

Urban Democracy

An Internet Journal

No. 4, June 2001

ISSN 1617-8092

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.

The Lopsided “Advances” of “Globalization”

The Unbalanced Dynamics of “Modernization”

Late last month, the Protestant [Evangelical-Lutheran] Church of Germany joined the Farmers’ Association to issue a grave warning. At a joint meeting, the President of the Church in Hesse-Nassau, Mr. Peter Steinacker and the President of Hessian farmers organized in the Farmers’ Association, Mr. Baer, sharply criticized the neglect of rural regions. The farm crisis was a major factor leading to a considerable exodus from predominantly rural regions.

The problem that both men and both institutions focused on is a recurrent one, to be sure.

In the 1840s, it was Frederic Engels who noticed the crisis of the Scottish highlands, where large portions of the rural population were driven from the land by a kind of agricultural “restructuring.” (Big landowners were increasingly converting arable lands into pastures for the sheep that were giving them the wool sought by the flourishing woolen industries of the time.) Lands suddenly sparsely populated began to contrast industrial towns where newly formed slums mirrored the fact that masses of uprooted rural paupers were being crowded into sheds, barns,

huts, cottages, and quickly erected, sub-standard tenement houses.

Then, the sharpening contradiction between town and countryside mirrored a particular dynamics of the new, and forceful industrial capitalism which attracted rural populations to the hubs of industrial production, interfering with the relatively balanced distribution of populations on the national and continental territories of a pre-industrial age. In most pre-modern societies, population densities had mirrored different degrees of fruitfulness of the land, different intensities of its (labor-intensive) use. There were few exceptions to this rule: commercial and residential urban centers attracted populations to a certain degree, and so did proto-industrial regions where rural craftsmanship mingled with agricultural activities.

Of course, population movements and differences in population densities did not fall from the sky all of a sudden, in the 19th century. Roman antiquity had known large cities, first of all, the capital of the Empire, Rome. Most other important cities had played a mercantile role in the provision of armies and of Rome's ever increasing population. Certain regions, like Flanders, parts of the Normandie, or the Ile de France, the Bergische Land in Western Germany, probably much of Lombardy, had attracted people in search of employment in the ancien régime, as had the more important capitals (London, Paris, Naples, Vienna, even Berlin...) In France, the Conservatives of the 19th century decried the lowered birth rate and the depopulation of "backward" rural regions like the Auvergne, bypassed by Capitalist investors.

We do not think that Mr. Steinacker and Mr. Baer are merely echoing these conservative concerns. We do not think that they are preaching a return to the so-called good old times or that they are afraid of the "sinful ways" of big cities which were once believed by the Conservatives to "corrupt" uprooted rural newcomers.

We know the farm crisis is real.

In the 1920s and '30s it was real, too. And socially concerned writers and filmmakers responded to it. John Steinbeck described the plight of the Okies driven from their land by over-exploitation of the soil in a land perhaps not meant, for ecological reasons, to be used as wheat producing acreage. John Ford made a great film on the basis of Steinbeck's critical book. In Japan, socially concerned writers discovered the misfortunes suffered by the daughters of cash-squeezed peasants when they were practically being "sold" to the

textile mills. The Great Depression following the Black Friday of 1929 aggravated the farm crisis the world over.

In the 1970s, traveling down the Rhone valley in France, one could witness the defeat of the cooperative idea. Cooperatives formed by local farmers and wine growers were well-off; their buildings and trucks were shiny and new. We may assume that the contradiction between their well-kept premises and the run-down, often decrepit premises of many local wine growers reflected the triumph of commercial capital, of agri-business. There was money only in trade, not in production. The “cooperative” of the farmers or the “cooperative” of the wine growers had remained only formally theirs. In practice, it was a lucrative commercial establishment that was run with its own “success” in mind; the rural producers as “shareholders” of the cooperative did not count much. Maybe the bank that had made credit available counted most. Certainly the chain stores that the cooperative dealt with counted a lot.

I know of a milk processing cooperative of Westphalian farmers. Years ago a local farmer complained to me about the low price for milk they were paying him. And that he had to give them a considerable sum to become a member. That he had never really seen a return when they reported a profit. It all went into investment and reinvestment, sizable salaries for top-ranking managers, expansion, mergers and acquisitions. This farmers’ cooperative by now is a leading player in the regional agribusiness. It is well-known. As far as my private, subjective judgement is concerned, the quality of its products is as questionable as that of most industrially processed foods; in effect, it seems worse than that of much smaller enterprises, so I tend to shun its logo, its wares, buying ecologically produced milk instead, and certainly avoiding their butter. But economic success is on their side, not on the side of their small “competitors.” Certainly it is not on the side of the farmers who deliver their milk to this, by now, *giant* milk processing venture...

The farm crisis has had prolonged effects in the U.S.A., since the 1970s. Farm Management Corporations founded by banks that have given non-performing loans to farmers run an increasing percentage of American farms. It is poverty and the feeling of standing with their back to the wall that enhances conservative ideological values like “self-reliance.” Since they were homesteaders in the 1860s or ‘90s, many of these farmers have fought to survive by being largely self-reliant, parsimonious with respect to themselves and their kids, and above all hard-working. Cash squeezed by agricultural prizes all too often under pressure from wholesale buyers and commodity stock exchanges, they loathe the unholy load of taxes. They loathe the power of banks and the burden of loan repayments, fluctuating interest rates that (when rising sharply, at a particular turn of the business cycle) throw them out of business. Louis Malle made a beautifully humane documentary (in two installments, shot years apart) about farmers in Iowa, struck by the farm crisis.

