints do not go well together

Public coffers are empty and vital services cut,
because it is deemed essential to strengthen the
competitiveness of capital by reducing taxes, while
governments keep the pressure on trade unions to
accept wage restraints and often encourage a
relaxation of labor laws that include protective
provisions for labor.

*Lets' make it clear once and for all
that a contradiction exists
between the fact that the United States are one of the richest
countries of the earth,
and the other fact
that the American Society of Civil Engineers is compelled to
criticize how run-down America's public infrastructure is.
The problem exists today in other 'rich countries' like Britain and
Germany, as well.
Public coffers in many countries are empty.*

*Governments anywhere are considering tax cuts or
enacting tax cuts.*

*We are not saying that the tax burdens on the low-income earnings
ought not to be alleviated. Or better still, as far as the working poor
(and similarly distressed groups) are concerned, take it entirely off
their shoulders.*



But tax cuts usually profit large corporations and big income earners more than anyone else.

This is supposed to lead to increased investment at a time when opportunities for profitable investment in the productive base are scarce anywhere in the highly industrialized world.

Tax cuts mean that the rich get richer, that public services for all are being underfunded, and that the majority pays for it in their daily lives.

Corporations, although financially sound, need more money, the reasoning goes, in order to invest in the modernization of the 'productive sphere' and increase productivity. All this is to counteract the 'profit squeeze' due to international competition among major globally active corporations. One result has been productivity increases that have made people redundant – frequently at a faster rate than new jobs have been created. Some have found well-paying jobs in new sectors of industry that were able to expand quickly during the last boom. The rest were evidently expected to take up unqualified, badly paid "service jobs" or accept long years of being on the dole. Needless to say, many of the added financial resources that capital owes to this policy of redistribution from public to private coffers (and from below to above) goes into speculative ventures. Rather than invest overwhelmingly in production or in the important commercial sector (international trade, etc.), it is above all property speculation, currency speculation, the stock market etc. where the really big money seems to be made – although, of course, in cyclically varying fashion.

According to the A.S.C.E., inadequate investment in public infrastructure is responsible for the fact that

- three quarters of all U.S. schools do not offer an adequate learning environment; they are either too crowded or the architecture is decrepit and 'crumbling;'***
- one third of all U.S. roads are in miserable condition;***
- nearly a third of all bridges are in bad shape, some are close to collapse;***
- public transport, already underdeveloped by comparison with France, Britain or Germany, is close to collapse in many communities (among them San Francisco and Washington, D.C.);***
- airports, operating far above capacity, are increasingly becoming unsafe;***
- the energy sector has been neglected; the most blatant example being California where public utilities have been late in starting to educate customers with regard to energy-wasting behavior; on the other hand, new Calif. power plants to take care of additional demand have not been build in recent years and the***

network of overland electricity lines (which is desperately needed to carry the added load produced by out-of-state power plants) does not exist;

- *in many cities, the sewage system is about a hundred years old and it has not been maintained properly in recent years by cash-squeezed city governments; the result is that it is in dismal condition;*
- *the quality of drinking water frequently is horrendous; a program for new sewage plants and for purification plants taking care of the liquid emissions of industry is necessary; likewise, the quality of water is negatively affected by hog farms, poultry farms, and the (over-)use of pesticides.*
- *many of the country's roughly 2,100 dams are unsafe, some in densely populated areas; there were 61 instances of dams breaking, in the last two years.*

It is calculated that 1,300 billion dollars would be needed to fix these problems.

But it seems more likely that President George W. Bush will go ahead with his tax cut and a tremendously costly NMD that the arms industry knows will be a bonanza for them.

At a time of extremely neo-liberal "monetarism," under the pressure of federal budget cuts, we have seen both tax reductions (benefiting above all the affluent) and shrinking allocations of federal tax money to municipalities.

This has often brought about, on the municipal level, a destructively enforced compulsion to "tighten belts" and reduce often essential expenditures. Towns have begun to discover "cost cutting" as the most likely way out. It hurts the citizens. It stabilizes budgets.

But most of all, it diminishes the important right of citizens to shape the development of their communities. If 'the force of budgetary constraints' that is being imposed from outside cancels out many options, this affects democratic choice. It affects the future, as the fan of options is narrowed and as things may develop in a way that is contrary to the will of a large majority of the local population. Tight budgets imposed from outside thus are a means to take a democratic right to decide on their own future out of the hands of citizens. A legal frame of reference that allows for municipal self-rule while in effect denying the financial means necessary to fulfil local tasks is a farce, it is meaningless, it is a token of merely formal democracy.

A community which does not control the financial means to keep school buildings in good repair, to look after its sewage system, or

to subsidize the arts, is in fact taken hostage by a federal government intent on cost-cutting by all means.

This is even more scandalous as private wealth (although unequally distributed) has reached levels never before experienced.

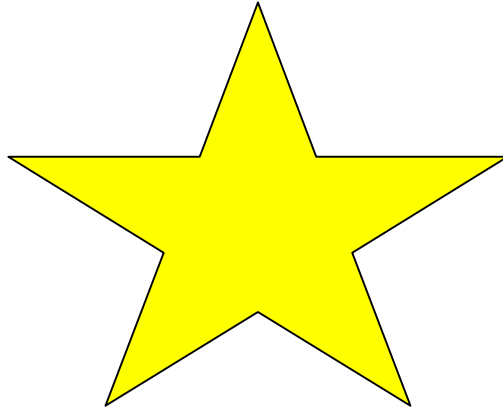
We must not forget that socially produced wealth would allow for a financing of local tasks. This is the true scandal today.

Belt tightening and improvisation would be justified if society at large would not produce the means to make all the efforts necessary to create a livable, lively, humane, and beautiful urban environment, a spatial and social context in which

people can be truly productive and find refreshing spaces of recreation and opportunities for active involvement in, as well as 'productive consumption' of the arts.

Theaters are closed or their budgets shrunk, making their work frequently next to impossible. Artists are told to rely on the art market as well as on sponsors. Schools and universities have faced cuts and personnel shortages for years, already. And more cost-cutting is due, especially for those university institutes not deemed immediately beneficial for the economy, that is to say, not subjugated to the interests of big business. Jobless young people frequently are neglected. So are those in need of kindergartens, of youth clubs... The upkeep of vital health and traffic infrastructure is poor, if not scandalous, promising huge repair bills once the time comes that such repairs can no longer be postponed. All this has happened in many of the richest countries on earth, in countries where private wealth – in a few hands – is amassed at an accelerated pace and in historically unparalleled proportions.

Budgetary control by higher level State bureaucracies diminishes the important right of citizens to shape the development of their communities. If 'the force of budgetary constraints' that is being imposed from outside cancels out many options, this affects democratic choice. It affects the future, as the fan of options is narrowed and as things may develop in a way that is contrary to the will of a large majority of the local population.



Urban Self-rule

*"Yes" or "no"? And if "yes" -
From "below" or from "above"? By the many or by
the few?*

Urban democracy

*Has it merely become fashionable to talk about urban democracy?
Or is there a real sense of urgency?
But among the 'populace,' within the 'silent' or not so silent majority?
Among activists and militants of the ecological movement? Of social
movements, local and regional citizens' groups against nuclear power
plants? Against the expansion of large airports, against
superhighways projected to cut through densely built-up suburban
areas and inner city neighborhoods, or against the destruction of
unique habitats of threatened species?
Or is it maybe that talk about decentralization has simply become
an issue among the 'classe politique' and the journalists close to
them who all seem to sense the erosion of their political foundations
as electoral abstentionism and the concomitant growth of the
extreme right loom like nightmares before them?*

The journalists who produced the Le Monde publication "Dossiers & Documents" this month (No.296, mars 2001), talk about a revolution of the municipalities ["révolution des communes"], calling it an institutional revolution ["une révolution institutionnelle"] tantamount to the irresistible emancipation of those elected (to local or regional offices) as well as the citizens ["l'irrésistible émanicipation des élus et des citoyens"].

But they don't hide the undercurrent, perhaps the motivating force of the institutional reform brought about by the decentralization law of March 2, 1982: "la politique en crise".

The decentralization debate

The debate on decentralization vs. centralization has been carried on again and again. In the young American republic, anti-federalists confronted federalists. During the French revolution, the 'Gironde' represented the interests not only of the grande bourgeoisie against the petite-bourgeoisie, the interests of the mercantile bourgeoisie of Atlantic harbor towns like Bordeaux, la Rochelle, or Nantes. Up to a point, it also represented the regional interests of the Languedoc against Parisian centralism. In Switzerland, the debate as to the relative autonomy of cantons played a role from the beginning. The debate was started anew with the drawing up of the West German constitution, which reserved certain rights and prerogatives to the 'Laender', that is to say, individual states. Education, public radio (and later on, public television) fell within the jurisdiction and decision-making power of the states instead of the Federal government (whereas the Federal parliament still influences education expenditures indirectly by the way taxes are split up between the 'Bund' or central government and the 'Laender' or state governments.)

