The Confederation as the Commune of Communes

Debbie Bookchin & Sixtine van Outryve

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Movement Horizon

Confederalism as a revolutionary strategy provides us with the means to build and organize a radically democratic and egalitarian society at scale.

In 1936, at the apex of the Spanish Revolution, hundreds of Spanish villages, towns, neighborhoods and factories had organized themselves into collectives in which local residents made decisions about labor and the distribution of resources.

For a splendid few months, these workers' and peasant assemblies and their committees took charge of nearly one third of Spain. They help to organize every aspect of political and social life: agricultural production, local administration, munitions and how to feed their people.

While each community had a great degree of autonomy, they also cooperated informally, sometimes holding general assemblies that covered more than 1,000 families across 15,000 square kilometers.

Like the French revolutionaries of the sectional assemblies of 1793 and the Paris Commune of 1871, which called for a nationwide Commune of Communes, the fiercely democratic anarchists of Spain understood that to maintain their autonomy, any decision-making body had to be directly accountable to the communities from which they derived their power.

These popular assemblies and their empowerment of ordinary people were coordinated through an important process: confederation, also known as confederalism. By coordinating collective will through a confederal council, the confederation allows for the organization of political life over a large territory and a large population in a directly democratic way.

Confederation (sometimes called co-federation or federation to avoid any association with the racist project of the Southern Confederacy) also presents a radically different logic from that of the nation-state. As a structure for organizing society that enables the non-sectarian co-existence of different races, ethnicities and religions, the confederation places itself in direct opposition to the nation-state's project of "unity" and homogeneity of the people.

The ability to organize direct democracy at scale, while preserving its fundamental principles of political equality and the accrual of popular power to every member of society, is the reason we must turn to confederalism as our revolutionary strategy.

The importance of confederalism to a grassroots democracy

Throughout modern history, revolutionary self-governing organizations and communities have bound together against the forces oppressing them using the model of confederation. Whether the revolutionary sectional assemblies forming the ancestor of the 1871 Paris Commune during the French Revolution, the Congress of Soviets during the early days of the 1917 Russian Revolution or today's democratic confederalism in the Kurdish-led northern Syrian region of Rojava, revolutionary movements have found in confederation both the strategic vehicle for their emancipation and the ability to realize the liberated institutions of self-rule to which they aspire at a large scale.

Under confederalism, a network of delegates are elected from popular assemblies, the face-to-face gatherings at which every member of a community is able to speak, propose, debate and deliberate about the issues facing their neighborhood and region. It allows these popular assemblies to connect with each other through a system of delegation: delegates who are strictly mandated to communicate the wishes of the assembly for which they speak — not to make decisions on their own — a critical distinction between confederalist organization and the traditional representative style of government that has dominated liberal democracies for the last two centuries.

Operating on the basis of recall, imperative mandates, accountability, constant supervision by the constituency and local autonomy, the confederal structure offers a way to organize directly democratic

assemblies at scale. The scaling up of these assemblies through the confederation is necessary in order to create a power capable of challenging, and eventually replacing the state.

Against the centralized nation-state, and its sidekick — representative democracy — as the only horizon of societal organization, the confederation of communes, or commune of communes, constitutes both the means and the end to build a democratic and egalitarian society.

The confederation as a means: establishing dual power

To understand how the confederation can form a real threat to the ruling class, one needs first to understand the strategy of social change in which it is embedded: the effort to create a situation of dual power. Dual power has a long history dating back to 1917 when Russian revolutionaries used the term to describe how the Petrograd Soviet and the provisional government shared power, a relationship that was unfortunately all but over by the October revolution of 1917, but that has gained increasing currency as a revolutionary theory.

Dual power proposes the strategy of creating a struggle for popular legitimacy between, on the one hand, capital and the state — i.e., the institutions of the ruling class — and on the other, the confederation of democratic and self-governed grassroots counter-institutions building popular power.

Discussing the politics of what he termed "libertarian municipalism" or "communalism," Murray Bookchin states that dual power "intends to create a situation in which the two powers — the municipal confederations and the nation-state — cannot coexist, and one must sooner or later displace the other. Moreover, it is a confluence of the means to achieve a rational society with the structure of that society, once it is achieved." Whether it concerns the neighborhood, the workplace, housing, food, childcare, or energy, communalism considers that "the creation of these dual power institutions must grow out of people's everyday experience and immediate needs — our needs for freedom from domination as well as for essential goods and services."