The perhaps most interesting fact about it was that when he returned to the place where he shot the first film, it was the largest farmer who had gone broke. The one who had borrowed heavily to buy or lease additional acreage and new machinery. The one who had believed the slogans that you have to expand in order to survive. When farm prices went down (as a result of regional or national ‘overproduction,’ but also due to the pressure of imports on prices), he couldn’t face the increasing load of rising interest rates and the farm was auctioned off.

Not untypical in this, the farmer that had gone broke blamed “the Jewish banks” in New York. This naive reaction is not new. The underprivileged, in their frustration, develop aggressive tendencies that are instrumentalized by demagogues. Or that instinctively borrow from the ideological “ammunition box” of by-gone times. People instinctively “pious,” ill-educated, untrained to analyse their plight (as a well-understandable result of certain dynamics of their society), resort to naive explanations. The age-old anti-Jewish religious bias of “simple” people in small provincial towns and crisis-stricken villages was surfacing already in a new, vaguely anti-capitalist form in Europe, in the wake of the global economic crisis of 1929. The people seducible by fascism recognized what big capitalist interest groups, struggling to keep afloat, were doing to them by shifting the burden of the crisis on the shoulders of the weakest. But as small property owners, they shied away from a “left” answer. As a consequence, they made not “Corporate Germany” or “Corporate America” the target of their frustration and eventual attack, but “speculators” which they naively equated with “Jews.”

In Louis Malle’s film, again, it is “Jewish capital”, “Jewish bankers,” not bankers. I wonder whether the man denying debt relief to a cash-squeezed farmer was not a red-haired hometown boy from Iowa, responsible to some Chicago banker of Scotch or Italian descent...

The farm crisis in its different shapes is hitting North America as well as Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand as well as Argentine and South Africa and it is certainly hitting the so-called underdeveloped countries which depend on agricultural exports to earn the cash needed to service their debts while hunger may be endemic, as food grains are being replaced by cash crops targeted for export, thanks to the advice of the World Bank and similar organizations.

The farm crisis is not new. It is unavoidable because the gains in productivity possible in the industrial sector have never been possible in agriculture. It is into “new industries” that investment is flowing (if it is not soaked up by purely speculative investments or by marketing efforts). The oligopolistic corporations which control regional, national, and finally, “global” or “world” markets, accumulate fast enough to have the weight of politico-economic power on their

side. The fragmented ownership structure of the farm sector in the different regions and countries of the world is no match for them. Industrialists (the “industrial bloc,” as Gramsci called it) in the 19th and early 20th century were deeply interested in keeping the cost of living for their work force as low as possible. This tendency goes back even to the times of “commercial capitalism,” the time when big cities like London had to be supplied by imported grains in the late 17th and the 18th centuries. Then, in the early 19th century, with the fight over the “corn laws” in British Parliament, the old contradiction became as clearly visible as never before. Landowning social forces wanted high grain prices; industrialists wanted cheap imports, cheap grain prices. Of course, the masses sucked in by the new industrial conglomerations had to side with the latter, their wages being so miserably low, by and large. If you want to restrain wages, if you want to “restrain inflation,” as they say today, you have to make sure that agricultural prices are low. (Better subsidize farmers than allowing the prices of foodstuffs to rise drastically, wasn’t that the wisdom of the 1960s?) You have to keep the cost of living *of the working masses* as stable as possible. Better let the farm sector fall apart, better let certain industries fall apart, as well. Because to keep the cost of living down, you may also have to import cheap shoes for so-called “low income groups” from Taiwan, toys from Hong Kong, textiles from the People’s Republic of China, canned beans from starved Ethiopia, palm oil from here and bananas from there...

The logic of “short transport routes” that are preferable to long ones is not logical under capitalism. It follows an ecological way of thinking. If considerable profits are being realized by marketing goods produced no matter where, it doesn’t matter so much whether your shoes come from ten thousand miles away, while – as a Bostonian – you knew they were for decades produced solidly in Lynn, just a few miles away, practically in a suburb. The logic is simple: Third World labor is dirt cheap (and trade unions of course, usually are outlawed “out there”). Transport is cheap. A lot of money is to be made by trade. Who cares for the survival of a factory, of know-how, of pride in one’s job, in Lynn, Massachusetts?

The same is true of the farmer. Who cares if he will survive, economically? Who cares if his farm is auctioned off? Who cares if no buyer is found, if the soil is deemed second- or third-rate, if the location of the farm, in some “marginally located” state like Montana or South Dakota or Nebraska, is considered “strategically” untenable? Who cares if the people, finding no jobs in far-off cities, are marginalized and forced to find their niches of survival? Who cares for increasing rural poverty?

The logic of marginalization has given rise to the ‘militias’ in Idaho, Montana, Michigan, North Carolina...

The logic of marginalization has given rise to neo-fascist tendencies in Mecklenburg, Germany, or the Mezzogiorno, the South of Italy...

Regions drift apart.

The dynamics of capitalism *aggravates* the average social ills of neglect and poverty that are inherently a part of our societies *in the “by-passed” regions* while concentrating the ecologically and otherwise disastrous effects of overaccumulation and “sur-développement” *in the so-called “growth poles” and “axes of growth.”* [Noise pollution, traffic jams, disastrous densities, exploding land prices and exploding rent levels are among these effects of ‘over-development.’]

