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Citizens’ Assemblies, From New England to Rojava

by Janet Biehl

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For a few hundred years now, town meetings have been the local government of towns in northern New England, including the state of Vermont, where I live. On the first Tuesday in March of every year, in all 240 towns, citizens come together at a local school or other large meeting place to make decisions for their community. It’s the last gasp of winter, and a sure sign that spring will come is the annual flowering of grassroots democracy.

In some important ways the town meetings are like the communes of Rojava. They are face-to-face democratic assemblies. They take place at the most local level: in Vermont the towns are mostly under 2500 people, the equivalent of villages in Rojava.

But they also differ. In Rojava, commune assemblies also exist in city neighborhoods. But in Vermont they are only in the towns--city neighborhoods do not have assemblies, except in the city of Burlington, where Murray Bookchin helped create them.

In Rojava, the communes are the basis of the whole self-government, and thus are vested with sovereign power. The communes share power, but they share it

horizontally. In Vermont, towns have sovereign power only for local matter; power is divided vertically, among the towns, the state of Vermont, and the federal government in Washington.

In Rojava communes meet frequently, because they are the basis of the society's democratic self-government. The town meetings assemble only once a year, although they may meet more often if they wish.

In Rojava, you have several tiers of confederal councils through which the communal assemblies collectively self-govern in broader areas. In the Vermont, the town meeting's don't confederate, except in loose nongovernmental associations.

In Rojava, decisions made by citizens in the communes move upward through the other levels. In Vermont, the town decisions don't, although towns can decide to make nonbinding resolutions about national or international issues if they choose to. Most famously, in 1982, more than 150 of the towns all voted jointly in favor of a freeze on nuclear weapons testing. Those decisions were all nonbinding—they had moral force but no legal force. Nonetheless their moral force was strong—it initiated a whole movement across the United States that culminated in a million-strong demonstration in New York.

We can trace the difference back to their origins. Rojava's communes are brand new; the town meetings are centuries old, older than the United States as a country. In Rojava, the communes and their confederations originated in Ocalan's Democratic Confederalism, and consciously modeled themselves on a specific program of assemblies in confederation. New England's town meetings date back to the first settlements in Massachusetts in the seventeenth century, by Puritans from England. Notably, Ocalan was influenced by Bookchin, who studied the town meetings closely and was inspired by them to create libertarian municipalism.

At the time Europe was undergoing the Reformation, a reaction against the corruption, nepotism, and decadence of the Roman Catholic Church. Protestantism was a reform movement, and there were different kinds of Protestantism-- some groups demanded more reform than others. The Puritans' version very extreme: they

rejected the validity of any ecclesiastical hierarchy at all, to mediate between the congregation of believers and god. That was very radical at the time.

The result was that Puritan congregations were an autonomous religious bodies, claiming that they and only they could interpret Scripture for themselves. Once they settled in New England after 1629, founding towns where none had existed before, that religious autonomy extended into the civil world in the form of political autonomy. The worshipping congregation became the governing town meeting. They might make regulations about their religion, but they passed laws about their communities.

In the years before the American Revolution, town meetings spread outside of New England, as far south as Charleston, South Carolina. And in the 1770s they were engines of revolutionary activity against British rule, especially the Boston town meeting. But after the U.S. gained independence, conservative forces carried out counterrevolution against the institutions of popular power. They ensured that in most places town meetings were replaced incorporated forms of municipal government, in which urban wards elected city councilors and mayors. Only northern New England towns held on to their democratic assemblies.

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They continue to meet, and we know a few things about them. They met on first Tuesday in March, starting in the early morning. A moderator runs the meeting. All adult citizens of a town can attend and participate.

The agenda consists of a variety of items, to which citizens can contribute in advance; the agenda is announced (“warned”) thirty days before the meeting. concrete items, like whether to repair a road or buy a new fire truck. The most compelling item is the town budget, inevitably the subject of much discussion, as how much a town spends on something in a given year reflects its priorities—it’s a moral document. When the discussion of a particular item is finished, the citizens vote by a show of hands, then move on to the next one. They also elect town officers, called the selectboard, who will oversee the execution of the decisions over the next year.

The townspeople sit on hard metal folding chairs (as I saw in Rojava!) that become uncomfortable, but they continue anyway, and the meeting usually last for three to four hours. Either during or after, they break for lunch—the townspeople have brought home-cooked food.

These features of town meeting are more or less the same as they were a century ago. And historically, we know what decisions they made, and what officers they elected, because they are recorded in the minutes in town records.

Stories about town meeting have passed into Vermont lore. They have been much admired--the philosopher Henry David Thoreau called town meeting “the true congress ... the most respectable one ever assembled in the United States.” At other times they have been mocked, by mainstream politicians, as the dithering of uneducated rural dolts. Murray Bookchin argued that they are a rare instance of assembly democracy, in the tradition of ancient Athens, and a tradition, in my opinion, that Rojava is in the process of joining.

But from a social science perspective, we don't know very much about town meetings historically, because no one really studied them. To know what happens in a town meeting, how the discussion runs, for example, you have to in person. But they all meet at the same time, and you can't divide yourself into 240 people.

So we don't know, for example, how many people attended--what proportion of the residents of town actually came to the meeting. How many of them spoke, and how many were silent? Did more of them speak when the meeting was small or large? When it was crowded or sparse? How often did a given speaker speak? How many women participated, and how many spoke, and how many were silent? How has any of this changed over time? Did wealthier communities' town meeting run differently from poorer communities? What about mixed communities—did the rich and educated speak more than the poor and less educated?

That is, we didn't know these things until recently. In 1970 a political science professor at a Vermont college decided to study this very important subject. He had grown up with the town meetings and was frustrated that conventional political

science didn't talk about town meetings when it talked about democracy. There wasn't even a single book dedicated to the subject.