In France, the decentralisation debate of the 1970s culminated in the law of March 2, 1982 which was claimed to liberate the towns, the departments and regions from the tutelage of the centralist state.

The French Decentralization Law of March 2, 1982

French decentralization occurred as a project of the Social-democratic left. Carried through from above during the first term of François Mitterrand as president of the French republic, this “institutional revolution” will remain connected with the name of Gaston Deferre. It is claimed to have brought about a fairly considerable reshuffling of the way the French state apparatus was organized, and a similar change regarding the levels of power. Apparently, by giving mayors larger prerogatives, Socialist mayors (in Lille, in Bordeaux, and elsewhere) were meant to create a power base that went beyond what was hitherto possible. The ‘projet de loi relatif aux droits et libertés des communes, départements et régions’ proposed by Deferre and adopted by parliament meant that a municipal council would set the priorities when drawing up its budget. It would decide to what degree it would expand or curtail expenditures on social work or local cultural activities. It would decide in its own right whether to build a new school, a stadium, or a concert hall. It would decide when and where to develop a new neighborhood, improve amenities for a large public housing project, create a park or ice-skating ring, open up new streets, or permit a new shopping center. It would decide whether or not to favor private-public partnerships in undertaking new urban projects of some significance

In other words, it was no longer the government in Paris that would have the last word, via its prefect (préfet). It would instead be a local, district, or regional body, the ‘conseil municipal’, the ‘conseil général’, or the ‘région’ – each of which would decide seemingly autonomously on budgetary questions related to their planning activities, and on the carrying out of plans drafted by the respective local or regional planning authorities, submitted to the vote and approved by the ‘élus’, the elected council men or regional deputies...

Some Questions Regarding the Effects of French Decentralization on the “Emancipation of Citizens”

It is clear that a central state taking myriad decisions, even with regard to minor local and regional issues, cannot really be that effective. The bureaucracy continues to grow. But decision-makers are far from the scene, often out of touch with reality. Moreover, an exceedingly bureaucratic process not only tends to be inefficient; it also kindles dissent.

We must not deceive ourselves with regard to the ‘essence’ of the reform. It is a reform from above, a reform brought about by the ‘classe politique,’ and it is above all tantamount to a territorial and organizational revamping of the State. It does not mean a smaller role for the State; it means that the weights are shifted within the state structure. The local and regional layers of the political machinery that is ‘the State’ become more independent of the center. Correspondingly, members of the classe politique in their local and regional circuit acquire a certain, relative ‘space’ for manoeuvring, without having to ask national party leaderships all of the time.

Of course, in a way this seems to bring the decision-making process ‘closer to home’, to the grass-roots. This is why we are for it. It prepares the ground for more direct local and regional involvement by ordinary citizens. But does it take local or regional power away from the professional politicians, the ‘classe politique,’ and trust the citizens to make, directly, the important decisions that will matter in their everyday lives, that is to say, in their immediately experienced reality?

Apparently, no.

The Limits of Representational Democracy

The process is the usual, indirect one. It relies on representation, they tell us. And after all, we are represented. Haven’t we ticked whom we want for mayor? Haven’t we supported, as a democratic majority, the slate of candidates that we want to be ‘majoritaire,’ that

is, constituting the majority on our city council? Fair enough. We have done all that. Or abstained.

Last year, Le Monde noted how participation in Parisian municipal elections had slipped to little more than 30 %. In many

They are ready to invest their trusted local and regional party 'big shots' with added (local or regional) influence and power to decide questions of local importance.

democratic elections, not only in the U.S.A., an abstention of about half of the electorate has become common. That means that frequently, about 25 % of the electorate (and sometimes less, especially if the 'winner takes all' maxim has supplanted proportional

representation of parties) decide the important questions that will regulate and predetermine many of the conditions that affect our lives.

It is in order to bolster their 'legitimacy' that the 'class politique' tries to rekindle our interest in the representative democratic game. One instrument in this strategy is decentralization.

A decentralization that doesn't far enough. They are ready to invest their trusted local and regional party 'big shots' with added (local or regional) influence and power to decide questions of local importance. Indeed, they aim to be more in touch with local and regional reality. But above and beyond this, they are rarely prepared to curtail their own power and influence and encourage the rank-and-file to assume a greater responsibility themselves.

It is in order to bolster their 'legitimacy' that the 'class politique' tries to rekindle our interest in the representative democratic game. One instrument in this strategy is decentralization.

It is the old reservation as to the 'maturity of the masses,' that today again takes the form of talk about elites. We have seen this happen again and again. Take the example of 'real socialism.'

It is the old reservation as to the 'maturity of the masses,' that today again takes the form of talk about élites.

The party hierarchies and bureaucratic hierarchies of what was posing as 'real socialism' in the East distrusted the 'masses' of ordinary citizens, in the last analysis. They resorted to 'democratic centralism,' a game where democratic appearances were kept up in the shoddiest of ways: decisions taken by a small group in the 'bureau politique' (or 'polit-bureau') of the party that claimed to possess the key to 'scientific Marxism-Leninism,' as 'the only rational basis' of all decisions; subsequent approval by the Central Committee of the Party, then by the General Assembly of the Party, discussion on the shop floor level, first by party members, then by all. This was the way 'downward' that supposedly was supplemented by another, 'upward' channel which together were to reflect the 'centralist' and the 'democratic' aspect of the 'new system.' For the sake of legitimacy, the party that thus assured its monopoly to the 'truth' and remained in control all vital decision-making processes depended on rigged elections, with puppet parties 'competing' for previously allotted seats.

But is the process of taking decisions in narrow circles at the top something that is so completely foreign to today's liberal, representative democracies?

Of course there are usually two major parties seriously competing for power. Of course, despite manipulations (sometimes as obvious as those recently observed in Florida during the last U.S. presidential race) elections are not crudely rigged. They are a little more sublimely but certainly effectively influenced by the media and by campaign contributions that again help buy advertising time in the media.

In liberal democracies, major parties seem to be relatively firmly controlled by small groups of (certainly replaceable) politicians who together form the party leadership. It is in these hubs of power that decisions are being taken. And the process of assuring consent by lower-ranking elements in the party hierarchy is about as formally democratic as in the more soft-spoken of post-war 'Marxist Leninist' parties. Of course, people in Poland or the G.D.R. of the 70s, 80s or 90s were not shot for disagreeing and ending up as a minority in the

'polit bureau' or the 'central committee,' they simply ruined their chances of remaining in the center of power and they certainly spoiled their further careers. In Conservative or social democratic parties, people can fall from grace, as well. Jochen Steffen, the former member of the party leadership of the SPD and the highest-ranking party official in the 'Land' of Schleswig Holstein (Germany) a few decades ago, was shoved out of all major positions and either was excluded from the party or quit voluntarily. His 'left-wing positions' made him very suddenly unacceptable to the rest of the party leadership. Exclusions of rank-and-file SPD members were frequent in the 70s whenever these seemed to embrace positions considered too far to the left by either the federal or the regional or even local party leadership. Very recently, the number 2 of the Social Democratic Party in Germany, Oskar Lafontaine, was sacked as minister of finance and has now reverted to the position of a simple rank-and-file member. Similarly, the Free Democratic Party in Germany gave us an example of intra-party democracy when one of the more aggressive members of the party leadership, Moellemann, embraced positions not welcomed by other party-leaders at the time, among them the top party leader, Mr. Kinkel. No matter how we may reject the positions and style of Mr. Moellemann, he still was democratically elected by the FDP members of the 'Land' of North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) to the top position in that state's Free Democratic Party apparatus. And he did nothing else but make free use of his right to voice his opinion within the party. Quickly, Mr. Kinkel phoned the decisive people in the North Rhine Westphalian party leadership behind Mr. Moellemann's back; they immediately called in an extraordinary general assembly of North Rhine Westphalian party members, and just as surprisingly deposed Mr. Moellemann as regional party leader of the FDP in that state. This was just a few years ago; it made everyone wonder how a regional party secretary supposedly extremely popular with the regional rank-and-file members of the party can fall from power that suddenly. The federal party leadership with Mr. Kinkel in command pulled the strings; top members of the regional leadership collaborated, having (probably) their own careers in mind, and the rank and file simply succumbed just like that to those 'up there' who supposedly 'know best' what is good for the party.