The crisis of agriculture and the exodus of inhabitants from stagnating and downward-spiraling regions can only be “cushioned” and “mellowed”, up to a point, by the decisive etatist intervention that Mr. Steinacker and Mr. Baer request (but probably will not get, or will only get in a half-hearted, compromising way) from the government coalition of the Social Democratic Party and Green Party in Germany. “Regionalpolitik” (regional policy piously but ineffectively meant to create comparable living conditions in all parts of the country) will suffice only if the decisive “engine” of development and the decisive “brake” of development do not remain in the control of a small number of “private investors,” that is to say, if the population, in a democratic effort, takes *control of its vital living conditions* into their own hands.

The strengthening of regional economic relationships and the enhancement of cooperation and rational, democratic coordination of investment efforts and productive efforts as well as the democratic “stock-keeping” of resources and analysis of needs which are all so desirable, both from an ecological and from a social point of view, run counter to the predominant trend of “globalization.” They come into conflict with the trend to push for the establishment of larger and more powerful “players” in “global markets,” currently playing with our future, and with the survival not only of the human race but perhaps of many more species.

The farm crisis and the regression of “backward rural regions” (but also of “rust belts”) are only a symptom of unbalanced, unhealthy, lop-sided, phenomenal economic growth balanced by equally phenomenal, catastrophic effects in the very fabric of our societies as well as the “household” of the earth.

The criticism leveled at the present German government by the Protestant church and the farmers’ association singles out symptoms, and articulates grievances in a way that is both straightforward and not clear enough, regarding

its very implications. It fails to identify the root cause, and the medicine it recommends is too mild and will prove, once again, inefficient.

[Check also a brief article in the German daily Frankfurter Rundschau of May 29, 2001 [p.35], entitled "Bauernverband und Kirche warnen vor Veroedung." It is significant that even the more open-minded media dedicate only such a small "note" to this important matter while at times allotting ten or twenty times this space to trivial affairs.]

Thank you, Herr Schroeder. The Debate about Europe is taken up by il signore Prodi...

The "classe politique" of Europe is at odds with each other. This is what the media tell us. What's it all about? The "structure" of the European Union at the moment where it is about to expand!

We can well guess what the quarrel is about. Influence. The weight of national government, especially those of Germany, France, Italy, Britain, and perhaps Spain. Alliances. Traces of hegemonism, of dominance achieved and defended. In view of all this, we may use Schroeders's words, as an apt comment, "These are not our problems." ["Das sind nicht unsere Probleme"]. Schroeder's remark originated in a different context, that of the police-state and often bloody repression in Turkey, by a government supposed to be "our partner." The Turkish and Kurdish populations may well be our partner, but hardly the government in Ankara. As for the Schroeder government, it did not fail to make itself a tacit accomplice of brutality against Kurds and trade unionists in Turkey, much in the manner practiced by the Kohl government or the EU.

*Do we want to identify with his quarrel about possible shifts of power in the structure of the European Union? No. For it is we the people, who are still largely excluded from taking EU decisions that **affect us**.*

*Prodi, we know, in his talk before the **Institut s'Études Politiques** last month, sided with Jospin.*

The first impression is that he sounds like a social-democrat, that he sounds progressive. Just like Lionel Jospin who recently told the prospective voters that we need "more economic and social solidarity" in the different countries of the European Union. Using similar rhetorics, Prodi demanded government activities meant to increase employment and initiatives that would help reduce poverty.

But which instrument to achieve these ends is being recommended?

A government of the economy [„Wirtschaftsregierung,“ a German daily translated this term]: *this is what Prodi has in mind...*

The executive of the European Union is to be strengthened, especially with regard to matters concerning the economy.

The sovereignty of the people of Europe has never been established, on the EU level. The European Parliament is largely a powerless advisory body. In economic affairs, the collaboration of European governments within the European Commission has boosted the influence and represented the interests of big business, and to some extent medium-sized businesses as well. Is this the "community's method of harmonic collaboration" that Prodi wants strengthened once again?

We may well assume that his aims are not that different from those of Berlusconi, Schroeder, Kohl, Blair, Thatcher, Aznazar, or Jospin. The laws of the EU that "harmonize" the conditions of the employment of capital tread already too heavily on the interests of the great majority of European populations.

None of the governments, not Schroeder's government, not Berlusconi's government, not Jospin's government, is challenging this "harmony"...

Don't be deceived, then, CITIZEN!

Berlusconi and the likes of him may address you as the "ordinary citizen" [the 'normal citizen', he recently said]. But they have only contempt for you, claiming you are too stupid or too tired to think. Claiming you don't want to be bothered by political debates. Claiming you just want to be entertained and "taken care of."

What they take care of, CITIZEN, is their own interests, those of their partners, their clients and "sponsors," their companies, and so on and so forth.

Their current disagreement about a "partial return of EU responsibilities" to the individual national governments (favored by

Schroeder and criticized by Prodi and Jospin) is a minor clash of interest.

Basically, they believe in the "brilliant future" of Corporate Europe.

A Longing For “Elites” – Is This the Fashion of The Day?

A longing for elites (“Sehnsucht nach Eliten”), this is what the Frankfurter Rundschau, a German daily, noticed as a trend more and more visible in our economy, inside the universities, and in the sphere of politics.