In 1970 Frank Bryan had a brilliant idea. He assigned his students—maybe thirty or so-- the task of going to the meetings. Each one would sit with a notebook and count the number of people there, identify gender and perhaps something about SES. The students would write down when the meeting started and ended. When someone spoke, the student would write on the grid “bald man in plaid shirt.” “Brown-haired woman in green vest.” They would note the agenda item they spoke to, and how many times, and for how long. By the end of the meeting, the student would have all this data and bring it back to Frank Bryan. Being a social scientist, he would put all the data together and crunch the numbers and use regression analysis and all those things and come up with the information. He did from 1970 to 1998, and he published the results in his 2004 book *Real Democracy*, which I highly recommend.<sup>1</sup>

He filled in our knowledge. In 2004, on average, around 20 percent of the townspeople participated, which is a decent showing, for a daylong meeting. On average, out of every 100 participants, 44 spoke. The most talkative 10 percent made up 50 or 60 percent of the total speech acts. Usually they speak for a minute or two at a time. Some just state their opinion and that's it; others are more conversational, with dialogue among several. The smaller the number of people at the meeting, the more equally their speech was distributed among those present.<sup>2</sup>

Wealthier towns and poor towns don't differ much in meeting length or participation. Back in the eighteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson had written that in town meetings in Concord, Massachusetts, “the rich gave council, but the poor also; and moreover the just and the unjust.” The same is true today, Bryan found: within a given community, class status doesn't make a difference in participation.<sup>3</sup> Educated people and affluent don't dominate public talk. Everyone has opinions. In fact, participation goes up when there's a conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Bryan, *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151, 155, 154.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

As for women: on average, between 1970 and 1998, they made up 46 percent of attendance at town meetings. But they constituted only 36 percent of the citizens who spoke out and were responsible for only 28 percent of the acts of speech. They speak more in small towns than in larger ones.<sup>4</sup>

But Bryan also found that women's participation increased in those years. In 1970, the second wave of feminism was just getting under way, and many women must have felt that political participation was a men's zone. But by 1998, they attended in greater numbers than at the beginning, and they were much more talkative.

Still, even at 46 percent, women's participation exceeds the gender quota at Rojava; and at 46 percent it exceeds women's participation in other parts of government in the united state. From city councils to the government in Washington, women's participation is much lower. The U.S. Senate is only 20 percent women. Women's participation documents the importance of assembly democracy for women, and women for assembly democracy.

Towns had been meeting for centuries before Frank Bryan get the brilliant idea to record this kind of information. I hope Rojava doesn't wait that long to document its assemblies. What a grand project it would be for students at the Mesopotamian Academy in Qamislo to document participation in the Rojava communes! How useful that would be, for Rojava to know what's going on in its own society, and to be able to defend and explain the democratic self-government to outsiders.

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Beyond the numbers, the town assemblies of northern New England provide important experiences that transcend culture and will surely be shared by Rojava communes.

First of all, citizen assemblies are not only venues for political participation, they are also schools for political participation.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 189, 214, 226.

For many people, speaking in public is hard, even frightening. It's even more frightening in an assembly, because your acts of speech are connected to action—to voting, decision-making—which affects how people will live in your community. It's even more nerve-wracking for out-groups—women, minorities—who may feel self-conscious by virtue of their identity.

But in town meeting you learn to build up the courage to speak. You learn not to be afraid to inadvertently say something trivial or foolish, because everyone else does it from time to time. That gives people confidence, and they develop civic skills and even leadership skills.

A second experience: people in town meetings learn civility. It's easy to criticize someone you disagree with from afar—from the behind your computer over the internet, for example.

But in town meeting you sit down with people you disagree with, who are also your neighbors. On the Internet we can just skip the sites we don't agree with, but in town meeting you have to sit and listen to your neighbors express their points of view. That leads to better information, better understanding. You learn to express your disagreement in civil terms—as Bryan points out, in town meeting you forbearance. You learn not to insult them, or let your contempt or intolerance show, because that person is also your local dog-catcher or emergency medical technician or the parent of your child's best friend at school. Who knows, you may modify your view, or they may modify theirs after they listen to you. Or maybe you work out a way for both views to be accommodated.

But whatever the outcome, that process is healthier for the community as a whole. It teaches civic cooperation and sociability and trust. And it makes for better decisions.

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Murray Bookchin, who grew up in New York City, was always fascinated by urban processes, by the ways strangers are incorporated into community life, by the rich

texture of close-knit neighborhoods as well as towns and villages. He savored sociable discourse among people who live in the same place, in local networks, clubs, guilds, popular societies, associations, and especially cafés—even in neighborhood streets. Such sociability, he thought, was the nucleus of freedom: it provided a refuge from the homogenizing, bureaucratic forces of the state and capitalism and embodied the “material, cultural, and spiritual means to resist.”<sup>5</sup>

That’s why he wanted to revive the citizens’ assembly and multiply it, so that they existed not just in the towns of New England but in urban neighborhoods as well. By proliferating assemblies, then coordinating them in confederations against the centralized state, he said, we can decentralize power into viable community groups.

In most times of social upheaval, Bookchin wrote, “people have turned to assembly forms as a way of . . . taking control of their destiny. . . . Apparently, we have something at work here that has abiding reality. . . . Something in the human spirit . . . demands systems of governance based on face-to-face decision-making, a personalistic as well as a participatory politics. It is as though the need for community and communing . . . emanates from the human spirit itself.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Murray Bookchin, “The American Crisis II,” *Comment* 1, no. 5 (1980), p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Murray Bookchin, *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1986 ), p. 257.