

EVERYTHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS*

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In assembling these minutes, questions and answers we give to them, we are speaking for ourselves. We are seeking as members of the North Berkeley community the maximum possible power over our environment and hence over our lives. We take ourselves seriously enough to believe that our desires and ideas for fulfilling them are worth sharing with others in this Council.

-- NORTH BERKELEY RESIDENTS
FOR GENERALIZED SELF-MANAGEMENT

* BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

(I) PRACTICAL DIALOGUE AND ITS MISCARRIAGE:

Critical Minutes of the North Berkeley Neighborhood Council's Last Meeting.

The meeting was told that it existed and then declared open. Maps of Berkeley were passed around: people conversed about the psychogeography of Berkeley in its "good old days". A general discussion followed on the subject of neighborhood government. Tom Hunt, Zelda, and others spoke in favor of "neighborhood power": Mark Ludwig reported on the upcoming review of the city charter, and said that a plan for a neighborhood council system of government in Berkeley had been put before the Charter Review Committee. Rick Brown, in an attempt to subordinate the energies of the council to municipal authority, announced that the April Coalition was "for" neighborhood councils, and implied that if those present were to work for the coalition, the neighborhood councils would generously be given some power. An objection was raised to this by someone who said that the N.C.'s by definition could not be given power but must take it for their own. Tom Ward disputed Rick Brown's claim, stating that, in his discussions with Coalition members at a neighborhood meeting they were evasive about the question of neighborhood power. He then ascended into an abstract discussion about generalized self-management. But obviously some people were not familiar with this concept. Tom Hunt, for example, asserted that self-management had existed in North Berkeley for the last three years. This explains the fact that alienation has vanished from the lives of the residents of North Berkeley since about that time! Tom Ward challenged this, and Hunt responded by dismissing his attempt at theoretical clarification as a "sermon".

Another interruption was made and the interruptor was told to go through the chair. A confused altercation followed over whether "ideology" should be permitted in the meeting. "Ideology" was defined by some as any political orientation whatsoever, and was seen by many as equivalent to theory. The original interruptor then demanded that he be allowed to speak on the grounds that he had raised his hand ten times already without recognition. A woman told him she felt that he should have to wait fifty times since there were at least that many people present. the interruptor said that he considered this remark "Fascist" since it imposed an abstract (and thus repressive) equality on the meeting. General consternation broke out. Somebody in a brown suit began to fondle his reminiscences about the thirties, describing them as a time of "street-walkers" and few automobiles, when ideological lines were clear. It was suggested that the meeting disintegrate into "interest" groups to work on "separate" issues, that is, those proposed on the poster advertising the meeting and any others. An objection was raised to this on the grounds that these issues could not be separated. Reverend Sawyer, in an attempt to appease all sides in the dispute, and return peace to the discordant congregation, suggested that those "concerned" could form a separate workshop on "self-management". Rick Brown, aiming to label and thereby isolate those interested in neighborhood self-management, suggested that this workshop be called "the situationist committee". There was violent objection to this, so of course a vote was taken. After the vote, many people wanted to know what was being voted on. This was hurriedly "explained" and another vote

was taken. Confusion mounted. Several people continued to object, saying that they wanted the meeting to remain as a full assembly for a few more minutes. There were hysterical cries of "You lose! You lose!" from those who called the vote. Nonetheless, the meeting continued to fragment. Leaflets were distributed on various issues including the BARTD strip and open markets. Sign-up sheets were passed and some of those present actually formed groups and discussed their respective issues. The remainder of the crowd went their separate ways.

(II) ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS Arising Out of the Experience of the Last Meeting:

1. Do we need a chairman to protect us from interrupting each other, and to organize our communication for us? Is chairmanship going to be the sacrifice of one person or the pleasure of all?
2. Who should be able to call meetings of the council?
3. Do we want to remain a crowd (objects) led by leaders or become an assembly (subjects) conscious of our desires and engaging in a common project?
4. What shall be this common project? What do you want from a neighborhood council?
5. With regard to the 'issues' raised at the last meeting:

The Organization of Space in the Neighborhood

Housing -- Should the neighborhood council seek control over its space (territory)? Should it seek power to administer zoning and construction within its boundaries?