Thank you, Gerhard L. Endres, for alerting us.

For we think that this is indeed a dangerous and an undemocratic trend that pervades all the major parties, as well, including the Social Democrats. And it certainly is not a phenomenon exclusively observed in German society. It is trend may be as pronounced, in France. And elitist tendencies have a long and deeply rooted tradition in the Anglo-Saxon countries...

The meeting of 500 “important participants” at a symposium prepared by the Hanns-Schleyer-Foundation, the Heinz-Nixdorf-Foundation and the Technical University in Munich only mirrors the long-standing trend to arrange get-togethers of so-called competent scientists, responsible politicians, and business leaders. These get-togethers started in the Cold War era, perhaps soon after 1945, and they ever so slightly came to our attention since a right-wing believer in conspirations began to talk rubbish about what he called the Trilateral Commission in the early 70s. From a very dubious right-wing position, this insider of Corporate America began to attack Nelson Rockefeller (then an important figure of the Republican Party) and Mr. Kissinger.

How astonishing then, to find, again in the ‘70s, a small note in Le Monde referring to a meeting of the Trilateral Commission in New York. How astonishing to find small notes in Le Monde about travels by important C.G.T. members and members of the PCI, invited to give talks before the Foreign Affairs Council in New York – certainly Kissinger’s circus. How astonishing to read in a respectable Portuguese news magazine in the 70s the confession of officers who had participated in the Portuguese revolution that the coup against the old Salazarist élites had been conceived and approved at a meeting of the Bilderberg Club to which they had been invited. [The main concern was

to stop the expensive and unwinnable war in the African colonies which Caetano was not prepared to end. Its effects on the Portuguese army, and on the 'motherland' began to be counterproductive, in the view of those intending an end to the old dictatorship without certainly envisioning a momentary triumph of the left.]

The Bilderberg Club and its role in Portugal army coup d'état against the Caetano dictatorship should be made a legitimate object of scientific research and of the investigative efforts of concerned citizens both in Portugal and in Holland where Prince Bernhard played a political role in the club from the very beginning.

The principle of get-togethers of "members of the elites", of debates kept secret from the democratic press and the public, the principle of covert actions, of letting in selected members of the media on it, provided they are trustworthy and play according to the games laid down by those in power, all point to a deeply anti-democratic attitude. Mr. Kissinger has repeatedly praised secret democracy and the example of Metternich. Only recently has he defended the CIA-engineered putsch against the Allende government and has claimed that "order" is more relevant than "justice". We should keep in mind that the era that is linked to the name and politics of Count Metternich was an extremely anti-democratic and repressive era in Europe. We begin to suspect that for certain Western politicians, just as for the Fascists or the "Marxist-Leninists" of the Soviet bloc, the ends justified the means. Certain allusions of Mr. Karl-Heinz Schreiber seem to confirm rumors that the Western governments heavily intervened in the Post-Franco and the Post-Caetano transition processes on the Iberian peninsula. We have heard of considerable sums that have illegally gone to the parties of Felipe Gonzales and of Aznazar in Spain, and to the group that formed around Soares in Portugal. This disempowered the citizens; it meant that new political institutions and circles of those who would run the changing political machinery were installed from outside. "Elites"? What are elites? In West Germany, after the war, dozens of Fascist secret service men were asked by U.S. specialists to build the 'Organisation Gehlen' [the Gehlen organization, the forerunner of the Federal Information Service, a kind of West German CIA]. The Foreign Ministry of Adenauer's republic recruited diplomats looking back to a career in the Fascist diplomatic service. Hundreds if not

thousands of judges with a Fascist past soon were in office again. The same holds true of school teachers, high school teachers, university professors. The very industrialists who had sponsored the Fascist party and helped them win elections, were lined up before the tribunal in Nuremberg only if they were extreme cases. And even these extreme cases, the Krupps, Thyssens, Röchlings [the Kruthyröchs, as a poet wrote recently] were left off the hook all too soon. Elites? The bunch on top... Those with especially dirty hands, to allude to a saying of Sartre. Are we to look up to them? Do we want to lay, trustingly our fate in their hands? Allons enfants – to the butcher, they are waiting to slaughter you in Vietnam, in Iraq, in the Kosova war. If you are not simply in for a rip-off, if it's not that they just want to milk you, citizen. Great if you enjoy it. Just go along with it. Perhaps they have a prison warden's job for you, in Oranienburg, or the job of a guard at the ramp in Auschwitz.

Why do we look back to the Seventies, to the shady involvement of the Bilderberg club that is being reported by supposed eyewitnesses? Why do we look back to rumors about the Trilateral Commission, about the role of Kissinger, of the Foreign Affairs Council etc.? Because so much blood was spilled.

Andreotti, about to be dropped by his American "friends" revealed the existence of Gladio, kept secret for several decades.

Is the Bilderberg Club a phantasma?

The dead in Bologna, blown up by supposedly fascist bombs at a time when Mr. Kissinger and his clique abhorred the imminent "compromesso storico" in Italy, were they really blown up by Fascists? Or do we have, slowly, piece by little piece, more and more evidence that organs of the Italian state, including the military secret service, used neo-fascist tools to get this thing accomplished. The terror bombing in Bologna and other, similar acts. And all, evidently, with the support and at the behest of "American friends" eager to avert a Center-Left coalition including a dubiously mellowed PCI. Whose leading figures, Le Monde tells us, were invited to present their views in New York...