In order to reach a situation where municipalities can effectively challenge the state, one of the strategies of communalism, in certain times and places, consists of gaining political power over the municipality by running candidates for city councils. These candidates are endowed with a mandate from the democratic institutions that are embodied in the form of popular assemblies, thereby giving their electorally gained institutional power directly back to the assembled people. The elections are seen here as a means for the popular assembly to gain power and to achieve communal self-government, but never as an end in itself.

By themselves, these democratic popular assemblies will not be strong enough to build a counter-power able to confront the power of capitalism and the state, or to eventually replace them. To amass power and challenge the ruling class, these democratic institutions need to connect to each other through a directly democratic vehicle. In this way, they can share resources, practice solidarity, develop a common strategy and mutually reinforce each other.

The confederation becomes the umbrella democratic counter-institution that joins the forces of the multitude of democratic assemblies by pooling resources and knowledge, engaging in shared struggles, emboldening new ones, and creating a formidable dual power that could constitute the tipping point for a new democratic and egalitarian society.

The confederation as an end: making direct democracy possible

In its most radical manifestation, direct democracy stands for the direct exercise of public power by the people meeting, deliberating and deciding in popular assemblies. But how to ensure that the people

are still the source of political and economic decisions when they can no longer be physically assembled as a single mass to collectively make such decisions?

Because of the physical impossibility of holding the entirety of the people in one room to make decisions that would affect a larger territory, representative democracy has concluded that regular people should leave the entire task of policy-making to a class of professional politicians elected every few years. Against this elitist political choice, confederalism presents itself as a way to organize the political life of a large territory, ensuring that decisions remain the results of the will of local popular assemblies, even when these decisions must be coordinated over a large region.

In his essay "The Meaning of Confederalism," Bookchin locates confederalism as an important part of a communalist politics, a politics that embraces organizing at the municipal level as part of a social ecology framework. He defines the confederation as "a network of administrative councils whose members or delegates are elected from popular face-to-face democratic assemblies, in the various villages, towns, and even neighborhoods of large cities. The members of these confederal councils are strictly mandated, recallable, and responsible to the assemblies that choose them for the purpose of coordinating and administering the policies formulated by the assemblies themselves."

Delegates versus Representatives

This proposition of confederalism in the framework of communalism differs from the classical understanding of representation. Generically defined by Hannah Pitkin as the making present of that which is absent, representation has been interpreted since modern revolutions as enabling elected representatives to make present what they interpret to be the interests of their constituency — traditionally: white men holding property.

Contrary to this model in which professional rulers accrue all political power, communalist confederalism starts from the principle that when local popular assemblies are physically absent at the confederal level, their already-deliberated and decided views will be "made present" by delegates. In order to entitle delegates to make decisions in the name of their assemblies, and to hold them accountable, they are endowed with imperative and recallable mandates.

This means that the assembly grants a mandate to a chosen person empowered to represent specific decisions in the name of the assembly. If the delegate does not respect the terms of the mandate, they will be deprived of that power, and somebody else will be selected for this mission. In antithesis to traditional representative democracies, under confederalism, the delegate's role is administrative, not policymaking. It is confined to coordinating and executing the policies adopted by the local assemblies, ensuring that power flows from the bottom up.

In order to prevent delegates from capturing power, becoming career politicians and forming another type of government — a risk that haunts any revolutionary movement intending to give back power to the people — a communalist movement needs to empower people with the ability to collectively make decisions about their lives through a constant lived practice of decision-making.

This requires making the assemblies conscious that *they* are the ones entitled to legitimate decision-making power, so that they will be the ones to recall delegates if they overstep their mandates and the will of the assembly. In this way, the assembly structure abolishes the possibility of the ruling class of professional politicians that might emerge from large-scale policy-making unaccountable to the base.

The decisions of popular assemblies across larger territories are coordinated and collaborated upon, allowing for region-wide decisions on economic, environmental, human rights, and other issues within a structure in which the delegate must always return to the base for instruction.