The Decisive Role of Those Forming the Party Leadership, the 'Gullible' (or Powerless) Ordinary Party Members, and the Lack of Intraparty Democracy

Looking at the case of Moellemann's deposition as FDP party chairman in NRW (Germany), we can easily criticize the way the leadership of the FDP at the federal level, especially Mr. Kinkel, were pulling the strings. But does it bode well for any effort to increase direct democracy at the local and regional level that the party rank-and-file was swayed so easily? What made them succumb?

Perhaps, loyalty to one's party plays a certain role.

'Loyalty' to the party, in liberal, representative democracies, often translates into an uncritical acceptance of what the party leadership recommends. It is as if the rank and file is too unsure of its own judgement, its capacity to think and to take decisions? They are again and again swayed, it seems, by local or regional 'figures' of some importance who supposedly 'know better,' or 'know what the party wants,' 'what the leadership thinks is necessary.' This holds true at least when it comes to major issues while it may be possible that a relatively free debate is carried on with regard to certain local issues of minor importance. But even when it comes to such minor local issues as closing down a public swimming pool charging minimal entrance fees and supplanting it with a posh, roofed, 'sunshine park' swimming pool charging fees four or five times higher, the party rank and file may largely succumb to the recommendations of a local party leader who is, perhaps, at the same time, the town mayor and (as insiders may know) in touch with a developer or construction company – that is to say, an enterprise likely to make a big profit by building the new public swimming pool.

Thus, we ask of course, 'Where is the self-confidence of the rank and file?' 'What makes them succumb, to those who claim to know better?' For local and regional holders of elected offices, the answer is fairly obvious. The prospect of careers (as professional politicians) is what makes many conform. In countries like Germany, it is all too apparent that the compensation that elected members of regional parliaments and especially the state parliament receive is quite an

efficient carrot to assure loyalty to the party leadership. Party leaders are, after all, by far the most influential people among all those who decide the slate of candidates running for office the next time. And if you have sat in federal parliament for two 'legislative periods,' you are really entitled to a nice pension. Nobody else in the country is entitled to a pension after 8 years of work. It is really seductive. Nice pay, nice pension. But you must not talk back when the big shots in the party tell you along which lines to vote. If you have that sort of 'party career' in mind, you better learn early enough to behave, to conform, to anticipate the views of the leadership.

In Britain, the question of intervention by the party leadership was raised to a level of considerable public attention when the Blairites tried to keep Ken Livington to run for the office of mayor of (Greater) London. When the Labour Party picked its candidate, they in fact succeeded to have a man of their choice picked as candidate. They thought they had engineered a coup that would keep Ken Livington out of the race. When he ran for mayor, he won nonetheless. As the conservatives will hardly have supported somebody like Ken Livington, it proves that the present mayor had the support of the rank-and-file in the Labour Party.

The answer given here as to why the rank-and-file caves in to party leaderships should of course cause concern.

If the rank-and-file of parties (and sometimes of unions, too) proves to be so gullible, so easily swayed by leaders often described as 'charismatic' in the press, is there any real hope for rank-and-file emancipation, for direct democracy?

We should, however, not underrate the anger, the nagging, the criticism formulated at home or among workmates.

The recent rejection of the PvdA leadership's choice for the position of party chairman by the party rank-and-file was exceptional enough to warrant big headlines (cf. de Volkskrant, March 17, 2001, p.1, "Basis PvdA kiest met Koole tegen partijtop"). The de Volkskrant issue of March 19, 2001 already noted that the 'ranks have been closed again.' The 'rebellion' by the rank-and-file was a temporary outburst. It is a completely open question whether the challenger of

the leadership's candidate, Ruud Koole, a university professor teaching political science in Leiden, really represents the grass roots. Perhaps what happened had little to do with grass roots activities. Rather, the leaders of what may have been a less centrist "wing" of the party (less "centrist", at least, than the wing headed by Wim de Kok) may have been staging a certain come-back by getting its candidate selected. Still, the fact that they succeeded was surprising.

We must not forget that it has always been difficult to formulate new positions in parties, against resistance by the leadership. Alternatives are not welcome were political routine has worked so clearly in favor of a status quo that party leaderships feel more or less obliged to defend. Whosoever stirs the water, may be expelled. This threat hanging like the sword of Damocles above all fireheads contributes to the maintenance of a façade of loyalty; it also contributes to feelings that as an ordinary party member, a part-time 'politician' at most, one is really powerless most of the time. Kept at bay and helpless in view of the ruses known to old hands, clever politicians who have withstood many a storm and braved criticism from the rank and file. And who have developed a certain skill in dealing with challengers and outmanoeuvring 'competitors' and personal 'foes' inside the party.

So much regarding the way decision-making processes at the top are shielded against rank-and-file influence. Of course, in the last analysis the voters have always the last word. In theory. In practice they are confronted with slates of candidates drawn up at the top, by leaders within the party apparatus of the two (or so) major parties. They can choose between (usually) two slates of candidates. Maybe neither slate represents them. Maybe both parties have major connections to 'big business.' Or one party leadership openly represents big business while the other party leadership thinks it inescapable to take its wishes and pressures into account. The voters often tell themselves they are choosing between a worse and a 'lesser evil,' knowing that small parties stand no chance at all to influence the course their society is about to take. This then is 'free choice,' comparable in many ways to the choice of a consumer in a supermarket where you can select from what is on offer, beef

carrying the BSE risk or pork carrying the foot-and-mouth disease risk. Perhaps chicken, and the salmonella risk. But no meat from animals raised as you wish they should have been raised. Sanely, instead of by farmers hard-pressed by trading companies to lower and again lower their prices. So that they take refuge to ever more unscrupulous methods, 'industrial farming,' industrial raising of livestock, against the most obvious needs of these animals. Free choice for consumers is a farce. Free choice in the political sphere often is no less farcical, indeed.

The Frankfurt/Main (Germany) Example of Municipal "Autonomy": A Certain Freedom of Taking Local Decisions Enjoyed By the Local Political Establishment

Centralist bureaucratic decision-making is loved by almost nobody today. Increased freedom to make decisions with regard to "their" city enables local politicians ("les élus," i.e. those elected) to approach their ideal of "gestion de proximité," of acting, that is, in a way that is respecting local conditions.

But what does that mean?

What are 'local conditions' and what does it mean to 'respect' them? Does it, for instance, mean respecting the needs and desires of the population (the "grass roots") to live in a healthy environment, a livable city with an intact social and cultural infrastructure? In a city where everybody's voice is heard, in the political sphere, and where everybody's voice (and preference) counts equally?

Let us look at the example of Frankfurt (Germany) – a town renowned in the years between the two World Wars for its accomplishments, especially in the field of public housing. It was here that Ernst May was able to design the Roemerstadt and see it realized, as well. It was here that

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In a city where everybody's voice is heard, in the political sphere, and where everybody's voice (and preference) counts equally?**

another architect, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, was able to experiment with the “Frankfurt kitchen,” a modernly designed, functional space, fitting well into small working-class flats.

The SPD had a reputation: that of being a defender of the interests of ordinary citizens. It was solidly entrenched in the city of Frankfurt before the fascists took over, by force. It was returned into power under the new circumstances of democratic post-war West Germany. Then came the 70s, the period of disillusionment.

For in Frankfurt (on Main) it wasn't the Conservatives who were in power in those years when the “grass roots” were opposed to property speculation in the Westend.

SPD mayors were protecting property speculation in the Westend. Old houses declared protected architectural monuments fell apart because investors who had recently acquired them were intent not to accomplish necessary repairs. The ‘patrimoine régional’ that had survived the air raids was to be sacrificed to the interest of those who were intent on destroying beautiful mansions and replacing them with much bigger office buildings disregardless of a tight housing market.

The politicians running the city failed to enforce legal provisions that made it unlawful not to undertake the repairs necessary for the preservation of protected architectural monuments.

They failed to enforce provisions against purposeful destruction of roofs, ceilings, plumbings by criminal gangs paid by the investors. They failed to protect renters still living lawfully in houses targeted by these thugs at the service of ‘respectable’ speculators.

They turned a blind eye to all of this. And then, finally, they willingly provided permission to destroy buildings, as the law foresaw, if and when theoretically protected mansions were run down to degree scandalous enough not to let them qualify anymore for enforcement of the legal provision that foresaw their upkeep.

And when the torn down buildings were going to be replaced by new ones, cases became known where they failed to enforce building codes outlawing the higher densities sought by the investors.

They failed to protect dwelling space, ignoring by-laws prohibiting conversion into office space.

But they did not fail to enforce the law against squatters who occupied threatened dwellings classified as architectural monuments. Their police acted with astonishing energy against these squatters. It acted with often excessive force against peaceful demonstrations, triggering an escalation of weird proportions.