Let us face one fact. Conspirational theories usually are nonsense. But the hegemonial bloc in many Western countries, during the cold war era, undoubtedly resorted to strangely violent, covert,

undemocratic actions. They kept it secret as best they could. The leaks came later, by chance. Schreiber talked. Andreotti talked. The P2 affair came out into the open. The Gladio network came out into the open. The clandestine involvement of the Ebert-Foundation and Adenauer-Foundation in Spain and Portugal in the 70s is no longer merely rumored; evidence seems to be close at hand.

No, these were not silly conspiracies. This was tough, rational, well-planned, coordinated action. In the dark. Out of sight for the public. Irresponsible, antidemocratic, as dangerous as the “totalitarian danger” these men and women claimed to fight. Our elites don’t trust us, you see. They trust themselves and long to meet and exchange ideas, focus on possible irritations and minor contradictions between themselves early on; they want to coordinate and cooperate and jointly keep in control of what they call “globalization,” the affairs of the world, to the extent that they are economically and geo-strategically relevant to them.

That’s why you have the meetings in Davos, in Aspen, at the Bilderberg hotel in Amsterdam, or in Sydney, Seattle, Prague, you name the place.

Conspirations? No. Secret informal diplomacy and its preceding, preparational stages... A tête à tête of what used to be called the “ruling class”, but what is now a ridiculous circus of “clerks” meeting again and again, to give their worldly-wise advice of how to keep the sinking ship afloat: politicians, “trustworthy” journalists, army air force navy generals, bureaucrats, servile scientists, they are all there, and all are dancing to the pipe of “big money”, in other words, Corporate America, Corporate Japan, and the slowly evolving “Corporate Europe” that is replacing “Corporate France, Italy, Germany, Britain, etc.”

We, the people are elsewhere, fooled, excluded, lied to, bossed.

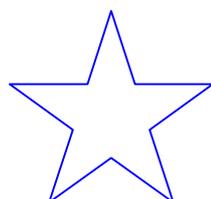
That’s why we are clamoring for democracy.

That’s why we want the democratic rhetoric put into practice.

Thank you – WE ARE THE ELITE. ALL OF US. ALL THESE SIX OR MORE BILLIONS OF HUMAN BEINGS ON EARTH. We are humble, and we can think. We are bossed, and we can be free.

But if I see these dull, conformist, mediocre figures playing the role of “a member of the elite,” I feel like observing the absurd comedy of our everyday lives...

The “elites” of “RealSoc[ialism]” were so lacking in phantasy and so mediocre; how can we believe that their Western twins will be spared their fate?



The Execution of Timothy McVeigh, known as the “Oklahoma City Bomber,” requires some comments

IS MR.CLEMENT AN ADVOCATE OF INCREASED URBAN AND REGIONAL DEMOCRACY?

This month, Mr. Clement, the Prime Minister (Governor, in US terms) of the populous and politically important German State of North Rhine Westphalia came forward with a proposal that advocates a strengthening of States’ rights at the expense of Federal authority. Basically, the idea of Mr. Clement is alright. We, too, argue for more local and regional power, in the name of increased direct democracy. If Mr. Clement maintains that more decision-making power should revert from the Federal government to the States, we are in agreement with him.

But Mr. Clement’s proposal has two decisive flaws.

We are not interested in regional fiefdoms while Mr. Clement is. He was among those in North Rhine Westphalia's governing Social Democratic Party who pushed hardest for a change in the statutes of his party that would take relative autonomy and decision-making power away from Social Democratic district committees, resulting in a centralization of intra-party decision-making power in Düsseldorf, the capital of the State. This strategy underlines his entire anti-grass roots tendency. Mr. Clement does not come forward with his proposal in order to strengthen the immediate potential of local and regional populations to intervene in politics; actually, for all we know, he may very well scoff at the ability of the average "ordinary citizen," the steelworker or maintenance man, the cleaning woman, shopkeeper, accountant or typist, to take informed decisions with regard to public affairs. He is not in favor of "gestion de proximité," the direct management of local or regional public affairs by those most concerned, the local or regional population.

If he is merely interested in building a power base in his own interest and that of a small inner circle of "important" people controlling the "party machine" in the State, this is not a step in the direction of increased democracy and increased citizens' participation. Quite the opposite is true.

Clever, half-educated people with a taste for money and power have made headlines as brilliant upstarts under Mr. Clement; top politicians formed "a private investment club" with a leading figure of a State-controlled bank. This is the kind of "professionalism" they advocate, in their distaste of a direct voice for the population, the citizens... But don't be deceived into

If Mr. Clement, in advocating increased States' rights, is merely interested in building a power base in his own interest and that of a small inner circle of "important" people controlling the "party machine" in the State, this is not a step in the direction of increased democracy and increased citizens' participation. Quite the opposite is true.