Creating popular assemblies to gather the people so that they collectively form their will around political and economic matters — and allowing the delegate to represent the collective will of the assembly only through recallable and imperative mandates — makes policy-making the everyday task of everyone, rather than the profession of a few.

Importantly, the confederation also prevents the practice of local autonomy from exhibiting itself in a reactionary way. According to Bookchin, the interdependence of municipalities for satisfaction of their material needs and for the realization of common political goals means that the confederation also serves as a bulwark against parochialism and exclusivity. Indeed, it gives the confederation the power to rein in a community that tries to deny certain members their rights or harm the ecology of the region.

As Bookchin explains:

"This is not a denial of democracy but the assertion of a shared agreement by all to recognize civil rights and maintain the ecological integrity of a region. These rights and needs are not asserted so much by a confederal council as by the majority of the popular assemblies conceived as one large community that expresses its wishes through its confederal deputies. Thus policy-making still remains local, but its administration is vested in the confederal network as a whole. The confederation in effect is a Community of communities based on distinct human rights and ecological imperatives."

Confederal structures today

Confederal structures exist not only in the world of ideas; they have emerged throughout history in popular movements fighting the forces that try to dominate them. Two recent examples deserve special attention for the ways they are employing confederation to wage their struggles: democratic confederalism in Rojava, and the Assembly of Assemblies of the Yellow Vests in France. A third, which is in nascent form but represents an important hope for expanding confederalism in North America, is the Symbiosis project, which held its first congress in September 2019 in Detroit, Michigan.

While these examples of confederation are different in terms of context, nature, purpose, practice, preparation, strategy, and actors, they illustrate how the confederal model is critical for organizing popular assemblies, exercising direct democracy and creating a mass movement.

Democratic Confederalism in Rojava

In 2012, near the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, the Kurdish region of northern Syria declared autonomy and began to implement a series of revolutionary political changes that had already been in practice in the Kurdish regions of southeastern Turkey. In conformance with a 96-point Social Contract that would be ratified two years later, the Kurds established a society that aimed to be governed primarily by communes at the local level according to the principles of feminism, ecology, and grassroots democracy.

This political formation, known as Democratic Confederalism, inspired by the writings of Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, who was influenced by Bookchin, calls for a committee system in which, depending on the size of the village, city or town, every 30 to 400 households forms a "commune" that decides issues within its zone. Those communes in turn send delegates to the neighborhood council, which sends delegates to the district council — the city and its surrounding land council. Finally, delegates are sent to the Rojava-wide People's Council, which contains delegates from all seven of the regions that comprise Rojava, more formally known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

Every commune meeting is open to every resident, including young people who are also able to participate in discussions. In keeping with their commitment to non-sectarianism and multi-ethnicity, there are quotas for representation by minorities and women, with women co-chairing every administrative position, and members of the Arab, Syriac Christian, Turkmen, Yezidi and other minority communities holding positions of power.

This project in Rojava, which is nearly twice the size of Belgium and shares a border of about 400 kilometers with Turkey to its north, is under direct threat because of its radical challenge to the nation-state.

In January 2018, Turkey attacked Afrin, in the most western portion of Rojava, looting, kidnapping, and forcing 350,000 residents from their homes. Three days after a phone call with American President Donald Trump in early October 2019, Turkey again attacked Rojava, killing hundreds of civilians, bombing hospitals, food stuffs, infrastructure and again pushing more than 300,000 Kurds out of their homes, this time east of the Euphrates.

The invasion and ethnic cleansing perpetrated by Turkey is a grotesque reminder of how terrifying the Kurdish confederal system is to authoritarian regimes because of its radically different logic from that of the nation-state. The confederal structure — with its emphasis on diversity and its celebration of cultural heterogeneity — stands in direct opposition to the nation-state's project of unity and homogeneity of the people. This has been made clear by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who, like his predecessors, has for decades denied the Kurds their cultural identity and sees this democratic model as an existential threat.

The Kurds emphasize that democratic confederalism is not simply about making local structures more responsive to the needs of local people, important as that may be. Their goal is to change the very nature of politics as a participatory project done by anyone and everyone to empower people in every aspect of their lives. It includes a strong educational component because democratic confederalism is above all, the Kurds say, about changing the "mentality" of the individual struggling on their own in a world in which global capital reaches into every corner of life, to one of interdependence, reliance on the community and its networks to reshape what it means to be a free human being.

