

Left and Right

An Introduction to Decentralism

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Throughout human history, there has been a persistent yearning among ordinary peoples to live under comprehensible social, political, and economic conditions that afforded them shared customs and memories, agreed-upon standards of right behavior, recognized status, security against brigandage and invasion, and reasonable prospects for achieving economic security.

For millennia, the most promising route to this happy condition was incorporation into a larger, centrally controlled entity that offered security and profitable commerce, at the price of political subjection and taxation. Hence, the subjection and incorporation of Gaulish tribes into the Roman Empire, the entrance of the mini-kingdoms of Dark Age England into the unified nation of Alfred; the creation by independent cantons and colonies of Switzerland and the United States; and the submission of Indian principalities into the empires of Akbar and Victoria.

But equally persistent has been backlash against centralization, whether voluntary or forced. At first, centralism may provide tangible benefits. But over time, local sentiment comes to believe that “they” at the center are governing ignorantly or unfairly; “they” are in the grip of corrupt and greedy special interests; “they” think naught of our hallowed customs and traditions; “we” have little or nothing to say about it; “we” have been forced to send our wealth to the decadent center, and give up “our” soldiers to defend its imperial frontiers. This centrifugal tendency was first described as historically inevitable by the great Arab historian Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqaddimah*, published in 1377.

This anticentralization backlash naturally takes many forms, depending on which sort of centralization is complained of. It often is described as “decentralism,” but that word generally connotes not so much a defined philosophy, as a label for arguments that sketch out resistance against the manifold ills caused by the centralization of power. Consider these varied examples of “decentralism”: the Lutherans who walked out of the Roman Catholic Church; the “Velvet Revolution” that peacefully separated Slovakia and the Czech Republic; the jealously guarded economic independence of Hong Kong from Communist control in Beijing; the secession of the Austrian village of Woergl from that nation’s failed national currency system; charter schools opting out of state public school systems; or naturopaths and ayurvedics rejecting the prescriptions of allopathic medicine.

To these examples must be added the secessionist Second Vermont Republic, whose adherents want to take the state out of George W. Bush’s American empire. (Whether this secessionist ardor will survive a possible Obama presidency is an interesting question.)

All of these examples evince a determination of some group of people to “do things our way,” independent of control from the center. History is rife with examples of cruel repression of decentralist movements—the Cathars come to mind—and, unfortunately, history is generally written to glorify the winners.

But despite the triumphs of Caesar, Alexander, St. Peter, Mohammed, Innocent III, Genghis Khan, Alexander Hamilton, Bismarck, J. P. Morgan, Lenin, and Franklin Roosevelt, the center rarely maintains its grip for long. And through the ages there have been numerous works written to explain, promote, and defend the decentralist impulse that breaks down that grip.

This impulse tends to take two forms. The liberal form tends toward the utopian: we're doing all this wrong now, but there's no reason why we can't redesign our world to usher in an era of happiness and prosperity! This version places great faith in the good nature of common people and their capacity to redesign their world if freed from the annoying and costly mandates from the corrupted center.

The conservative version, on the other hand, often offers a gloomy foreboding of creeping collectivism gathering all social, economic, and political power to the center, dragging society into a totalitarian dystopia. Somehow society must work its painful way toward mutually acceptable customs, governance, and ordered liberty.

The definitive universal work on decentralism, alas, has yet to be written. But here are a selection of works that together offer useful insights into the decentralist tendency.

Kirkpatrick Sale's *Human Scale* (1980) is as close to a classic as can be found. The central point of Sale's work is that when things grow too large, trouble inevitably begins. He examines the "burden of bigness," what happens when bigness overpowers the human scale in society, economy, and politics, and how it can be countered. Sale, a veteran of Students for a Democratic Society in its glory days of the 1960s, observes that government breakdown leads to "a resurgence of locally based forms, most often democratically chosen and scrupulously responsive, that turn out to be quite capable of managing the complicated affairs of daily life for many months, occasionally years, until they are forcibly suppressed by some new centralist state less democratic and responsive."