believing this is just a specialty of “promising young men” in the Social Democratic Party of Germany, rising slowly or quickly inside the party to positions where they hope to harvest the wages of submission and character deformation. What we are talking about is a social “type,” produced by typical mechanisms of our “modern” societies. You have to be clever [rather than rational], career-minded, and conformist, in order to make it to the top, in *any* institution. You don’t make it to the top, outside an institution. The institution has its rules that games are played by. All big political parties, in North America or Western Europe for instance, are such institutions. Parties, as institutions, depend on funds to survive and expand. And one of the most important sources of funds for any party is “big business.” It is this which makes the caste of politicians in all countries so suspect these days. A serious politician in the U.S. bluntly called the system of supplying “soft money” to the Republican Party and the Democratic Party *institutionalized corruption*. It’s influence peddling, it is a sort of “beefing up” of covert and open alliances between careerist “clerks” reaching for the top (that is, for as far as they can get, and they hardly ever become billionaires), and “big business.” This alliance seems rational, professionally warranted for many of those involved, for not all are cynics. They may argue, “What other way is there? You cannot govern against them...” It is their conformist “professionalism” that strengthens their allegiance to big business at the expense of the bulk of the voters, the bulk of the population (whether voting or abstaining, in sheer frustration...). It is this “professionalism” which makes them distrust direct democracy...

There is a second flaw apparent in Mr. Clement’s proposal, a flaw that is just as unacceptable to proponents of increased local and regional democracy.

We do not advocate the protection of particularist interests of special, privileged groups.

Mr. Clement is an outspoken advocate of neo-liberal politics, a representative of “Corporate Germany” and “Corporate Europe” within the Social Democratic Party of Germany.

Basically, he represents the same school of thought as Merkel, Schroeder, Blair, Clinton, Prodi. George W. Bush, Jospin or Chirac. These professional politicians have internalized the logic of “experts” that it is impossible to govern against “Big Business.” And therefore, they think it is better to anticipate their wishes and closely cooperate with them.

If Mr. Clement now challenges the unacceptable “balance” of power between the Federal government and the States, he should also

challenge the unacceptable “balance” of power that puts undemocratically conceived rulings of the W.T.O. or the European Commission above national law.

He should also challenge the undemocratic distribution of power that severely restricts fiscal authority of cities and that disempowers local citizens in favor of professional politicians.

He does none of this; he only demands more power for his state government in order to say, *Hey, we demand a greater share of taxes collected by the Federal government for projects dear to the government of this State.* Who will profit by Mr. Clement’s proposal? Regionally based corporations with close ties to Mr. Clement’s government, we suspect.

Who will suffer? Underprivileged people in poor, economically lagging states who will face further cutbacks in federal funds aiming to slightly alleviate their unacceptable situation.

No, sir, this is not what we understand by increased local and regional autonomy.

We intend to work for a greater say of local and regional populations in their own affairs, a re-written constitution that would curtail the power of the caste of politicians and of big business represented by them.

But we also know that not all questions debated locally and regionally are “purely local and/or regional affairs,” and concern only the citizens of this or that locality or region.

Production is social production, relying on exchange relations that often have been, for decades, if not centuries, unfair.

Allocation of investment occurred according to limited, particularistic, “private” profit considerations. It affected some towns and regions by excessive concentration of factories, offices, air ports, roads, etc. (the means of production; transport and other infrastructures) while starving other towns and regions of such investment.

Aware that the decisive source of such investment is social production, aware that the input that made possible affluent metropolitan regions like London and Paris and Frankfurt am Main stems from the productive contributions of regions both near and far away, and from the exploitation of natural resources often as far away as Katanga (with its copper and manganese), Alaska or Kuwait (with its oil), we also aim at greater compensatory justice.

We advocate a policy that would respect the right of local and regional populations to fair and decent living conditions in what are up to now underprivileged, neglected regions, cities, or parts of town.

Increased local and regional direct democracy implies a greater direct say in one's own affairs.

But it also implies a greater direct responsibility for your dispossessed or neglected "neighborly town or region," whether nearby or far away.

We don't like the local egotism of rich suburbs in the US where the affluent send their kids to expensive private schools and push for local or state tax reductions that rob public schools in underprivileged inner cities of urgently needed funds.

We don't particularly like the regional egotism of populist advocates of increased financial autonomy for rich regions, people like Mr. Teufel, the Prime Minister in Stuttgart, Mr. Stoiber, Prime Minister in Munich, Mr. Clement, Prime Minister in Düsseldorf, or their ideological relatives of the Lega Nord in Italy... Don't they understand the implicit dangers? The Yugoslav civil war to some extent was a result of this type of particularism. To some extent it was the result of the egotism of the elites in Zagreb and Ljubljana, the result of their rejection of transfer payments from these more industrialized regions to the poorer and industrially backward part of that country.

In Italy, it's the "rich" North which loathes to see part of the taxes collected here spent on the "mezzogiorno," the poorer South. It is

poverty and deprivation that nourished a social climate where the Mafia prospered. It is poverty and deprivation that have, again and again, nourished a climate of violence in some terribly neglected neighborhoods of large US cities.

In Germany, juvenile violence has been on the rise as a consequence of continued high levels of unemployment, disproportionately affecting populations in deindustrialized regions (steel towns, coal towns, cotton towns) where no new jobs were created or no jobs went to new people from outside. Affecting, in addition, certain underprivileged, untrained and underqualified segments of the population (segments which usually grew rapidly in the deindustrialized zones)... It is here where neglect of youngsters meets with the hopeless situation of adults. It is here where resentment, frustration, aggression against one's self and against others sometimes create an explosive mix. It is here where the hidden, "sleeping" heritage of racism comes out into the open, in some circles. Especially among ill-educated youngsters blaming youth unemployment and unemployment generally on the presence of "too many foreigners."