"The mentality of the state is that people in society cannot run things for themselves. ... That is the mentality that the state is constantly imposing on people. With our system in Rojava we show them that it's possible that society can do it for itself," explains Boze Mella, a member of the Derik council in Rojava. Against ferocious odds — terrorism, profound infrastructure challenges, medical supply shortages and ecological havoc wreaked by Turkey — democratic confederalism in Rojava made enviable strides in empowering people at the local level.

"Even [in the height of the war against the Islamic State] when we had nothing, we had hope," adds Sirin Ali, a co-chair of the Derik commune in the Qamishli Province of the Cizre Region. "The first thing we did was to create the communes and after that, the councils, to make people come back to humanity again."

Among the many challenges facing the region, the people of Rojava recognize that continuing to strengthen confederated face-to-face local control is one of the more significant ones. That means prioritizing the involvement of women and minorities, two groups that have been traditionally excluded from political power, and resisting any kind of political structure that tilts toward the formation of a centralized state.

But the future of the entire Rojava project is now at grave risk. Helping ensure the survival of this political and social structure — one of the most advanced expressions of radical confederal democracy in history — in the face of the recent Turkish onslaught must be central to anyone who considers themselves a feminist, progressive, or leftist.

The Gilets Jaunes' Assembly of Assemblies

Gilets Jaunes' "Assembly of Assemblies" in Montpellier, November, 2019. Photo by Sixtine van Outryve

Since November 17, 2018, Frane has been shaken by a new, unprecedented social movement. While revolutionary activity has historically taken place in Paris, whether during the French Revolution of 1789 or the Paris Commune of 1871, today rural towns are at the forefront of the movement.

To protest the latest attack by the government on the working class, hundreds of thousands of people put on yellow vests, block tollgates and roundabouts, and travel to Paris and major French cities every Saturday to demonstrate. With a critique of representative democracy and of the unaccountable political elite at its heart, the *Gilets Jaunes* or Yellow Vests have quickly prevented anybody from speaking in their name, despite the attempts of the government to co-opt the movement by demanding that the Gilets Jaunes designate spokespersons to negotiate.

While the national coordination of the movement happened largely through the Internet, the Gilets Jaunes of Commercy, a small rural town in Northeastern France that has garnered attention for its leaderless popular assembly, called for organizing across local groups of Gilets Jaunes in a new way: an Assembly of Assemblies.

The call was answered, and at the end of January 2019, approximately 75 delegates — generally one man and one woman from each local assembly, on the insistence of organizers — of local Gilets Jaunes assemblies found their way to Commercy. They met over the weekend, debated demands, strategy and perspective, reported on their local debates to other delegates, and discussed how to "organize the most democratically at all scale," that is, how to structure the Assembly of Assemblies. They paid close attention to the contour of their respective authority, and thereby, of the Assembly's. Indeed, delegates continuously reminded the Assembly of the limits of their mandates, or lack thereof, when anything close to a decision-making activity emerged.

This lack of clarity in the limits of each delegate's mandate quickly led to a major tension regarding the limits of the Assembly of Assemblies itself. On the one hand, participants wanted to respect the autonomy of local assemblies and refrain from speaking in their names without their authorization and, on the other, they wanted to see results from the coordination of Gilets Jaunes' delegates.

Strongly determined to not return home to their roundabouts empty-handed, delegates decided that what the Assembly of Assemblies, which they deem as "the most legitimate structure of the Gilets Jaunes," should issue "something" in order to make public the important work done in that space. They wanted to show the general public what they were doing and planning on doing, to provide local assemblies with a foundation of coordinated work and propositions to draw upon. Most of all, they wanted to invite the Gilets Jaunes to continue action and keep the movement going.

As not all delegates had mandates from their local assemblies to make decisions on official demands based on the survey that local groups participated in prior to the meeting, they settled on issuing a common call. They decided that only mandated delegates would co-sign the call; non-mandated ones

would submit it to their respective local groups for validation. Besides asking for social and economic justice and social rights, condemning repression, affirming their antiracist, antisexist and anti-homophobic commitments, they also called for participation in the general strikes on February 5 and December 5, 2019, and for the creation of popular assemblies everywhere.