Traffic Control -- Should the N. C. be able to restrict automobile traffic and declare auto-free zones?

BARTD Strip -- (land appropriation) Should the N. C. aim at collectively owning land within the neighborhood and constructing collectively managed neighborhood facilities on these sites; to begin with, its own meeting place?

Political Orientation

Neighborhood Government -- Should the N. C. organize to take back more and more governing powers from the City Council, and promote the adoption of a system of neighborhood-council government in Berkeley in the upcoming City Charter review?

April Initiatives -- Should the N. C. support municipalization of P. G. & E. in Berkeley? In general, should the N. C. support any political groupings and initiatives outside its own, e. g. the April Coalition?

6. Other points:

Food Conspiracies -- Should the neighborhood council incorporate or collaborate with the local food conspiracy as a source of revenue and as a step toward gaining control over the basic conditions of life (means of production and distribution)?

Rent Control -- Should the N. C. attempt to assume more and more rent control powers over the residential property within its area?

Diffusion -- Should this N. C. take the initiative of diffusing information on the perspective of creating other N. C. 's in Berkeley and elsewhere? How should this diffusion be carried out?

Federation -- Should this N. C. organize liaison with other N. C. 's in Berkeley and consider coordinated action on matters of common interest?

Theory and Ideology -- Is there a difference between revolutionary theory and "revolutionary" ideology? Will ideology, "revolutionary" or otherwise, destroy the council? On the other hand, does the council need a theory of its own practice, a self-theory?

(III) SUGGESTIONS Concerning The Definition and Organization of Neighborhood Councils

1. Do We Need a Chairman?

If we choose we can learn to take care of ourselves directly, without the mediation of any policeman. This would mean: telling someone whom we are tired of hearing to shut-up; asserting ourselves and making ourselves heard when we want to be; becoming sensitive to each other and becoming selfish about what we want as a group; learning how not to impede our work as a group since such obstruction prevents each of us getting what he or she wants. The facade of politeness needs to give way to shameless transparency about our desires.

If communication is organized for us the result will be non-communication. A chairman, i. e. a higher authority, prevents us from talking to each other. If parliamentary ideologists and other city council lackeys wish to inject hierarchical relations into the council and attempt to mediate our desires we should not hesitate to expell them by any means necessary. We need no priests of dialogue. The chairman is the germ of the state in the microcosm of the assembly, the one who protects us from each other and provides for our general "welfare", a general welfare that often opposes us as individuals; opposes our particular welfare. Our incapacity to function without a chairman is our incapacity for self-management.

2. Who Should Call Meetings of This Council?

Anyone, so long as no assembly of the whole neighborhood has agreed on a process. The people who called the last meeting have no exclusive authority, no legitimacy, no sovereignty, no official status. Whoever monopolizes or tries to officialize the meetings, their organization, or the power to call them, usurps your right as a consultive and executive member of this council.

The "planning committee" which has previously made itself responsible for calling general meetings is not an elected body: it consists, in the words of one of its more regular members, of "whoever shows up". It is, therefore, in no way a constituted authority, and we do not acknowledge it as one: (we would not do so even if it was so "constituted"). The members of the planning committee do not represent our interests; they represent their own. We refuse representation by anyone; we might elect delegates, subject to immediate recall, to coordinate our activities with those of others, or to handle certain specific tasks. But we don't want anyone making decisions which affect us in our name. This applies to the calling of this meeting by we people who wrote this handout: for us to have recognized the "planning committee" as an authority restraining us from calling a meeting ourselves is already to have recognized them as the official representation of the neighborhood; to have gone through their "proper channels" is already to have recognized them as a bureaucracy; and to grant them exclusive right to the use of the name "North Berkeley Neighborhood Council" is already to make them the proprietors of the name of our power.