In this situation, it is irresponsible to give States increasing financial authority *in order to enable the richer states to curtail or entirely withhold transfer payments that would otherwise go to poorer states*. But this is exactly what Mr. Clement, Mr. Teufel, and Mr. Stoiber have in mind.

In Germany, the governments of States with dozens of thriving corporations, hundreds of sub-contractors, and considerable tax income loathe to see part of these tax funds spent in the now largely deindustrialized East.

No, thank you, Mr. Clement. Your proposal is not what we have in mind.

Increased local and regional direct democracy must go along with increased solidarity of the rank and file, on a more than local and regional, in fact, on a continental and even global scale.

We do not criticize the preeminence of W.T.O. rulings and rulings by the European Commission because we are nationalists, saying, "National law should always come first." We criticize the status quo because we are democrats, asking "What is the democratic

legitimation of these bodies? Is it sufficient? Are we, the people, the population of the different member states, not disempowered by bureaucrats at the service of Big Business?"

We are not radically anti-European.

We are relatively anti-European, wanting a union that is much more democratic and much less particularistic in the so-called defense of its interests vis-à-vis the Third World, but also vis-à-vis Russia and other parts of the Second World.

We are European if we think of the French revolution, its *droits [de l'homme et de la femme]*, its *human rights*... If we think of Buñuel and Artaud and their criticism of European arrogance, we say, *Look, European culture wasn't all that bad!* No, Alexander von Humboldt wasn't bad, Goya wasn't bad, Leonardo da Vinci wasn't bad.

And deep down in history, Empedokles, Socrates, Sallust weren't so bad either.

But so much of our proud European heritage is bloody, is perverse, is anti-humanistic, and stinks.

And so many important contributions of other cultures were forgotten, misrepresented, destroyed, ridiculed!

Thank you, Europe. The European Commission, European "Big Business," the dominant political parties of Europe, European politicians and the "experts" in league with them (and with the American BIG BROTHER) are all continuing in this vein. Thank you, thank you, we are not your sheep. We are not seeking a consensus with you. We are seeking democracy, the right of the population to think for itself and act for itself and discover a humane and warm-hearted solidarity with its brothers and sisters all over the world. Thank you. But we don't think that parsimonious Mr. Eichel (finance minister or Secretary of the Treasury of the government which governs the rich German society, with all its unequally distributed riches, its huge public debt and vast tax reductions for the affluent and big corporations, and its supposedly empty public coffers) is sharing the spirit we demand when he freezes the "aid" given to countries in the Third World to its already ridiculously low level. And we don't think Mr. Clement is an advocate of increased local and regional democracy when he aims at curtailing transfers to the local populations in poverty-stricken East German regions plagued

by scandalous levels of unemployment. They all had their jobs till 1989, didn't they, whatever else you can say against that perverse dictatorship of the GDR!

If we look in detail at Mr. Clements proposal, we are shocked.

If States gain the authority to set the level of say, property taxes or the inheritance tax, this will mean that a tendency will be strengthened that runs counter to the presently necessary tendency to "harmonize" tax levels in the European Community.

Individual German states will use low tax levels as an incentive to lure business and lure the rich.

This is not in the interest of the majority of populations in the diverse regions as it will sharpen competition among regions hoping to attract investment.

Increased local and regional democracy, increased possibilities for citizens to build humane societies demands coordination from below in order to confront "big business" everywhere with similar conditions, allowing for coordinated disincentives in regions with "over-investment" and similarly coordinated incentives in regions bypassed by investors. To correct past mistakes, citizens will perhaps learn that it is in their interest to make investment decisions a public affair, to be decided democratically, thus taking this important power out of the hands of shareholders, managers, and private owners.

The Clement proposal also suggests that a number of federal tasks should be made tasks of State governments. He includes the federal task of regional planning and of aiding bypassed regions.

In view of the particularistic interests betrayed by the Clement government, it is clear that such a change would be at the expense of crisis-stricken regions in East Germany, as well as the Saarland and Bremen.

We oppose this move.

If we ask for increased local and regional fiscal authority, we know this must go hand in hand with a mechanism of networked inter-regional planning and coordination, and with transfers from rich to poor regions.

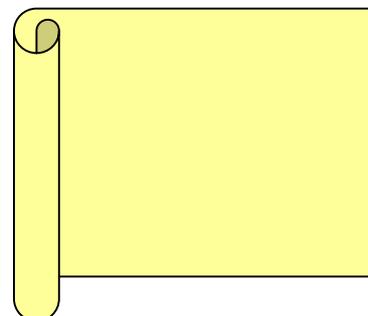
We propose to create a forum of international, democratic debate

**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.**

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.

Yes: We propose a forum of international, democratic debate...



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.

Recently, the Federal Parliament in Germany tried to deal somewhat more seriously with the grave question of often extreme abstentionism in Western democracies.

More often than not, only 60 percent, 50 percent, 40 or even 30 percent of the voters take part in important local, regional, or national elections. An "enquête" seemed necessary.

The question, to most of them, seems to be: "How can we safeguard the projected image of legitimacy of our power?" "How can we keep up democratic appearances? For we, the elites, are democratic elites, of course." The democratic process doesn't look so good if too many voters stay at home. In this was, interest in the safeguarding of the democratic process runs the risk of becoming interest in a marketing process. "How can we best market 'democracy' to keep a segment of the population interested in it?"