Both the politicians running the city and their police force completely ignored the support by ordinary Frankfurt citizens which the squatters enjoyed. Many of these supporters were duly aware of the housing shortage (especially the shortage of affordable flats). And the scandal of the on-going destruction of what once were mansions of the Frankfurt bourgeoisie, in a deteriorating town quarter at the edge of the inner city did not sit well with many of them. People knew that the squatters risked penalties, and they did so not only on their own behalf. Their fight defended the rights of renters, as well: the rights of people who had moved here because the rent levels were still affordable. There were immigrant workers, artists, students who had flocked to the Westend. In the end, the attention these 'protected architectural monuments' received, saved many of them.

Gentrification as an alternative strategy of property speculators set in. The former renters were driven out, and conversion into office space remained a problem.

If parts of the Westend were preserved, we certainly owe this to the squatter movement, not the local Social Democratic establishment.

With the grass roots battle against the expansion of the Frankfurt (on Main) airport, the same game repeated itself.

The SPD city government fully supported "economically sound" business interests against a massive wave of grass roots protest.

That Frankfurt was lost by the SPD after years in power, was not just due to the shrinking of the industrial base since the 1970s.

It had a lot to do with disappointing the social democratic rank-and-file, ordinary Frankfurt citizens.

While the well-paid among the employees in the growing financial and more generally, the tertiary sector (banks, insurance companies, headquarters of major corporations etc.) were presumably tending towards the conservative parties (the CDU and the FDP), the local

SPD leadership has proved to the grass roots that they could be nearly as conservative, nearly as indebted to big business.

The entire planning process that made possible the explosion of land prices, the construction of high rise office building after high rise office building, resulting in a worsening of the local climate, severe traffic problems, dreary urban ‘deserts’ at night, sharply rising rent levels, and the superficial aestheticism of Frankfurt’s skyline, has been backed by the SPD and the chief planner it supported (Mr. Wentz) as much as by the CDU that became the dominant party in the municipal parliament.

Divergences between both parties as to which “office tower” to allow in which location as well as the quarrels over maximum heights and densities have all been of minor importance and seemingly have reflected the closeness of either party to specific investors and their proposals.

Whenever it came to major issues (destruction of Westend mansions, then gentrification; airport expansion; the urban policy giving rise to the new skylines, studded by more and more “skyscrapers”), the voice of the ordinary citizen was drowned out by the shriller way in which important business interests made themselves heard. This tendency continues to make itself felt in the recent propensity of city governments to favor what they call “private public partnerships,” a modus operandi or strategy that is sure to lead to close teamwork and cooperation between city administration and potent investors. Important decisions affecting cities like Frankfurt will be taken while ordinary citizen are told to wait outside the door. It is all for his own good, they tell him. The experts know. Politicians know. Big business knows what is good for it, and how to buy cooperation and assent. Isn’t it nice that public coffers will profit from private enterprise shouldering the cost of private planning. But are you kidding? No subventions? No tax relief for them? Are they really so unselfish in circumventing normal planning procedures?

As ever, the population is an outsider, an observer only. At best. Much is vanishing behind a smokescreen, shrouded in secrecy. What does the public know about the more intimate agreements concerning the Leuna deal?

In Frankfurt, voters defected from the SPD. Everywhere, they are defecting from all (or almost all) parties. Abstentionism is on the rise.

Often, anger is vocal. Apathy is a bad alternative. Anger in itself is hardly constructive. If the rank and file is to be actively involved in the public cause, it takes new ways and means. Its role needs to be larger, more direct. The power of local “elected officials” needs to be curtailed. We, the people have to learn to look over their shoulders. To get involved. To demand a direct say. Instead of accepting a “No, you just go home and wait for the results. We are the legitimate decision-makers...” For it is the people that all power belongs to, in the last analysis. They may loan it, to you, delegate, for a while. You are accountable. Don’t forget it. They may also get involved, directly, if they see the necessity.

Why Local Self-Rule As Granted by the Parisian Central Government Is Insufficient

Local self-rule, as the 1982 law on decentralization defined it, is after all increased “self-rule” by the elected (usually professional) politicians. Such decentralization is not tantamount to a political revision of power mechanisms that would empower the grass roots; it is an “institutional revolution” reshuffling the balance of power within the sphere occupied by professional politicians.

*As François Grosrichard and Jean Menanteau write in their article about decentralization as an “institutional revolution,” the elected officials are not only closer to the local issues, they are also closer to local pressure groups and thus more likely to be subjected to their influence. (F. Grosrichard / J. Menanteau, “Une révolution institutionnelle”, in: *Le Monde / Dossiers & Documents*, no. 296, March 2001, p.1)*

To the influence of all ordinary citizens, regardless of how propertied they are?

Or to the influence of corporations locally present, to owners of big and small businesses, to the old-fashioned ‘notables’?

As the authors put it, the decentralization that has made possible “une gestion de proximité” (administrative action close to the ‘reality’ dealt with) has above all meant an increase in a very specific kind of social pressure. The pressure that is so effectively

exerted locally on those elected (“la pression sociale exercée sur les élus”) is exerted, most notably, in the field of employment and support for enterprises (“dans les domaines de l’emploi et du soutien aux entreprises”). It is the blackmail of companies considering a shut-down of local operations. Or the fishing for tax relief and subsidies of companies looking for a new location and offering to create new jobs. These are the pressures that the locally elected mayors and councilmen are most likely to listen to. Local democracy? An increased voice for all of us? We are as far from it as ever, perhaps...

An Alternative: Local Grass Roots Democracy

*It is often claimed that the political leadership of “progressive” parties with an old reputation of representing ordinary citizens **cannot but succumb** to the pressures of big business when it is a question of averting a downturn of the economy, an “investors’ strike,” offers to create jobs, or threats to close plants and move elsewhere.*

They have to “respect” the “facts of life,” we are told, they have to take into account “economic circumstances,” “la force des choses,” they say.

And many of us nod in agreement, saying: “What can they do?” “If jobs are eliminated, if job growth is not achieved, if the growth dynamics is lost and corporations move to other, competing locations, don’t we all pay the price?”

But do not governments take measures against workers threatening to strike, outlawing the strike at least temporarily, “in the public interest” (as President George W. Bush did just recently, in the case of airline employees)? Why not pass legislation that outlaws the “strike” of investors?

*Furthermore, do not local people build the factories and offices and warehouses of their town, do they not work in them, creating value? **Why should a democratic society allow a small number of people in far-away places to wipe out a few thousand jobs and close a plant? Why should they let a small group of people decide what to produce, when, and how? Let us be respectful of private property, let us pay out the dividends to them that it will be possible to pay after***

all is accomplished. But the decision to operate the plant, the selection of experts and “managers” giving advice, the decision of how to produce, the safety measures, the hours of work, the decision whether more air freight and an expansion of an air port is needed, has to belong to the local people (and the people of the region), it has to be decided democratically by all.

It is only in this way that the dependence of a political “caste” on big business can be eliminated, and that the dependence of all of us on the whims and worries of the few who “own everything” can be eliminated.

What we need are new democratic processes, new democratic institutions that will more rationally, more humanely, more democratically coordinate and secure the diverse social activities, from the productive base to urban development, from transport infrastructure to the free space needed for a lively and free cultural life. It is more important than ever that the expanded reproduction and modernization of the productive base be not an end in itself. In turning it into a task of democratic fact gathering, debate, and decision making, the citizens (while inviting information from experts of all relevant disciplines) will be able to take into account human needs, ecological concerns, and so on, without being unduly distracted by the profit motive or by a technologically minded obsession with “progress as such.” It is as important to take urban development out of the hands of investors interested in high levels of land rent and concomitant high densities, as such, concentrating instead on the aim to create healthy, livable environments while restricting wasteful sealing of arable lands and counteract the trend towards the megalopolis, towards urban sprawl, and highly unequal distribution of the population and of productive facilities in a given territory. Last not least, it is important to break the hold of a few, mighty corporations over the media, the film industry, to resist the commercialization of theater and the arts, to combat the infantilization of ‘popular culture’ and to create better conditions for free expression, open information, unfettered debate, and an end to self-censorship that is now so strongly furthered by undue concern over careers and undue dependence on employers.

In a more genuinely democratic civil society it is important that every voice can make itself heard, without being drowned out by the loud voice of “big business.”

It was James Burnham, the admired social thinker of post-war capitalism, who pointed out that important modernization of capitalism which took place when decision-making power went from CAPITAL to the MANAGERS. As a consequence of this ‘managerial revolution,’ shareholders would receive their dividends; their power of decision-making was curtailed.

