

An Overview of Decentralism

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Source: *The Good Society*, 1998, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1998), pp. 23-25

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20710896>

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An Overview of Decentralism

Kirkpatrick Sale

I know that there are some of you out there who are wondering how two speakers with such disparate views of decentralism as John McClaughry and I can be occupying the same stage and talking about the same subject—as colleagues. But I am afraid that such people are victims of what I would call the flat-earth delusion of politics. That’s when you see all political thought on a straight line, with Left over here and Right over there:

LEFT ----- RIGHT

But as you all know, we’ve given up the idea of a flat earth—most of us have, anyway—and the appropriate way to look at politics today is with a round-earth perspective. In that, you see, the Left makes up one hemisphere and the Right the other.

And the important thing about it is that, at the poles, the Left and the Right are not so far apart—because at one pole you have the authoritarians of both camps, the Stalinist Left and the Hitlerian Right, for example, and there’s not much to choose between them; then down in the middle, along the equator you have the squishy middle-ground liberal-moderate types of both Left and Right, far apart; and at the other pole you have the antiauthoritarians, the decentralists of all stripes, anti-big government, antistatist, communitarian, the anarchocommunalists and communitarians and communards and anarchists on the Left, and the libertarians and Jeffersonians and individualists on the Right, and they’re really not so far apart.

That is why John and I are here together tonight. Because I am a decentralist of the Left and he is a decentralist of the Right, and on most things, in most ways, we agree. I remember when we first got together as trustees of the Schumacher Society he sent me one of those Johnny Hart cartoon strips, you know, those little cavemen always hanging around rocks—“B.C.,” it’s called—and this one showed one caveman saying, “Can you stand it that everyone’s so happy?” “No,” says the other, leaning on a rock. “Well, then,” says the first, “let’s start a government.” Exactly. We had plenty of common ground there.

Let me start by suggesting some of the things that decentralists generally agree on, whatever part of the round earth they come from.

First, big is bad—the corollary of Schumacher’s small is beautiful. The centralized state, particularly the mass-society state of the

20th century, is inherently a failure: it is authoritarian and anti-liberty, imposing checks and laws on all individual actions; it is hierarchical and arbitrary, with power at the top and subservience for the great majority below; it is bureaucratic in order to function at all, but

it functions poorly nonetheless because bureaucracies are always inefficient and clumsy and self-perpetuating; it is undemocratic, because it is too big to allow direct face-to-face decision making and substitutes various forms of representation, all of which take power from the individual.

I am reminded here of a story that Leopold Kohr, the great decentralist economist, used to tell, about going to Lichtenstein and wanting to visit the Prime Minister of the country. He went to the castle, rang the bell, and the man who answered the door and ushered him in, whom he assumed to be a servant, turned out to be the Prime Minister himself. And when they were seated in his office, chat-

ting, the phone rang and the minister answered, saying, “Government.” You see? With a tiny country like that government is always there, always responsive, always able to answer the phone and take care of your problem.

But to continue with what we agree upon, we decentralists, about why big government is bad . . . it is dangerous, inevitably dangerous, because it favors war, welcomes war—war is the health of the state, as Randolph Bourne put it—and is not afraid to use its citizens as cannon fodder; and it is technological, continually amassing more and more complicated technology of the kind that increases its power and control over citizens, increases its ability to centralize all authority. In my book, *Human Scale*, which is certainly appropriate to this gathering, and some copies of which I am told are available somewhere around here, I have a chapter called “The Law of Government Size.” It is lengthy, but it’s easy enough to reduce its lesson to a few words: “Economic and social misery increases in direct proportion to the size and power of the central government of a nation or state.” Among the many historical proofs of this is one of my favorites, having to do with the German people. When they were divided into dozens of little principalities and duchies and kingdoms and sovereign cities, from about the 12th century to the 19th, they engaged in fewer wars than any other peoples of Europe: they were so small attacks by them were few and feeble enough, and so small

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attacks on them by larger powers were seen as useless. But when the German people were united and formed into a state of 25 million people and 70,000 square miles, it almost immediately embarked on wars against the other European powers, conquered territories in Africa and the Pacific, and ultimately instigated two devastating world wars within the space of thirty years.

