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Politics for Place: An Introduction to American Decentralism

Abstract

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**Politics for Place: An Introduction to American Decentralism
by Jeff Taylor**

Addressing educated, fair-minded Americans on the subject of states' rights and other manifestations of decentralization, is to swim upstream. It evokes images of the Klan, of lynchings and burnings, of Bull Connor and Lester Maddox. We can understand why. "States' rights" has been the rallying cry for several well-publicized crusades for inequality over the past 150 years. Keep in mind, though, that these crusades for slavery and segregation—in the Civil War, Jim Crow, and Civil Rights eras—were manifestations of a single cause: white supremacy, with a special emphasis on the southern economic elite. The real evil was the end, not the means.

On an international scale, all of the great political monsters of the past century have exemplified the opposite of the decentralism principle that underlies states' rights. Totalitarianism, in both its communist and fascist forms, was about concentrating power in the hands of the few, at a level far removed from the common people. For instance, it was not as though Hitler had too great a regard for the desire of local people to govern themselves. Quite the opposite. Resistance to political centralization and its frequent companion, economic centralization, is not antithetical or alien to the progressive tradition. There has always been an anti-statist, anti-bureaucratic variety of socialism. For every Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, and Mao, there has been a Bakunin, Proudhon, Kropotkin, Goldman, and Orwell.

Deep in American soil, there is the decentralist tradition of Thomas Jefferson, John Taylor of Caroline, Samuel Adams, and Thomas Paine. Sam Adams, the great democrat of Boston, thought "the best government" was the one which "played the least part in men's daily

affairs” and who believed in a “negative political theory of natural rights” which “caused him to fear every increase in the central government’s power.”¹ Anticipating Peter Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid* thesis, Tom Paine wrote, in *The Rights of Man*, “A great part of that order which reigns among mankind is not the effect of government. It had its origin in the principles of society and the natural constitution of man. It existed prior to government, and would exist if the formality of government was abolished. The mutual dependence and reciprocal interest which man has in man, and all the parts of a civilized community upon each other, create that great chain of connection which holds it together.” Paine also believed that “The more perfect civilization is, the less occasion has it for government, because the more does it regulate its own affairs and govern itself.”²

Human behavior is a mixture of competition and cooperation, of individualism and integration. Each side of the equation contributes something of value to life. It is a tricky thing to structure government in a way that helps to maintain social equilibrium. Liberty and order are both important. A strong government will hinder freedom and rights. A weak government will fail to promote justice and commonweal.

Part of the desirable equilibrium is a sense of proportionality. Some sizes, some amounts, some levels are more appropriate than others. A person should not eat fifty slices of pizza during one meal. No one should lock up a naughty one-year-old child for fifty years in a maximum security prison. Everyone should realize that one size does not fit all, that one body of law cannot be entirely appropriate for fifty diverse geographic areas. Bigger is not always better. A government that presides over a vast expanse of land and a multitude of people does not necessarily bring greater happiness or justice. A proud empire does not necessarily foster greater security than a humble republic. Often the reverse is true, as the empire entangles itself in other

people's affairs, stretches its military thin in distant places, creates unnecessary foreign enemies, fails to secure its own borders, and fails to protect its own people. This scenario should sound familiar to Americans.

Decentralism is the best political tool to ensure equilibrium, to promote proportionality, and to obtain appropriate scale. Power distribution should be as wide as possible. Government functions should be as close to the people as practicable. In this way, individual human beings are not swallowed by a monstrous Leviathan. Persons are not at the mercy of an impersonal bureaucracy led by the far-away few. Decentralism gives us politics on a human scale. It gives us more democracy within the framework of a republic.

The old cliché says, "You can't fight City Hall." It is even more difficult to fight the Governor's Mansion or the White House. The City Hall cliché is an overstatement. Sometimes average citizens do prevail against the misguided will of city government and local elites. But odds of successful popular insurgencies become slimmer as they face larger and more remote powers. More often than not, local government is better than national government because it is more human. More human forms of government are more likely to produce more humane functions of government.