A work of special inspiration to me is Herbert Agar's *Land of the Free* (1935). Agar was the Pulitzer Prize-winning editor of the *Louisville Courier Journal*. His enthusiasm for a United States delivered from the evils of concentrated Finance Capital and its handmaiden Big Government is tied to the circumstance of the Depression years, yet the book exhibits a timeless Jeffersonian passion for distributed property ownership and protected liberty that, alas, is rarely emulated today.

Leopold Kohr is a name little known today, but his works have been published in at least five languages and have been an inspiration to many, notably Fritz Schumacher. Perhaps his most representative work is *The Breakdown of Nations* (1957). In it, Kohr points out that many of the world's problems come from political entities that are simply too big, and that such entities will inevitably fragment. With great wit and charm, Kohr makes a good case for a world of small translucent mini-states where the human spirit can flourish.

E. F. "Fritz" Schumacher is celebrated as the author of *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973). Schumacher became something of a cult figure in the 1970s, pioneering intermediate technology and new patterns of ownership (influenced by the UK Scott Bader Commonwealth plan). His essay on "Buddhist Economics," built upon a worldview of simplicity and nonviolence, was perhaps the most influential in this book, which is admittedly an uneven collection of lectures. George McRobie's *Small Is Possible* (1981) is an enthusiastic recital of people acting on Schumacher's ideas. A later and similar work is Richard Douthwaite's *Short Circuit* (1996).

Another German-born scholar with more libertarian leanings is Wilhelm Röpke. His most influential book is *A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market* (1958). Röpke is not an advocate of decentralism *per se*, but his courageous commitment to a free society fighting to survive against fascism, communism, and the suffocating welfare state shines through half a century after he wrote. He is much in tune with Catholic social thought, which has always feared great concentrations of secular power as destructive to the human spirit and human community. Another valuable Röpke volume is *The Moral Foundations of Civil Society* (1948).

Similar to Röpke in his concern for the effects of mass society upon the individual is the conservative American sociologist Robert Nisbet. His most-quoted work is *The Quest for Community* (1953), which analyzes the human urge to re-create meaningful communities when overrun by the forces of centralized mass society. A similar but more optimistic work is Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave* (1980).

A classic work of anarcho-decentralism, one that exerted a powerful influence on such diverse thinkers as Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Mao Tse Tung, is Peter Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1899). Though dated and derived from Russian experience, Kropotkin's readable and enthusiastic work paints a hopeful portrait of happy, self-sufficient, autonomous communities spread across the vast expanse of Russia.

Gilbert K. Chesterton was a renowned British author, a Catholic much influenced by Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *De Rerum Novarum* of 1895. He and his fellow thinker Hilaire Belloc founded a Distributist League to promote widespread ownership of property. Alas, the League never became a force in British politics, but Chesterton's witty writing—*What's Wrong with the World* (1910) and especially *Outline of Sanity* (1926)—made him a household word in the UK. Belloc's most prescient work was *The Servile State* (1912), well worth reading today for its analysis of the development of industrial society toward a few rich owners, a larger middle class of skilled technicians, and a vast body of unskilled laborers whom the state must compel to labor. Allan Carlson's *Third Ways* (2007) is a lively account of Chesterbellocian distributism and other family-centered economic movements. Especially interesting is his description of perhaps the most decentralist of all national governments, that of Alexander Stambolisky's Bulgarian Agrarian National Union. It was in power (under desperate circumstances) from 1919 to 1923 and expired when Stambolisky was murdered by the Communists.

For a clear statement of criteria for a free society, and an antidote to rigid ideologies of both Left and Right, Henry Calvert Simons' trenchant essay "A Political Credo" remains a classic. It appears as the lead chapter in his collection, *Economic Policy for a Free Society* (1945). While not an explicit plea for decentralism, it recognizes the importance of voluntary associations and distributed property, and the evils of collectivist centralization. If I were asked to recommend one short piece to a reader interested in acquiring a foundation for understanding U.S. social and economic policy, this would be that piece.