The Future of Civic Commitment / La future de l'engagement des citoyens / Zukunft des bürgerschaftlichen Engagements

We encourage readers to send us articles, long letters or short comments dealing with this topic (in English, French, or German).

Centralism? Regionalism? Which Way to Real Democracy?

We, a few debaters involved in this internet journal, know that municipal (and regional) democracy cannot but fail if society at large is not fully democratized.

*But we are convinced of one thing:
If people are awake,
if they discover they have a voice,
that they can 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.

However, local and regional democracy deserve to be seen in perspective. They can't flourish in isolation, based on the written principles of local or regional egotism.

*John Donne, the poet, noted that "no man is an island."
No community, no region is an island, either.*

The dialectical relationship between the "whole" and the "parts" must be reflected if we are to avoid "particularism".

*The human universe, humanity, the world and its survival may be threatened by big business, influential TNCs, hegemonial power... But if we counter that **by grass-roots initiatives and the demand for participatory democracy “right here” “where we live”**, we do not want to cut links with or deny responsibilities for “the rest of the world.”*

Let us, therefore, debate the contradiction between a tendency to centralize power, to streamline organizations and advocate “bigness”. And the contrary tendency to “decentralize.”

That we question bureaucratic centralism, no matter whether one is thinking of the Washington brand, the brand represented by the European Commission, or by etatist “socialism”, should be clear.

But very often, political strategies advocating “decentralization” and/or “regionalism” are not the thing we hope for, either.

Often they are not intended to give people locally and regionally a greater say. Often it is not an expression of the decision of central governments and major political parties to accept that we, the people, ask (or may be asking tomorrow) for a greater say, in our own affairs.

Often, decentralization undertaken “from above” is just a matter of a “divide and rule” game.

Or the expression of selfish interests of “big business” and the wealthy in boom regions who are increasingly unwilling to accept “transfer payments” to regions bypassed by Capitalist investors.

The ‘res publica’ (or public and common interest) is not something we should entrust a caste of ‘professional politicians’ with...

Public affairs
- the “res publica”,
the *choses publiques*,
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.

In an earlier issue we wrote:

A
suggestion
for change:

“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, the employment sector.”

We have to further reflect on this.
What does it imply – for you, me, every one ?

We republish here a key statement: it argues in favor of the “part” and the all the “parts” that form the “whole.”

Local self-determination! *And cooperation!*

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.

Individualism, today, is often the contrary of individuation. Millions of people thought of them as brandishing a particular, individual style when wearing Roebuck shoes, or whatever they were called. Millions think that a hair-style, or style of dressing, a particular car or kind of music they prefer constitutes their individuality and sets them apart from others. *If you enjoy these little diversion, alright. But don't forget there are millions like you. Don't forget the products that help you define your 'individual' style are produced by the millions. Those who devised and marketed them preformulated 'your' individual style. You have been largely passive in this, a productive, process. You have been active only as a 'consumer,' a buyer, somebody who is sporting these goods. Don't forget you have a productive bend, a creative potential, as well. It is in developing this potential that you become a full, mature, or rather, maturing and 'growing' individual.*

This society does not encourage and further the development of individuals. It encourages and furthers the development of a gullible mass of people: people usable as working people who function in the desires way (instead of thoughtful, self-confident, imaginative producers), people who will make willing, uncritical 'consumers' (instead of productive consumers, consuming producers), people who can be manipulated by the media and a caste of professional politicians.

Decades ago, an American sociologist called this type of social being (who thinks or may think, in fact, that he or she is 'very individualistic') the 'outer-directed personality.' For it, outside determination of thought, will, morality by authoritarian institutions (the church, school, family, army, the factory) has largely been superseded by instant impulses, kicks offered by the entertainment industry, by info-tainment, by more or less 'populist' or 'charismatic' politicians, fashioned after an image that has been drawn up by experts of modern mass psychology.

Both the outer directed personality of today's society and the inner-directed one that was prevalent in much of the 19th and the early 20th century, are 'ideal types.'

They do not (often) appear in pure form, it seems.

We all carry part of them in us, in greater or lesser proportions. But we also carry a creative urge in us, a desire to be free instead of alienated or manipulated, a capacity to think for ourselves and to act in our best interest while taking care not to disregard the best interest of our fellow men.

Who is the 'ordinary citizen', then?

Perhaps, today, more often than not he is somebody crazy to consume, trapped by the latest craze, impatient that he cannot afford so many things. Somebody hooked by the false promises of a society that has low quality shoes, shoddily produced cars, food produced under the most questionable circumstances, noisy neighborhoods and ugly houses available for almost unaffordable rents for most of us. Today this person, faced with the carrot and the stick of his or her invisible masters (masters invisible as the absentee landlord was frequently invisible for the tenants of another time or country) adapts to the rat-race of anti-cooperative 'competition', hoping to chance upon his own lucky streak while in fact what he finds is stress, burn-out, sometimes sickness, and even premature death.

But this same person, tomorrow, may crave something different, may opt for different goals: dignity, decent living and working conditions, a say in his own affairs, friendliness and cooperation among neighbors and work-mates.

THE CITIZENS THAT URBAN DEMOCRACY and SOCIETY-WIDE DEMOCRATIZATION DEPENDS UPON WILL NOT ONLY CHANGE THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES. THEY ARE ABLE TO CHANGE THEMSELVES. BOTH PROCESSES 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.

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