Now, with the next indispensable modernization and restructuring of the global economy, that power must be curtailed even more decisively. The irresponsibility of capital owners like Soros became obvious for all who have eyes to see and ears to hear when they recklessly unleashed the Asian financial crisis, making millions redundant, creating conditions of misery for millions.

*But the managers, still too dependent on Capital, will have to redefine their role as well. As, in the process of democratization reflecting the new needs of civil society, all decision-making power reverts from them to the local and regional population and their democratic bodies (general assemblies of the local inhabitants, bodies of temporary delegates with specific and ‘imperative’ tasks), *the managers will form advisory bodies, together with concerned scientists, experts working in universities, as ‘organic intellectuals’ with ties to trade unions, churches, civic action groups, groups of environmentalists, and so on. It will be the ‘grass roots initiatives’ that will suggest the priorities; it will be the population that will decide on them, by way of democratic debate and popular vote.**

It will be the experts, as ‘organic intellectuals’ of the rank-and-file, not as paid servants of “big business” who will be asked how these priorities can be achieved. Their suggestions will not be the ‘law,’ the reflection of new ‘scientific constraints.’ They will be debated and voted on.

The shareholders will receive their fair share when the moment approaches to decide what to do with a possible surplus.

The maximum return on invested capital may be democratically decided. We should remember that in most cultures, limits were found ethically required. Catholic as well as Islamic theologians have usually upheld an injunction against usury; so has civil law. If decisions on investment are taken democratically, in local, inter-local or regional, inter-regional or ‘national,’ international as well as intercontinental democratic bodies of coordination, the role of Capital becomes what it should be in a democratic society, that of a

passive 'rentier' without undue social and political influence. Mr. Soros will be as free and his voice will count as much as that of any cab-driver.

This is democracy, after all, Mr. Bush!

Instead of the wealthy and influential meeting in Davos, it will be the people in the neighborhood who'll take the important decisions.

This is what the American or, for that matter, the French revolution were all about.

Mr. Murdoch or Mr. Berlusconi may collect their checks. But as to their influence over newspaper and television "empires," it will be gone. It will revert to the citizens.

And Mr. Murdoch will be as free as anybody to write an article, or a letter to a newspaper. While we all look forward to interactive TV and the media as a genuine two-way channel of communication.

HOW ARE THE COMMUNITIES TO BECOME (MORE) INDEPENDENT WITH REGARD TO THEIR BUDGETS?

We all know that the dynamics of capitalism continually produces inequality.

It produced "by-passed" regions and "growth poles." Poor regions where jobs are scarce, where wages levels are far below average, where towns and villages look run down, where public coffers are more empty than usual, and where people tend to leave if they see a possibility and feel young enough to attempt another start elsewhere. Rich regions where qualified and often even unqualified people are in demand, where wages are above average, where land and house prices as well as rent are sky-rocketing while affordable housing is priced out of the market and destroyed both by property speculation and city administrations eager to "embellish" their cities...

But even in the zones of growth (and wealth-creation), it produces neglected neighborhoods. It knows inner cities plagued by problems. It knows ill-kept streets and rusty bridges. It knows decrepit industrial zones, the ugly chaos of warehouses, supermarkets, hamburger joints, garages, and gas stations. But it also knows affluent middle class suburbs and the areas where the very rich concentrate.

It is exactly this awareness of contradiction of interests which motivated democratic reformists in the past to plead for a strong role of the state as the potential 'mediator', the 'instrument' of

‘social policy’ that should in a compensatory way see to it that the basic needs of everyone everywhere are taken account of.

The rich in their affluent suburbs would, of course, prefer less responsibility for ‘others.’ They prefer fewer transfers. They would like ‘tax sovereignty,’ for their gated communities. They would like school vouchers as a practical subsidy when they send their children to private schools. Which they would do anyway, as the public school system (underfunded as it is) often appears to them as wanting in quality. They resent paying tax dollars to the central government which in turn sends money to their community as well as the poor inner city neighborhood so that schools can be build and kept going, so that teachers can be trained and well-qualified teachers can be employed (and paid) in both the affluent and the poor community.

‘Why not do it the simply way?’, they suggest. It seems easier to them if each community would tax people locally to pay for (say) schools and use the money as they see fit, instead of accepting the ‘irrationality’ of the ‘big detour’ where tax money goes to the Federal bureaucracy in the national capital and then comes back to them, with thousands of ‘bureaucratic strings’ attached.

The bureaucracy, they rightly claim, is expensive. It eats up a lot of money for its own upkeep. It is far away, out of touch with local realities and specific needs. It tends to set uniform rules which do not respect diversity. It undermines individuality and tends to create or bolster conformism. Last not least, safeguarding the right of the central authorities to collect taxes and decide on their use is the heritage of an old, pre-democratic era. The absolutist state, as the forerunner of today’s centralized state, ‘invented’ the bureaucracy, also as a tax collecting system. It certainly did not do so to take care of the people; it collected a surplus to be spend as the government saw fit. Most of the tax money was spent by the court as well as on wars that were expansionary in intent and undesired by the populace which paid the price.

It was in the 19th century that more modern, but as yet undemocratic governments like the Bismarck government in Germany, under the influence of conservative and liberal reformers, discovered ‘social policy’ as a safety valve, as an

indispensable means of keeping mounting social pressures under a lid of control.

To some extent that motivation was still at work when the New Deal programs were ushered in by the Roosevelt administration. But now, a new motivation was added. More democratic, less control-minded intellectuals and social thinkers, committed social workers, even artists and writers joined hands because they thought they could shape this 'crisis alleviation program' into something new, and different: an effort of the people, by the people, for the people to combat the distress and poverty of the many, to reduce the power of big money, to beautify America for all, creating progress and technological advance in the interest of all. In one word, the aim was to make possible for all a life in dignity, with real and assured access to food, clothing, shelter, culture, to a degree that never before had been possible.

This motivation proved to be the 'engine' driving the New Deal; it provided the energy, it furnished the dream, it is at the root of the myth of the New Deal that remained and for years influenced progressives in the United States and abroad.

This idealism proved important in the 1930s and 40s.

And still, the idea of a deep and decisive change brought about in American society proved to be illusionary. When the war against fascist Germany and militarist, expansionary, proto-fascist Japan ended, big business in America was stronger than ever. The people saw that the New Deal had accomplished a modernization of infrastructure that had benefited the creation of war industries and of jobs. Wages levels had risen; millions and millions of people who had experience extreme distress in the Great Depression no longer were subject to economically motivated despair. But with the end of the war, companies began to shed workers. Nothing had changed in a fundamental or basic sense with regard to the situation of the people. The overall effect which the New Deal had in the "everyday reality" (vie quotidienne) of most Americans, proved to be not too different from that of conservative 'Social policy' under Bismarck: it prevented a social crisis from exploding; it strengthened the state bureaucracy; it instituted programs that alleviated social ills in order to avoid more drastic changes.

The post-war ‘socially concerned’ state indeed drew on the conservative instead of the enthusiastic, grass-roots perception of what the New Deal of the ‘30s was meant to be.

We all know what extreme ‘instruments’ and ‘solutions’ this post-war state resorted to. In the U.S. and Canada, the children of Native American parents were taken away from their communities and transferred to institutions which were supposed to raise them as ‘well-adapted citizens’ of a modern society. The results were traumatic. Suicides were frequent. In Australia, the children of ‘aborigines’ were similarly abducted by the government and placed with foster parents. In Sweden, children not considered ‘normal’ and ‘well-adapted’ were taken away from their families for minor reasons and placed in state-custody. In Britain and West Germany, similar trends surfaced or became more pronounced. Alan Sillitoe has referred, in one of his stories, to the experience of a ‘Borstal boy’ struggling against state-enforced conformism. It was, to some extent, a craving for a deadening, conformist normalcy that was also reflected in the then-current debate on ‘anomy’ and deviant behavior carried on especially among American sociologists of the ‘40s and ‘50s (who of course were referring to Durckheim etc.). The state bureaucracy, in a way, embodied the values and thoughts of an educated middle-class that did not intend to make drastic changes with regard to the status quo but was interested in a smoothly running economy and a smoothly functioning state machinery. ‘Functionalism’ at the service of the status quo, certainly not in confrontation with big business (whose interests were respected) but equally aiming to keep ‘the masses’ quiet if not (in a mute, subdued way) ‘satisfied,’ this was the ‘rationale’ behind ‘welfare state policies.’

The idea of the state as a paternalistic ‘benefactor’ mellowing or (as they say) balancing out inequalities, is in disrepute these days when the neo-liberals are seen occupying the commanding heights of politics as well as running the media.

