

Machover on Collective Decision-Making

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Moshe Machover, one of the founders of the Israeli Socialist Organization (Matzpen) back in the 1960s, is a specialist in the mathematics of voting. He has recently written a very valuable paper on Collective Decision-Making and Supervision in a Communist Society.” He explains his use of the term “communist” as follows:

“with the collapse of ‘official communism’, there has been a growing tendency to reclaim the former terms and use them in their older sense as in the Communist Manifesto and Marx’s Critique of the Gotha Programme. I am happy to go along with this semantic shift and actively promote it.”

His analysis should be of interest to all those concerned with imagining the political institutions of a good society. (Warning: the paper is heavy going, even apart from the technical appendix.) Among the views on political vision that Machover criticizes are mine (as I’ve spelled them out here and here). I think he makes some very good points and advances our thinking on these matters, but I think he goes awry in at least one important respect in his critique of nested councils (or “pyramidal councils,” as he calls them). This is not the place for a full response to him, but let me just briefly indicate where we disagree. Machover asks whether grass-roots councils (or cells) “ought to be determined geographically or functionally.” The only reasonable answer, he says,

“is that both kinds are needed: geographically-based councils are essential for dealing with local issues, and functionally-based cells for self-management of production and of other sectorial functions that are not anchored in a person’s specific place of residence. So the council pyramid must consist – at least in its lower tiers – of two kinds of council. A person belonging to cells of both kinds will then have two votes, one in each cell. But a citizen who is not active in production (due to illness or old age), or who works alone or in a very small group, can only have one vote. This is inconsistent with the principle of equal suffrage.”

But this objection seems to me misguided. Imagine an organization that has members of both sexes. Each member of the organization gets one vote. The women in the organization, however, establish a women’s caucus. Within the caucus, each woman gets a vote. But this doesn’t mean that women have twice the political power of men in the organization (because they get two votes each, while men get only one). The caucus may lobby and even make demands on the organization, but the women’s caucus is not the decision-making body for the organization. So there is no departure from the principle of equal suffrage. Consider as well the case of a public school teacher in the United States today. The teacher is a member of a union, and votes within the union; the union negotiates with the city government on the terms of its contract. The teacher also lives in the city and so gets a vote as a resident of the city. Does the teacher thus have two votes? The local soccer club — each of whose members get a vote in the club — asks the town government for a place to play. Are the soccer club members who are also residents of the town getting two votes? That seems a very misleading way of looking at things. Obviously matters would be different if we said that in some national legislature there would be X representatives representing people as citizens and Y representatives representing people as producers (or as playing some other functional role). In this

case, different citizens would have different voting power. (Machover develops a technical definition of voting power, but here I am just using it in its intuitive sense.) But there is no extra vote involved when a worker is part of a workers' council. Some of what the council does will be simply internal to the work place (like a vote on what color the wall should be painted). On such matters, only the people involved — those who work in the work place — should have any say. Some of what the council decides will involve the rest of society — as when the members of a work place determine how much they want to produce of a particular output. But they don't decide the economic plan; they are only deciding what they want to propose to society (like the teachers voting on what they want to ask for in their contract or the women's caucus voting on what demands they wish to make of the larger organization). Moreover, if having a vote both as a producer and as a citizen were really undemocratic, then Machover's solution wouldn't eliminate the problem. He proposes that alongside the council structure, there be a second legislative body, chosen on a national basis. But since everybody would have equal representation in this second body, the overall number of votes per person would still be unequal. (If X had two votes to Y's one vote in the council structure, and X and Y each had one vote in the national legislature, then X would have three votes to Y's two.) Let me re-emphasize, however, that despite my disagreements, I think Machover's paper makes an important contribution to the discussion of decision-making in a good society and I highly recommend it.