3. Crowd or Assembly? Led or Self-Managed?

A crowd, because it has no direction, is incapable of any self-organization and is capable only of dealing in fragments. Its dynamics usually waver between mass expression of frustration and a decorous display of receptivity. An assembly, on the other hand, is a coherent group formed around shared desires, in which the power of each individual is magnified. It is based on the totality of the individuals who compose it, who recognize their own subjectivity. (As in the sentence structure, the subject is the source of action upon the object, subjectivity is that quality of initiatory volition that belongs to the agent of any activity. Radical subjectivity knows itself to be the quality of this agent*,) In the assembly, the gratification of the collective egoism rests on the active egoism of each participant. Passivity and domination, those two reversible faces of power, cannot survive where the only rules of the game are passion and transparency. Power that is imposed or obeyed creates a politic of impotence. And in that game, everybody loses.

*Radical self-consciousness

4. What We Want From a Neighborhood Council

In general, what we want is this: that the neighborhood council, the neighborhood's assembly, become a power in its own terrain and re-own more and more power from the centralized city government bureaucracy, and that through this power, we begin to collectively reshape our immediate environment. Some of the specific possibilities we came up with can be found in section 5 and 6.

Becoming an assembly is a project in itself, a project that involves as many questions as the number of unsolved problems we face daily. What we want will be defined by the desire to organize our lives ourselves, which means refusing to choose among different "representatives" and developing active self-representation.

The first goal of this common project is the creation of an assembly that functions independently of the city apparatus, open to outside initiative only after close examination in open meeting. This would be the emergence of a growing local power parallel and opposed to that already in existence. This requires a conscious strategy for creating embryonic dual power in Berkeley -- expanding the power of the councils through an escalating series of planned encroachments. This parallel power is for us not a goal in itself, but only the process by which the absolute power of the N.C.'s might be realized.

If the phenomenon of N.C.'s multiplies throughout and beyond Berkeley, the N.B.N.C. could be the seed of generalized self-management, i.e. of the social revolution.

5. How Do We Organize Space and Time in Our Neighborhood?

At the last meeting, the issues of housing and traffic control were presented as immediate priorities for discussion by the neighborhood assembly. These concerns raise the following points: Should the N.C. seek control over its space (territory)? Should it seek power to administer zoning, construction and demolition within its boundaries? And, concerning the automotive pollution to which we are subjected, should the N.C. be able to restrict automobile traffic and declare auto-free zones? The question of the BART strip leads to the examination of land appropriation as a viable collective project: can we collectively own land within the neighborhood and construct collectively managed neighborhood facilities on these sites?

Housing

Controlling our space means choosing the environmental content of our collective experience. Zoning and construction, for example, can be administered better by those who are subject to it. What could be more natural?

The domination of rectilinear architecture on the quality of our daily lives is so immense that it appears almost invisible to its victims. Every ninety degree angle sets its own psychic limit.

Traffic

The restriction of automobile traffic can be the beginning of a rediscovery of street life. Travel on foot can do nothing but overturn mechanistic notions of distance and destination. The feeling of always being "in transit", always on the way to somewhere but never actually arriving, is alleviated somewhat by the speed with which we are transported from one place to the next. Harsh lines are reduced to a fleeting blur on the screen of a car window. And this is as much a part of the colonization of time and space as having to report five days a week to an eight to five job. Who is setting the clocks?

BARTD Strip

At present, it is still the contractors and political careerists who are deciding for us how we can utilize the BARTD strip. This is the extension, seemingly benign, of a centralization that is already too oppressive. When we leave our homes to our places of work we experience work time -- alienated time, and BARTD is its cybernetic sauce. (Transportation time is work itself.) More efficient organization of our alienation, with a free gift bonus.

A Neighborhood Council gaining further control over its own social space-time by holding property in the neighborhood opens many possibilities for creating collective facilities and services. We begin with a place-of-assembly. Isolated from each other by centralization, we move to create our own center.

From this point forward, it is a question of the limitations of our desires and imaginations, and of what we have the energy to create and sustain: a food conspiracy distribution depot organized for efficiency and convenience; a child-care center; greenhouses to grow our own vegetables; a community sauna bath; a block radio station; a neighborhood printing facility; a tool access center; a park; a neighborhood computer utility, etc. We would need to get the City Council to cede us the land area we need property-tax-free like other municipal facilities. Access to tools and technologies, and the learning of skills, becomes interesting once we are able to use them to reshape our own immediate environment.