The old ‘New Dealers,’ the ‘Keynesians,’ the old-style ‘Social Democrats’ have grown old; they have dwindled and become a minority. Today’s educated (middle class) ‘elites’ have shed the historic consciousness of the Great Depression and with it, they

have to a large degree shed the concept of ‘responsibility’ for the well-being of the majority of the population that keeps struggling to make ends meet. As public servants and university-employed intellectuals living in relative material security, they have embraced an ethos of ‘responsibility’ for their own careers. Having made it, they have discovered the good side of life. The ‘underprivileged’ marginal groups sometimes continue to figure in their thinking about ‘social policy.’ But as far as the ‘broad majority’ of the population is concerned, one needs to keep the pressure on them. Everybody is responsible for his or her success or failure. In a fast changing, ‘globalized’ economy, the majority must not be allowed to lean back and become lazy. It is necessary to rescind their ‘privileges,’ deregulate the labor market, reduce the power of trade unions, demand and make legally possible greater ‘flexibility’ of the individual employee...

Of course, today’s educated middle-class ‘elites’ placed in the upper layers of the state bureaucracy are still embracing ‘functionalism’ just as much as their predecessors in the ‘welfare state bureaucracy’ did, in the ‘50s. But now, it is a functionalism pursued under different economic conditions and in the milieu of a different politico-economic rapport de forces. Now, it is a functionalism going against the grain of the old ‘welfare state.’

Decentralization, today, is a way for neo-liberal, anti-welfare state thinkers and politicians to discard responsibility for more and more ‘public duties’ and put the financial load of what formerly were federal programs on regional and local shoulders. This relieves the federal budget. It often puts the weight on weak shoulders. In the case of decentralized ‘welfare responsibilities,’ poor regions and poor communities which receive fewer or no transfers from richer regions and communities, will in turn increase the pressure on the poor in need of public support. Poorer regions and communities without access (or with drastically decreasing access) to federal funds will correspondingly neglect schools, theaters, the arts, let alone day care centers for the children of working mothers, rehabilitation programs for people injured on the job, health care efforts, and so on.

Decentralization, regionalization, local democracy is good if it gives people at every level more power to democratically decide and run their own affairs.

But we cannot accept as just and democratic that the people of affluent communities pay for their own schools, streets, theaters etc. out of their own pockets (their 'locally collected, locally spent' tax dollars) and let the unemployed in an inner city slum do the same for 'their' schools, streets, theaters... What is rightly criticized today is the alienation implied in having some bureaucrats up there and a few upper-echelon politicians out of touch with reality decide for us, the people, what is good for us. What we need are new democratic forms, instruments, and even institutions that allow for a 'mediation' between local (respectively regional) democratic autonomy of decision-making (also with regard to local taxes, local budgets, etc.) and compensatory justice that makes necessary transfers from rich communities to poor communities, from booming regions with a considerable gross regional product (and considerable tax income) to lagging regions and zones of distress. This is true on the regional scale, on the 'national' scale, and on the world-wide scale.

If we should agree on wanting an increase in democracy, accepting that democracy will not do without compensatory justice, this means that we must strive for increased local democracy, more meaningful local self-rule, while working to create the democratic means that will allow for democratic cooperation, coordination, and planning on the larger level, which includes of course the necessary and justly decided-on transfers. In speaking of 'increased democracy' what we mean is that local communities and regions should retain those economically and politically relevant powers that pertain primarily to themselves; they should not 'receive' them from 'above' as a federal government delegates certain rights and prerogatives to them, but from 'below', from the people, the population, that is. Local and regional democracy cannot solve all questions. As no man is an island, no region and certainly no community is autonomous in the sense of its being unaffected by what those outside it do. Rather, it has to rely on cooperation, on an exchange of ideas and material results of societal work. And others,

of course, will rely on it for certain ‘products’ of human labor and the human spirit.

What we wish for, is the invention, debate on the grass-roots level, critical assessment and eventual approval of democratic institutions of intercommunal, interregional, and international coordination, planning, and decision-making (also with regard to necessary and just transfers between rich and poor communities, rich and poor regions, rich and poor nations) that would replace centralist, etatist government bureaucracies as well as the present international organizations instituted from above (the W.T.O., the World Bank, the IMF, the UN as it now stands, as an organization dominated by a few governments, above all the U.S. government, where other governments like Germany and Japan are striving to enter the exclusive circle of Security Council members). Such new institutions should be a means to extend the say of the local and regional rank and file, instead of becoming newly created layers of control that assume a higher place in some hierarchy and relegate local as well as regional institutions to positions of secondary importance.

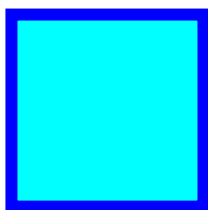
While today’s stratum of self-styled ‘professional politicians’ and bureaucrats pretending to act in the public service (the ‘classe politique’, as they are called) favor decentralization to bring about the ‘lean’ (that is to say, less costly) state at the service of big business and certainly in order to shed the responsibility for service up to now rendered by the federal government (as well as the cost this involves), we have seen that for the rich, the demand for local autonomy is a smokescreen for group egotism or ‘class egotism.’

Decentralization and pretended local self-rule will fail if they are nothing but an instrument to cut cost and privatize public responsibilities. There are tasks that, by and large, depend on cooperation. Take for instance, education. A university educated couple may well be able to educate a child at home, provided one parent works at best part-time. The well-off may be in a position to pay for expensive, supposedly good private schools. The task of schooling, for most people, can only be solved collectively, by way of cooperation... Maybe state schools indeed have been and still are

instruments of producing conformism and subordination in most children. Perhaps, in leaving the organization of a 'school system' not to bureaucrats but experimenting 'from below,' allowing for free association and all forms of cooperation, would be the better way. But of course poorer communities and poorer regions need transfers to pay for this...

It is not only private, profit-oriented business that can cause problems by trampling on the rights of citizens; municipal bureaucracies can also be a source of alienation and disempowerment.

Local grass roots activism for increased urban democracy means an effort for increased empowerment of citizens across the board. It means that the ordinary silent majority can discover its ability to speak up, and that the underprivileged can be encouraged and can themselves find the courage to challenge undue privilege and demand compensatory justice.



Municipal self-rule is not a value in itself.

We have finally to begin restructuring our democratic institutions, especially by making sure that ordinary people can join into the political decision-making process, with sufficient hope of making a difference.

We have to increase elements of direct democracy on all levels, starting with the local / regional level and starting (especially) with the sphere of economic activities.

Local self-determination, a lessening of alienating influences on our lives, must and will go hand in hand with regional, trans-regional, inter-national, and inter-continental cooperation, or they will not exist, at all.

What local democracy is about is not "collectivism", it is not conformism, it is not uniformity.

*Instead it is expressivity, intelligence, variety, choice.
It is what Marx called 'individuation', the fuller, more meaningful
developments of individual potentials or capacities.*

Historic fairness and human decency require that the project of democratic self-rule, of urban democracy, of regional self-determination (in other words, the democratic process of decentralization, where power is seen as belonging to the grass roots locally wherever problems that can be solved locally are to be dealt with) is not conceived as separate from questions of trans-regional, inter-national, and intercontinental responsibility and solidarity.

Local democracy is unthinkable and would not work without cooperation, mediation, compromise, coordination. Whether we will be subjugated to an imperial globalism of all-powerful corporations exerting their influence through international organizations and national governments dominated by them, or instead will succeed to strengthen civil society in our quest for more meaningful democratic involvement and participation of ALL, depends very much on our ability to strengthen local self-rule, urban and regional democracy by forging cooperative alliances the world over. For this,

- global cooperation by ordinary citizens and their grass-roots organizations,
 - the democratic evolution of institutions of self-rule on the local, regional, and national level that encourage direct influence by the people,
 - local, regional, and national bodies of democratic, rational (instead of bureaucratic) planning that draw up broad outlines of needs, resources production goals,
- are all essential. A networked world, linking computerized information, would make large planning bureaucracies obsolete. It has become possible to locally and regionally formulate pieces of rationally planned world-wide production based on need instead of the profit motive, and place them into a puzzle that as a whole makes sense if local, regional, and national bodies autonomously decide only those items of a plan where no outside input/output is seen as necessary and forward all data concerning the need of outside resources or goods and the ability to furnish resources or goods to any outside partners to all other potential partners, via the 'net,' as well as taking such data from others into consideration. The 'plan' as a broad assessment of needs, resources, productive capacities (including socially desirable and locally okayed input of working time) would be perpetually adapted, in flux, as information as to changing needs, changing resources, etc., came in. Today's supermarket scanning systems are a perfect example of how it is possible to keep minute-per-minute track of stock, of changing 'consumer preferences', wishes or needs, although supplemental communicative roads of citizen input as to needs, as to priorities, as to the desire to shape working conditions, determine working time, etc., must be invented. The California-based virtual companies that coordinate the production schedule of Asian subcontractors or partners *and* the incoming 'buy' list of supermarket and department store chains are another example of the communicative, computer-based and net-based technology available for democratic, rational, broadly sketching planning efforts coordinated worldwide on the basis of solidarity, compromise, and fair mediation of interests.