Modern political decentralists of the Left face a problem that does not much afflict their conservative counterparts. The Left is concerned that no self-governing locality makes doctrinal mistakes. Thus, Left decentralists tend to endorse lots of centrally established ground rules: no ecological damage, no racial oppression, full equality for women and gays, living wages and protection for labor, no Walmart and McDonald's, etc. Right decentralists—sometimes grudgingly—agree that there must be some overarching rules to prevent grassroots tyranny, but they are darkly suspicious of a Center imposing evermore-alien mandates on cultural communities seeking to evolve in their own way. For instance, the Right has little concern over locally prescribed manifestations of conscience, such as obligatory affirmations of faith and values, an established church, and exclusion of "undesirables" from civic life.

Two recent works from decentralist-oriented Leftist authors make serious efforts to avoid excessive centralist mandates upon local communities. Michael Shuman's *Going Local: Creating Self-Reliant Communities in the Global Age* (2000) synthesizes the arguments for why communities should resist the temptations of globalization and instead strengthen their economies through locally owned companies, import substitution, new community financial institutions, and smart local policymaking. He makes the case, from a progressive political viewpoint, for devolving political and economic power.

America Beyond Capitalism: Reclaiming Our Wealth, Our Liberty, and Our Democracy (2005) by my longtime friend Gar Alperovitz is a sweeping analysis of what's wrong with modern-day America—globalization, financial concentration, opulence, imperialism, etc.—and makes a well-argued case for creating a "pluralist commonwealth" in its place. Alperovitz founds his argument on the need for universal state-guaranteed economic security, an expansion of civil society, and (surprisingly) the necessity of people having more free time. True to the socialist tradition, his prescription requires a redistribution of wealth enforced from the center, but it abandons the Leninist

insistence of totalitarian control from the center by a correctly thinking vanguard. Alperovitz has been thinking on this subject for forty years and has a very creative and inventive mind. His wide-ranging book deserves serious attention even from those who believe that a government made powerful enough to achieve such redistribution will inevitably use its power for inhumane and destructive purposes.

Finally, I hope I may be excused for mentioning a homegrown volume, *The Vermont Papers: Re-creating Democracy on a Human Scale*, by Frank Bryan and me (1989). This (if I may say it) interesting work proposes to decentralize Vermont into some forty self-governing shires, to which the state would devolve perhaps three-fourths of its present responsibilities. “Let forty flowers bloom” as an example to the nation and the world! With the passage of two decades, some of the policy discussion has become obsolete, but the basic decentralist philosophy and the description of the proposed Vermont shires remains valid and—Frank and I hope—still inspirational.

This quick tour of decentralist thought necessarily neglects many valuable English-language works by such authors as Paul Goodman, Ralph Borsodi, Andrew Greeley, Louis Brandeis, Allen Tate, Wendell Berry, Arthur Morgan, Jane Jacobs, Edward Goldsmith, Ivan Illich, Henry George, James Warbasse, Michael Zwerin, Herman Daly, Morgan Doughton, and James Robertson. It also overlooks two authors whose indispensable writings celebrate, among other things, the decentralist vision: Alexis de Tocqueville and Thomas Jefferson.

Centralism’s apologists will always find an eager audience among those who seek to win supreme power, whether in government, finance, industry, labor, religion, education, and other arenas. The decentralist appeal to keep power and property widely distributed among people and communities has little appeal for the Alexanders, Napoleons, Hamiltons, Lenins, Mao Tse Tungs, and Nassers of world history. Thus, decentralism is never likely to become a reigning philosophy. Indeed, it is difficult to find any modern American politician who has made an explicitly decentralist appeal, untainted by the “states rights” defense of racial segregation. (The best recent candidate may be Ronald Reagan, but his accomplishments failed to match his inclinations and occasional rhetoric.)

But the decentralist tendency never goes away. Like grass growing up through cracks in aging concrete, the human urge to “bring things home where we can watch over them” is always likely to be with us. Perhaps the best we decentralists can do is constantly strive to give it room to flower.