

The Decentralist Movement

A Third Way

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Just a few weeks ago I took seven large boxes of books from my library to give to the E. F. Schumacher Library just outside of Great Barrington, Massachusetts—books I'd gathered for years on decentralism, anarchism, community, separatism, and the like—and I was struck once again by the depth, tenacity, and importance of the movement to which I was contributing. For the Schumacher Society and its library were established to provide an intellectual and activist home for what we can call, loosely, the decentralist movement. This is the Third Way that has existed for a century or so outside the varieties of centralists, both conservative and liberal; a movement that has vigorously put forth cogent alternatives to the modern-capitalist industrial nation-state.

The Schumacher has most of the library and all the papers, speeches, and articles of Fritz Schumacher, the economist and philosopher whose work outlining the decentralist way went far beyond the notion of “small is beautiful”—however trenchant that idea may be—to include self-managed firms, Buddhist (“right livelihood”) economics, intermediate technology, organic farming, alternative energy, and matters of scale in all human endeavors. But it also has the libraries and papers of a number of other decentralist figures. Among them are George Benello, a scholar and activist whose library emphasized worker ownership, alternative technology, and the Yugoslavian decentralized economy; Ralph Borsodi, the founder of the School of Living and keystone of the homesteading “back-to-the-land” movement in the 1930s; Richard Bliss, a teacher whose material concentrates on the quasi-anarchistic Catholic Worker movement and the English Distributists (who were also called leaders of “a third way”); Henry Geiger, for four decades editor of the decentralist weekly *MANAS*, whose copies are available online from the Library; Robyn van En, the creator of the Community Supported Agriculture movement; and Bob Swann, a cofounder (with John McClaughry, Ian Baldwin, David Ehrenfeld, and me) of the Schumacher Society in 1980, who for years acted as its president and guiding light, as well as serving as a leading theorist of land trust organizations.

That's an impressive group, and it argues that the decentralist movement has not only been wide-reaching and comprehensive but durable and impactful. No, it has not had the kind of support from the capitalist system that has created and sustained the conservative and neoconservative movements or the various do-gooding liberal parties and unions—largely because it generally stood opposed to large-scale corporate capitalism and the large-scale governments that were its handmaidens. So it has gone along with small and underfunded organizations, working in different parts of the country on different parts of the problem, sometimes without even knowing the others existed. But the point is that it has gone along, for more than eighty years (if we figure its modern beginnings with the Distributists and Southern Agrarians in the 1920s), and it is still to be found everywhere.

Let me see if I can distill the essence of decentralism, and its appeal.

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.”

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 fewer 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.
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. The war that separated us from Britain was not a revolutionary war—we desired to have our own country, not take over Britain’s—but a secessionist war. A unified state did eventually arise after it, the product of powerful banking and mercantile forces desiring centralized authority, but it was not especially centralist at that time, and even then contrary forces proved 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. In the twentieth 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. And think of Henry George and the Georgists, Paul Goodman, Arthur Morgan and his Community Service organization, Ivan Illich, Gary Snyder, Helen and Scott Nearing and their Good Life Center, Wendell Berry, Thomas Berry, Chellis Glendinning and the neo-Luddites, Jerry Mander and the anti-globalists—well, the list could go on into the thousands.
4. Decentralism 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; the resurgent Indian tribal societies and organizations for tribal culture; the growth of worker-owned firms from 1,600 twenty years ago to more than 10,000 today; the phenomenon of cooperative businesses, which as of 2005 had revenues of nearly \$1 trillion; the spread of such efforts as community currencies, community land trusts (100 of them today, at least) and community-supported agriculture (1,140 farms) and local farmers’ markets (4,400 in 2006); and the 250,000 private government associations housing more than 50 million people.

All of this is evidence that this great tradition, this basic human impulse, is still to be found in the United States, 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. The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia split up. Montenegro became an independent state in 2006; Kosovo is becoming one, in its own way. Catalonia gained significant autonomous powers in 2006, as did Aceh in Indonesia. More than 50 percent of the people of Scotland in a recent poll wanted complete independence from England, and that seems likely to happen within a few years. There it is: the Third Way. Ever powerful. And we—you—are a part of that great tradition.