This system of suspending decision-making until obtaining approval by local assemblies was later adopted as "consultative" or "indicative" voting, meaning that if a delegate thinks that making a decision oversteps the boundaries of their mandate, as the issue has not been discussed or decided on by their group, they give a vote indicating what they think their group will vote, and will later submit the proposition to their local assembly for ratification.

As summarized by one delegate to general applause: "The principle is that the roundabouts decide, but we must be able to tell what is the tendency of the Assembly." This rule was used during the three following Assemblies of Assemblies, in April in Saint-Nazaire, in June in Montceau-les Mines, and in November in Montpellier. Some 200, 650 and 500 participants respectively, including delegates from local groups and observers, gathered.

Both in smaller working groups and in general assembly, delegates discussed various topics throughout these Assemblies, such as the citizen's initiative referendum (RIC), local popular assemblies and municipal elections, the role and structure of the Assembly, People's Houses, repression, link with the population, future actions, and long-term strategy.

During these debates, the Assembly of Assemblies was consistent in its desire to build common political ground while at the same time debating and deciding issues democratically, avoiding bureaucratization and the centralization of power and preserving the local autonomy and diversity of Gilets Jaunes — a defining and essential feature of the movement. Nevertheless, fighting the tendency of each organization towards bureaucratization does not mean that they do not want the Assembly to last through time.

Indeed, not only do they attempt to create continuity by expanding on the previous assemblies' topics, but they also build upon what has been previously decided by giving authority to previous decisions made by the assemblies. However, the absence of a foundational constitutional document that would preserve some rules and decisions from the whim of a changing majority remains for some a factor of instability.

The Assembly of Assemblies is perceived by its participants as an opportunity to coordinate diverse Gilets Jaunes' efforts, to share the experience of engaging in new types of organization between more and less experimental groups and to mutually strengthen one another. It is also a place to build common messages, to collectively make propositions that local assemblies can draw upon and to design actions that can be carried out together in solidarity.

However, views differ. Some wish to create a coordinating structure with strong political orientations; others prefer to limit it to a platform of exchange, discussion, proposition and action. The question of the exact nature of the Assembly therefore remains an open one.

Whatever the answer to that question turns out to be, one thing is clear: for the Gilets Jaunes, the Assembly of Assemblies should not be a "government," a "structure that would overstep local groups" or a standardization of their functioning. The Assembly should respect the autonomy of local assemblies. Contrary to five-year elected and distant representatives, Gilets Jaunes delegates *know* their local groups: how they think, feel, react, debate, and ultimately, decide.

The delegates are part of their group's everyday social and political life and they are immersed in their praxis. What they "make present" to the Assembly of Assemblies is not their local group's "interests" to defend, but rather a way of thinking, debating and acting, and a common will that has emerged out of the continuous practice of collective deliberation and political action. The stakes are high: to create a democratic coordinating body of local assemblies while upholding the principles of direct democracy stemming from their critique of the representative system.

Symbiosis: towards a confederation of municipal movements in North America

From Olympia, Washington, to Jackson, Mississippi, by way of Cherán and Oaxaca in Mexico, numerous movements in North America have chosen the municipal level as a site for building popular counter-institutions. While their organizing focuses on political work at the local level, these movements take part in a similar strategy to create dual power between the institutions of capital and the state and popular power at a larger scale. It is a strategy that, to succeed, needs to join scattered local forces. Indeed, despite radically different local contexts, methods of organizations and actions, size and history, "each of these member organizations of Symbiosis illustrate a politics of dual power in action."

It is from this perspective that the collective Symbiosis held the "Congress of Municipal Movements in North America" from September 18–22, 2019 in Detroit, Michigan. The Congress was organized in a participatory way for two years by several municipalist organizers throughout North America. Undeniably, Symbiosis organizers have worked tirelessly to create a radical and new directly democratic structure, in the most directly democratic way.

With a preparatory conference for the congress, monthly referenda, and regular online town hall meetings, member organizations that integrated into Symbiosis could directly shape the nature and structure of the Congress that would assemble them.