The best premise (if not precondition) for this is voluntary cooperation. It is friendliness. It is a desire to turn to the other, instead of combating him in a competitive game. This leaves enough room for withdrawal, being on your own, for necessity moments or hours, days or months of solitude.

The End of Statism (Étatisme)

We propose to overcome etatism by a worldwide network of affiliated communities and affiliated regions that will constitute modernized,

restructured civil society. Increased democracy and the development of a more civil society (the “civilization” or “Zivilisierung” of present-day society) will go hand in hand.

Democratic grass-roots assemblies (conceived as ‘fluid,’ ad hoc institutions of debate and decision-making) will decide predominantly local respectively predominantly regional affairs.

Inter-community, inter-regional, inter-national, and inter-continental democratic institutions formed by temporary delegates from lower level democratic bodies would take care of interregional, respectively international or intercontinental coordination as well as democratic, rational, and humane planning. They would be able to rely on information gathering systems supplying (past and up-to-date [realtime]) data on ongoing exchange processes, needs and resources. They would be able to draw on information and projections supplied both by the rank-and-file and by experts. Faced with scarcity, they would submit decisions regarding priorities to full discussion and decision-making by all citizens. All information available to temporary members of democratic bodies would always be available to all citizens and fed into the general discussion process with regard to social priorities.

Planning in a civil society

Etatist and bureaucratic societies exclude citizens from planning processes, turning them into a domain of experts that are under political control of a central government and of the top levels of the classe politique, that is, professional politicians with career interests and with attachments to privilege-awarding party ‘machines’ and private interest groups (usually factions of big business or, as it has become fashionable to say, ‘major players’ in the global economy). Ordinary citizens are expected to be content with the mere appearance or token concessions of citizens’ participation.

Planning has been decried as bureaucratic, as inhumane, and usually it is.

Planning in our times has taken on larger proportions than ever. With the disappearance of etatist, bureaucratic socialism, it has not disappeared at all. The economic weight of large corporations is vaster than ever. And every corporation draws up short-term and medium-term plans, as to asset management, as to production, as to marketing, as to cash flow, 'human resources,' etc.

Metropolitan areas draft land use plans, zoning plans, water conservancy plans, public transport development plans, budgetary plans, etc.

Regional plans exist. Federal governments draw up plan. France and Japan have been renowned for their broadly designed plans setting a frame of reference for fiscal policy, industrial policy, public research expenditures and so on. As General Butler pointed out, the US drafted a detailed 'general war plan' for nuclear war, listing (amongst other things) targets according to priority.

Many of these planning efforts are not in the interest of humanity, of civil society and its citizens. Almost all of these planning efforts are carried out without any possibility of the vast mass of citizens to influence the aims, tasks, and means of such a plan, let alone a possibility to discuss and decide in favor of alternatives. Planning as it is, is real, it is widespread in modern, liberal democratic market economies, and it is rightly loathed because it is a reflection of a situation where the ordinary citizen has become alienated and kept away from any control of the decision-making processes that shape the circumstances of his life.

Similarly, the vast mass of ordinary citizens have been alienated from property. For most ordinary citizens in today's rich, industrialized society, property has been reduced to 'personal belongings,' the things you can put into a few bags, some furniture and electric appliances, a partly-paid car, perhaps also a partly-paid or inherited house, with a small garden. Or a family farm, often highly indebted. Add to this a few shares, a bit of money in a bank account, in the case of the more successful among average citizens.

The vast amount of private property in our countries, industry, banks, insurance companies, trading corporations in anonymous hands, a few billionaires, but mostly, private bureaucracies, pension funds, mutual funds, you name it. Similar in some regard to robots with artificial intelligence that take over control over society from human

beings, in certain science fiction stories, these bureaucracies have taken on a life of their own, having been put under the command of an abstract principle, the pursuit of profit, disregarding both human needs and human happiness.

*To put human needs and the pursuit of happiness in the center again, we have to debunk these bureaucracies. The **de-bureaucratization** of society is a prerequisite of civil society, of increased democracy. The process of **democratic participation** that will come with increased local and regional democracy, will wrest control over humanly created productive and distributive capacities from bureaucracies and small groups making important decisions “behind closed doors” that affect all of us (locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally). And thus it will mean that this control is put it again in the hand of all citizens. We reject the old recipes of checking the power of big business, for instance the urge to “nationalize.” It will only lead to state bureaucracies, another form of alienation. We will demand a greater say for the people, all the citizens, in everything that concerns them. This will lead to real, concrete, immediate appropriation of the circumstances of our lives, it will lead to a real ability to shape them. It is not the bureaucracies, the managers of the pensions funds and mutual funds (for instance) that claim ‘ownership’ in the name of thousands and tens of thousands of shareholders, which have the right to control the future of all of us. It is we ourselves, all the citizens, including the many shareholders, who have that democratic right. And we shall take control, define and assess needs in urban reality, in rural reality, in plants and offices, taking stock of resources, of work time we want to put in, of our priorities as ‘consuming’ producers, producing ‘consumers’. We will do so, starting at the concrete level, the local level, starting from the grass roots. Who knows best than we locally how that local factory, warehouse, harbor should be operated? Who knows best than all of us (linked world-wide by internet based communication and connected to global pools of data collected by local communities) what our*

Should we not distrust large, global corporations and their planning activities? Should we not distrust large, powerful international organizations like the W.T.O., the IMF, or the World Bank? Should we not be loath to create new, inter-continental planning bureaucracies?

real needs are, what should be produced, and how, and when. And what exchanges are necessary, yes, indeed, vital. For all of us.

It is by cooperating locally and then reaching out, by planning locally and at the

same time seeing to it that regional, interregional, international and intercontinental coordination and exchange work, that a humane, more democratic, civil society is after all possible.

All this will go hand-in-hand with a more equal, equitable distribution of low-key (grass roots) power the world over. We will overcome the contradiction between enormous concentrations of power on the one side and vast powerless 'masses' of disempowered individuals on the other side that reigns today.

The antagonism of today's world have created conditions where we are still heading for catastrophes, above all those connected with global warming and possible nuclear war.

Let us work together, as free and determined citizens, to overcome this antagonism.

Let us work together, to overcome the irrationalities of economic processes that steer us from crisis to crisis, subjecting us, the majority, to the forces of a process that has gotten out of hand. The managers, the private and state bureaucracies, are not in control of the 'car' they pretend to be driving. It drives them; it has taken them hostage. In a humane world, a civil society, we have to establish control again, control from below, local, regional, grass-roots control. Democracy will stop to be merely formal, it will be increasingly real – or it will not be, at all.

THE CITIZENS THAT URBAN DEMOCRACY and SOCIETY-WIDE DEMOCRATIZATION DEPENDS UPON WILL NOT ONLY CHANGE THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES.

THEY ARE ABLE TO CHANGE, THEMSELVES.

BOTH PROCESS ARE NOT NECESSARILY COMPLETELY SYNCHRONIZED; ONE MAY TRACK THE OTHER, AT TIMES; IN OTHER MOMENT, THAT RELATIONSHIP MAY BE REVERSED.

THE FACT REMAINS THAT CHANGE, AN URGE TO CHANGE, HAS ALREADY SET IN.

Should we not prefer "gestion de proximité", local decision making regarding everything that can be decided locally? Information, and democratic coordination can link together all these local efforts, world-wide. Mediation, compromise, mutual help will go with it.

Debate:

Who is the "ordinary citizen"?

A Contribution by André Jadis

If the large body of mostly politically passive citizens who form the population is to play a greater direct role in the democratic management of their own affairs, it requires more than a readiness to participate in the voting process. It requires a new awareness that we need this participation because politics need not be the (almost) exclusive domain of professional politicians, because politics is about the public cause, the cause of the public, our cause. And despite all well-founded skepticism, all negative examples, all apathy resulting from discouraging experience, we have to be ready to defend the democratic proposition that we should be able to get involved. And that this (whether we do so or not) should make a difference, and eventually, in the long run, at least, will make a difference.

But who are “we”?

And aren't we “represented”?