Enough, then, about big government—that is the place where all decentralists begin, the common ground for all the rest of our shared understanding.

The next, following, point of agreement is that power should be diffused, and to the lowest level possible—which means to a bioregional level, and beyond that to a community level, a neighborhood level, a family level, an individual level. Nothing should be decided at any level beyond that where the people affected get to have their say and participate in carrying it out. Following from that, as a next point of agreement, is that the community is the most important human institution in the life of the species—the small, place-based community, where each member is known to every other. It is primarily there that power should reside—social, economic, political, whatever.

And finally, also following, liberty is not the daughter of order but the mother. In a true decentralist society, freedom comes first, upon which are then built the needs and obligations of individuals one to another, and thus the order and harmony of the community and the society at large. Liberty is the mother of order.

Now having said all that, I am obliged to confront the question of where we decentralists stand today—together, communalist Left and libertarian Right. But we both must recognize that this is, without question, the Age of Authoritarianism. And even if the most egregious forms of that have, for the moment, been subdued except in the smaller states of Asia and Africa, it is still true that the 20th century is the era of the large and powerful nation-state, a condition only made worse by the fact that it is also the era of the global corporation, superpowerful entities that have all the characteristics of the state, except any vestige of responsibility, and operate with their own free-wheeling authoritarian ways. Yes, what we face today, in both political and economic spheres, is Authoritarianism Triumphant.

And yet—and yet—these are facts: Decentralism is the basic human condition; decentralism is the historic norm for human societies; decentralism is deeply in the American tradition; and, despite everything, decentralism is alive and well today. I want to expand briefly on each of those points.

1. Decentralism is the basic human condition. The community is the oldest human institution, found absolutely everywhere throughout the world in all kinds of societies. As Rene Dubos has pointed out, more than 100 billion human beings have lived on earth since the late Paleolithic period, and “the immense majority of them have spent their entire life as members of very small groups . . . rarely of more than a few hundred persons.” Indeed, he believes that the need

for community has lasted so long that it is encoded in our genes, a part of our makeup, so that “modern man still has a biological need to be part of a group”—a small group, the community, the village, the tribe.

2. Decentralism is the historic norm, the underlying system by which people live even where there arises, from time to time, those centralizing empires that historians like to focus on and pretend are the principal systems of humankind. Empires are infrequent, do not last long, and are sparsely located. Yes, there was a Greek empire, for example, but it lasted effectively for less than twenty years; the real story of Greece is long centuries of decentralization, each city-republic with its own constitution, its own social life and cultural peculiarities, hundreds of separate communities that created the Hellenic civilization that is still a marvel of the world. Even in the belly of the large nation-states of today, even in this Age of Authoritarianism, there is an underlying current of separation, of localism, of regionalism, of tribalism. On every occasion when the power of the state is dissipated—in revolutions, for example—the power of localism is reasserted, sometimes in the form of militias and warring bands, sometimes spontaneous popular councils, sometimes regional independence movements, but always giving expression to a spirit of decentralism that does not die.

3. Decentralism is deeply American, from the anti-state Puritans, through the communalistic Quakers and Mennonites and religious sects, and on to the original colonies, independent bodies protective of their special differences and characters. A unified state did eventually arise, the product of powerful banking and mercantile forces desiring centralized authority—and helped along even by Thomas Jefferson, who made the United States twice its original size even as he kept talking about the value of “small republics”—but even then the contrary forces were powerful, too. Emerson and Whitman and Thoreau gave voice to the old New England traditions of town-meeting democracy and parish rule; Utopians and communards like Lysander Spooner, Benjamin Tucker, and Josiah Warren gave voice to the yearning for community control and villages free from outside interference; the emancipation movement, the women’s rights movement, and the populist movement all were impelled by a decentralist anti-statism throughout the 19th century.

In the 20th century that tradition continued with the Country Life movement and other communal impulses; with Lewis Mumford and the original Regional Plan Association, devoted to a resurgence of regionalism; with the Southern Agrarians, determined separatists explicitly, and eloquently, opposed to the national government and its economic hegemony; with the various organizations and movements we now call “the Sixties,” attempting to redress the balance of power even against the most potent government in the world.