The plan was to gather delegates from movements building real democracy across North America so that these movements could meet with one another, create deep connections and share lessons, experiences and resources. More importantly, the congress was intended to be the launching moment for a "continental confederation of local movements building dual power through radical democracy" — a permanent confederation whose structure would be determined by the movements themselves.

As such, this congress has only taken the first step towards the goal of creating a dual power situation. "Ultimately," states the invitation to the congress, "we will need such a confederation to carry our struggle beyond the local level. Ruling-class power is organized globally, and if democracy is to win, we must be organized at that scale as well."

And a first stepping stone it was. For three days, 150 people from across North America met, exchanged skills, knowledge, and shared feedback on their respective projects. They debated and took decisions on their common future together through successive breakout groups, a general assembly and social time. Issues discussed included the structure of the confederation – that they decided to call federation – in the form of a spokes council, a two-staged decision-making procedure based on an elaborate mix of consensus-building and qualified majority decision-making, points of unity, a skill-share group, the organization of an annual organizer exchange called "Symbiosis Summer," the creation of a group of "People of the Global Majority," a sortition system for administrative labor and an organizing team for the next congress.

While the final outcome of these organizational discussions at the congress need to be further fleshed out by various working groups and then adopted by local member organizations, its process hints at some of the challenges of building a confederation.

While the elaboration of the procedure for setting the agenda, conducting the debates, and making decisions was open to the online participation of all members of the participant organizations prior to the Congress, delegates quickly felt uncomfortable with a "too-procedural procedure" that they found did not allow for enough time for meeting each other, or for understanding why they were all there. It was, in their view, too oriented towards the details of a federation that did not yet exist.

What participants felt they needed, before making any decision, was to get to know each other. They needed to share their experiences and their reasons for coming, to discover commonalities and differences, and ultimately, to see if they could create trust among each other and if what they could build together was worth pursuing. In other words, they first needed to bring a "we" into existence, before thinking of the modalities to perpetuate it.

While the idea of confederating with other local movements to form a counter-power made sense for the member organizations — it was, after all, the reason for their presence — they needed a sense of community to commit to placing the limited time and energy they have left after their local organizing into the running of that federation.

This observation highlights one of the main tensions of direct democracy. On the one hand, direct democracy rests on face-to-face meeting, deliberation and decision-making in local popular assemblies. This requires that people know each other, recognize each other as equals and learn, progressively, how to think, hear and decide together.

On the other hand, the scaling up of direct democracy through confederation requires the delegation of the local assemblies' decisions to certain members through mechanisms that depersonalize power. This includes recall, imperative mandates and rotation to prevent the capture of power by professional representatives and, ultimately, the domination of the rulers over the ruled.

However, if depersonalization of delegated power and the constant rotation among delegates are conditions for having direct democracy at scale, how do we ensure that direct democracy — the creation of a collective assembly that has developed personal relations with each other, recognizes each other as equals and has learned how to make decisions together — is exercised at the confederal level?

While this tension can be more acute during constitutive moments of the confederation, as was in the case for the Symbiosis Congress, it nonetheless remains a fundamental question for movements to tackle as they adopt confederation as a vehicle for realizing their radically democratic revolutionary strategy.

Challenging the hegemony of the nation-state

At a time when the term ecocide no longer adequately captures the multitude of irreversible human insults to the earth's ecosystem, when every aspect of social relations is so utterly mediated by capital relations that it is almost prosaic to comment on it, and when the isolation and desperation experienced by large swaths of humanity has transitioned from lassitude to fascism in just a few years, we must address the issue of how to re-empower people and offer them a sense of true community and comradeship.

History teaches us that mutual aid, kinship and solidarity are strongest when people meet face-to-face in their communities, when together they can discuss, debate, and decide. They flourish when the architecture that supports direct democracy is institutionalized: be it the Athenian agora, the Paris Commune of 1871, anarchist Spain, Rojava, or Cherán and Chiapas, Mexico today.

It is time for the left to turn its attention to building those institutions that offer an ethical and structural terrain by which ordinary people — through assemblies, initially built around local issues and then confederating to form the kind of networks that can challenge the hegemony of the nation-state — can redeem our relationship with nature and each other and construct a bold, new, meaningful politics.

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