As to whether we are represented, ask Senator McCain by whom we are actually represented. He has called the system of soft money (that often determines the chances of a candidate to win) as “legal corruption.”

But even if the issue of “legal corruption” and the undue influence of “big money” had been successfully addressed, the question remains, “Are we really to put existential questions of our life, sometimes of humanity's survival in the hands of representatives?” “Shouldn't we be heard ourselves, directly, unmistakably?” There may be decision-making processes that are long, complicated, and delicate. And it may be necessary to chose trustworthy delegates at times. But should not the final outcome of their deliberations, the set of alternatives proposed by groups of delegates, be again and again put before the population, for wide debate, consideration, even amendment (by

additional, direct grass-roots proposals), and finally, an ascertaining respectively rejecting vote?

In such votes, it will become clear who “we” are: people with different temperaments, different histories, leanings, preoccupations, and so on. But nevertheless, we are citizens able to debate in a respectful and peaceful manner the issues that we are putting (either directly, or through our delegates) on the table, in order to take the basic decisions ourselves. They are decisions that may be revised in a month or a year, or three years, or twenty years. Deciding according to our knowledge and conscience, we do not ever arrive at perfect, absolute, ‘final’ decisions. We may be influenced by particular interests, of our class, our group, our generation, our sex, even by points of view related to our cultural and ‘ethnic’ background. This is because “we, the people” are no homogenous mass. And still, we will have to learn to question our particular interests. We will have to learn to take a wider view, to think of the whole, mankind, the environment, the depletable (and often nearly depleted) resources of our limited, earthly universe.

Democratic participation of all citizens is a must, in any civil society worth its name.

It requires that we all contribute to the development of a democratic culture, of a truly civil society that balances interests of the individual and of the local community with interests of society, of the world, of mankind and of course, of the environment.

Can such interests that may be tentatively called “general interests” or the “common interests of the ordinary citizen” be respected by biased, uninformed individuals? Can they be defined?

And if yes, by whom – if not the ‘ordinary citizen’?

But what if the amorphous mass of ‘ordinary citizens’ fails to do this – if they fail to discover what are essential, instead of whimsical issues for them? Issues, that is, which are connected with their own well-being, their own ability to exercise their democratic rights, perhaps even with their or their children’s, grandchildren’s or grand-grandchildren’s survival, in a period of extreme environmental stress and accelerating ‘global warming’?

How are the media and their influence interrelated with the question of awareness, or of prejudice?

Do they not, more often than not, play a role as powerful mouthpieces of eminent particular interests?

Does not the fact that most media are owned or indirectly controlled by big business or (in some countries, in part, subject to the influence of one or more major political parties and their leadership) intervene with a role as potential furtherers of awareness and democratic commitment?

Does increased local (and regional) democracy therefore imply that we have to learn to set and enforce new, democratic rules that will make the media more genuine platforms of democratic debate within the communities where they are located?

What role does experience play?

Innocence and experience, William Blake knew, are in their own way intimately related, perhaps 'dialectically' related. We all have learned, and continue to learn by doing. Sometimes, even frequently, the experience is 'negative.' For trade union members trying to avert the closure of their plant, the lack of success they often experience under the given rapport de forces leads them most often to conclude that 'nothing can be done' in such a case. This 'lesson,' learned the hard way, will be inscribed into their consciousness and influence their future action under similar conditions. They tend to make an absolute lesson out of a specific case, a case rooted in a specific, historic situation. They tend to block the insight that historical situations, rapports de forces can change, and with them the chances for success.

Similarly, losing a long and extended strike often has a demoralizing influence. Strikers walk away from it with the feeling that it was all in vain, and that they will never do it again. Losing a minor strikes battle in a series of strikes, some of which were won, will leave a different impact. People with the one, rather depressing experience will find it hard to communicate with those having the other, better experience and to see the other person's point. On the other hand, people who have successfully sustained the work of "civic action groups" or "citizens' initiatives" (like the one against the projected nuclear power plant in Wyhl, Germany) will be telling a different story. They tend to believe that even today, under the given rapport of forces, civic action groups can attain certain goals if they persist over sometimes considerable periods of time and a base of popular support can be build and in the end, this necessary local and regional support is massive enough.

It is true enough that we carry with us, like a millstone around the neck, the collective memories of decades if not centuries studded with sometimes bloody defeats.

Democracy is a young phenomenon, in modern times. It did not fall into our lap. "We, the people" have paid the price, repeatedly. It is therefore perhaps understandable, in view of its presence shortcomings and deformations that many people are disillusioned with the democratic process and tend to abstain. Many of us rightly feel like Mr. Nader who pointed out that in the United States, the choice between the Democratic candidate, Al Gore and the Republican candidate, George W. Bush, was a choice between two candidates representing Corporate America, "big money", "big business". Perhaps they represent different factions, clothed in a more conservative or a more liberal robe, but both are essentially neo-liberal. Both represent a similar policy, despite certain divergences. A real alternative is lacking. The participation of the ordinary citizen is not unwanted, it is welcome if parties need local workers and local supporters carrying out the commands from above. But above and beyond this, real participation, an attempt to take the important decisions out of the hand of a party leadership and put it with the ordinary citizens, is nowhere welcome. The situation is certainly not different in France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Holland,

Belgium, or Britain, let alone in countries with weaker democratic traditions.

Experience can tell us we can achieve something. We can make a difference. But we have to try. And we must not give up at the first instance when a stumbling block is put before us as we attempt to open the road to wider, more meaningful democracy, a real say of you and me, of the 'ordinary citizen.'

The experience of the American colonialists in 1776 shows us that interfering with the interests of the mighty can be costly, it can be risky. This is as true today as ever it was, despite the fact that democracy triumphed in 1776. It was rescinded soon after, tailored to fit the interests of the propertied, male part of the American population. For women in America, it took more than a hundred years to draw equal with men. Formally equal, we are far from being able to decide our fate and wield the influence Corporate America is wielding. It is because they fear the risks involved in entering the limelight and speaking out freely on matters of public importance that many for us acquiesce to the status quo. It is because they are preoccupied with their duty to be breadwinners for their family that many lose sight of issues that should matter to them. In "12 Angry Men," the film based on a screenplay by a major American dramatist, one of the members of a jury deciding on the guilt of a youthful defendant says, "I let my boss do the supposing." What he is in fact saying, is, 'I'm a working man, I take orders and carry them out. It is not for me to think about the big (or even the smaller) questions of this society.'

It is experience that has told him he may run in trouble if he's doing "too much thinking", too independently. Many of us have lost the habit. We are thinking in the way first-graders speak in class, repeating their teacher's lesson. We repeat the thoughts the media have pre-formulated for us.

As with any exercise that gives the body back its elasticity, thinking and speaking need to be exercised in a way where constraints and restrictions (also fear and self-censureship) are overcome. They will thus regain their elasticity, their searching quality, their creative potential. Conscious experience of what we should be as human beings (thoughtful, responsible, speaking out in as clear a manner as possible, after having thought things over, again and again) will

provide us with opportunities to learn, to grow, individually. We can mutually give us strength and encouragement in that, as we listen to each other, and as we work together, for an increase of our democratic possibilities.

What role do socially committed groups of civil activism (in churches, in trade unions, in civil rights groups like the NAACP) play?

It is clear that no man is an island. Alone, we are often too weak. Joining hands, we find a certain strength in this union. But in the last analysis, we are alone. We are responsible for what we do or don't do. No one can duck for cover behind the shield of a group when it is a matter of his conscience asking him, "Was it right what you said? Was it right what you did?"

Groups can be seductive. They tend to exert group pressure. They tend to sway us, letting us give up against better judgement our view, our position, our insight.

But groups can also be a source of strength. A source of support, of consolation, of encouragement.

Within a group, we must never forget we are responsible for what we say and do, personally. We do not do a group a service by caving in, intellectually, and bowing to majority opinion for the sake of unity.

Maybe we are wrong. Maybe the time will come when we see it. But maybe we are right, a minority within the group is right, with regard to a certain question at a certain time in a certain place. This minority owes it to the group that it puts its position on the table.

Even while respecting a majority decision and supporting the group in practice, it should continue to put forward its arguments for a revised decision, perhaps a change of course. The democratic process is 'endless,' decisions are never 'final,' or beyond reappraisal and possible revision. In many instances, alternatives are innumerable, at least in theory. It is stupid to speak of a 'third way,' if the epithet third is to suggest that the supposedly 'middling course'

between two historically surpassed courses is the only pathway imaginable today... Their are always more possibilities... We should not lose our creative mind, our readiness for courageous democratic experiments, our awareness that the search for the new is an inherently humane urge: the new can, in fact, be better, more rational, more humane than the status quo, if we honestly work for it.

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