4. And it continues even now, it is alive and well in this country and around the world. I cannot say it is a dominant mode, anywhere, but I can point to all those ineradicable threads to be seen throughout the American scene: the wonderful bioregional movement, for

example, with representatives in all parts of the continent, holding its seventh biennial congress this year; the resurgent Indian tribal societies and organizations for tribal culture; the growth of worker-owned firms from 1600 twenty years ago to more than 10,000 today; the phenomenon of local cooperatives, numbering 47,000 in 1995, up from 18,000 in 1975; the spread of such schemes as community land trusts (100 of them today, at least) and community-supported agriculture outfits (some 450 today) and local farmers' markets (an estimated 3,000); the burgeoning of the intentional commune movement, now with more than 500 members. All of this is evidence that this great tradition, this basic human impulse, is still to be found in America, no matter how autocratic a power it has become.

And in the rest of the world, as well. Separatism, of course, is a powerful force in almost every land, famously in Canada, Spain, Italy, France, and virtually everywhere in Africa, existing in a hundred splinter movements and "independence" parties and groupings wherever you look. Yugoslavia, in its sad way, is evidence of the power of tribalism, of separatism actually in the hands of the thugs, the worst sort of face this tendency could have but not denying its deep resonance; the disintegration of the Soviet Union is another, somewhat more benign. A handful of recent books has attested to the decentralist sweep abroad: Hans Magnus Ensenberger has called it a Civil War in all advanced societies; Samuel Huntington finds a Clash of Nations both between and within modern states; Benjamin Barber's *Jihad versus McWorld* is an account of how fundamentalist

and other local movements are working to undermine Western hegemony and the power of states in thrall to it; Robert Kaplan's *Ends of the Earth* details the collapse of government throughout Africa, Asia, and the Middle East; and Noviko Hama, in *Disintegrating Europe* predicts "a giant patchwork of 100 or more city-states" in Europe "within the next twenty years, in which cultural and national difference, divergences and identities are asserted and maintained, and the brief experiment in federalism is abandoned."

There is the picture for you, there is the reality of the world: of the power, the eternal, resurgent, inevitable power of decentralism. Let it fill your hearts; let it guide our deliberations this weekend.

Now of course that doesn't mean that I am telling you decentralism necessarily will prevail, considering all the stark force of the nation-state to prevent its triumph. I am telling you, however, that it can triumph—it should triumph—for the sake of the earth and all its species, including the human, it must triumph. We here must help build that movement so that it someday prevails—starting now, this weekend, starting right here. Think locally, act locally, think locally, live locally—it is, really, our only hope.

Kirkpatrick Sale is the author of several books including Human Scale and Rebels against the Future. This essay is drawn from his keynote remarks at the E.F. Schumacher Society Decentralist Conference, June 28–30, 1996, Williams College, Williamstown, MA.

The Great Transformation

Vincent Ostrom

We confront many basic puzzles about the human condition that challenge those who seek the Good Society. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, for example, anticipated the withering away of the state and the creation of a society in which "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" ([1848] 1967, 105). In light of several successful revolutionary movements in which the Communist Party achieved sufficient control of the instrumentalities of state power to achieve the transformation of society, as expounded by Marx and Engels, none of these efforts have successfully achieved their version of the Good Society.

The course of history is a reflection of continuing interaction among human efforts, processes, and achievements in ways that human beings cannot fully know. But we can conjecture. Innovations are possible. New knowledge gives rise to new potentials that could not have been anticipated in the absence of that

knowledge and its technological possibilities. Advances in new knowledge and technological potentials yield obsolescence in prior knowledge and previous technological achievements. Truly long-term comprehensive planning is an impossibility. The most that human beings can hope to achieve in anticipating future patterns of development is subject to limited time horizons.

If human beings cannot anticipate the long-term future course of events and efforts to plan for the future are subject to serious limits, we confront a serious dilemma. Time horizons of a decade or at most two or three decades are inadequate for a biological species that is required to confront the conditions of life across multitudes of generations, centuries, and millennia extending indefinitely into the future. If we recognize that human beings are artisans who are capable of crafting their own future, perhaps there are basic patterns of transformation in cultural evolution that enable us to understand how such patterns of transformation are likely to manifest them-