6. Other Points

Rent Control

For a start, how much is it possible to control all aspects of our daily survival? Collective neighborhood revenue is drained out monthly to the bulging pockets of landlords and public utility "services", a regular reminder of our status as exploitable revenue rather than residents. This feudal model is the basis of all social institutions, and so used are we to signing and paying away our (human) wealth to our public "servants" and "protectors", that we retain it even in our own "counter" structures.

Food Conspiracy

The food conspiracy is severely hampered by lack of capital equipment and storage space, and yet it ties its own hands with a voluntarily self-imposed "solidarity" tax, that diverts its available financial resources into other, "more deserving" communities. The depth of this voluntary sacrificialism is one more measure of the space that exists between our professed (or rhetorical) needs, and their actual realization. Genuine solidarity (federated councils) and charity (left-wing christianity) are at opposite ends of the pole. Only a private appropriation of social wealth, in this case, "liberated space", can afford to be charitable; whereas a community of federated self-interest makes all social space the greatest private wealth of each individual.

Federation

Historically, federated organs of self-management have appeared again and again all over the world -- in Russia in 1905, ^{recently} and again in 1917, in Spain in 1936-37, in Hungary in 1956, and most/in Algeria in 1960, and in Chile in 1972. The form of organization most often created in the practice of self-management has been the Workers' and Neighborhood Councils (In Russian "soviet"). What has usually happened is that the workers in a given factory, transport system, telephone exchange, neighborhood, etc. formed a general assembly which then elected committees of delegates to handle specific tasks, including self-defense and coordination with other enterprises which had also been seized by the workers. Operations were then re-started under the workers' management and in accord with the needs defined by them -- obviously, during a revolutionary crisis, the most important sections would be production of food, weapons, electrical power, and the continued provision of medical care, telecommunications, and transportation services.

In Berkeley, and elsewhere, neighborhood councils could federate by mandating immediately revocable delegates to coordinate their interests with those of other councils, through a central coordinating council. This central body would have no power over the base assemblies and would only serve to synchronize the self-interests of the local councils. This form of organization is clearly in opposition to all forms of parliamentary representation, democratic centralism, as well as bourgeois "democracy"; in which the representatives are not immediately revocable and have power over their constituency, making decisions "in their name".

Ideology vs. Theory

Ideology is the generic term used in Marx's theory and revolutionary theory in general for systems of false consciousness. At the heart of every ideology, "revolutionary" and reactionary alike, lies a reification, an essential inversion of subject and object. Ideology always comes before practice whereas theory grows out of practice. (The historical practice of self-management emerged spontaneously and its theory (councilist theory) grew out of these experiences).

Theory is always of and about practice -- practice is its only validation, as it needs to know only what it does. Ideology veils, contradicts, and obstructs (represses) practice -- it lies about its practice. For the "separate ideas" (separate from practice) of ideology always serves a separate power. Separate power is power apart and thus over individuals. Every ideology is the theoretical self-defense of a ruling power, or of a power that seeks to rule, such as a "revolutionary" party. (cf. Minutes: Rick Brown's practice at the last meeting).

Political Orientation (separated for special emphasis from question #5)

A coherent practice of neighborhood government cannot be conceived without an adequate political orientation. To base this orientation on political demands and petitions means accepting the City Council's grasp and control over the N. C. 's and their incorporation into the rest of the centralized bureaucracy.

For the above-mentioned purpose, (incorporation), the April Coalition is there. The City Council knows, already, that the only way to continue to monopolize people's power is to divert their interest. The April Coalition is the mas-carade of radical action, its officialising seal, the last chance of a form of organization that failed long ago.

Those like Tom Hunt who base their claims to practicality on success in separate crisis situations, each time reacting to an impending threat to the neighborhood, and lapsing into disorganization in-between, and who maintain that questions of the organization of the neighborhood council are "abstract", not only invert abstract and concrete but fail to recognize in the council's power the unity, the unified means, to the solution of all these separate crises.

NORTH BERKELEY RESIDENTS FOR GENERALIZED
SELF-MANAGEMENT