The acquisition of power is addictive. Once gained, it is rarely given up voluntarily. There is a certain trajectory in politics that is clear. When is the last time you have seen a governor decline to run for reelection but instead seek a seat in the state legislature? When have you seen a sitting member of the U.S. Senate try to join the U.S. House? When have you seen a president decide to retire after one term? These things are not done. More power is considered to be better. The holder of power rationalizes that it is not about power for power's sake. It is about power for the sake of helping people. Democrats want to help the "disadvantaged."

Republicans want to help the “middle class.” But, really, they are helping themselves even more.

Power needs to be held in check, partly through decentralization, because power holds a great attraction for humans. Recognition of this human tendency is the first step in guarding against it and getting back on a better path. Concentration of power in the hands of the national government was almost inevitable after 1789. It was the natural, if dangerous, course of things in a world of misplaced priorities and perverted values.

Decentralism, or any other way of governance, is not a cure for all that ails us. A change in the mechanics of our politics is not going to automatically change the meaning of our culture. With its self-indulgence, materialism, and superficiality, American culture is morally degraded in many ways. People’s minds and hearts need to change. But a shifting of power closer to the grassroots and away from corrupted national elites in Washington and New York would be helpful. It is true that the common people are also corrupt, their natural human flaws encouraged by media, business, and political establishments that trample on truth, commodify everything, ignore social justice, and keep us stuck in a state of perpetual adolescence. In an age of bread and circuses, does the will to change our politics exist? Do the masses care about where our authority lies in a decadent era? Probably not. Our instincts remain good but, in many cases, our minds have been turned to mush by entertainment and our emotions have been short-circuited by hucksters.

One advantage we have is that those of us who care about restoring politics to its proper scale need not agree on everything. We are seeking a tool that transcends policy differences. We can work together to set new ground rules and afterwards work-debate-vote among ourselves how we want to proceed with particular policies to address common concerns. We do not have

to agree now. Or later. We just have to recognize that we all have a stake in our society and we must be willing to respect one another as fellow citizens.

Humans are complex creatures who are characterized by great diversity. Standardization is not a natural fit for humans. Within certain basic norms consonant with natural/divine law, the policies of human government should be as diverse as humans. While political principles can be universal in a time- and place-transcendent way, their application as policies will vary. If they are not allowed to vary, the body politic suffers. A political straitjacket ill-suits human beings. That is why scale matters. Complexity and individual conscience, diversity and free will, all demand a politics proper to who we are as people. They argue for multiformity and accountability in government.³

When the United States' form of government shifted from the Articles of Confederation to the Constitution in 1787-89, concentration of power in the hands of the national government was feared by Anti-Federalists, who preferred sticking with the Articles. Such concentration of power was rhetorically dismissed as a possibility by *Federalist* no. 45 and ostensibly protected against by the Bill of Rights. As time unfolded, as judges interpreted, and as politicians acted, the concerns of the Anti-Federalists proved to be justified, the assurances of Madison proved to be empty, and the protections of the Constitution proved to be impotent. Decentralism, even in its weakened federal form, has been an elusive principle.

Decentralized political power is characterized by four values. The quadratic persuasion of decentralism includes four philosophical underpinnings: democracy, liberty, community, and morality. Democracy is championed by the ideology of populism. It is linked to equality, majority rule, popular sovereignty, we the people, and competitive elections. Liberty is championed by the ideology of libertarianism. It is linked to freedom, individualism, natural

rights, civil liberties, and a pluralistic society. Community is championed by the ideology of communitarianism. It is linked to love your neighbor as yourself, fraternity, the common good (commonwealth), and united we stand. Morality is championed by the ideology of traditional conservatism. It is linked to social ethics, virtue, personal and social improvement, righteousness exalts a nation, and the beatitudes.

Ideologies committed to each of the four values can be found in the American agrarian thinker and practitioner Thomas Jefferson. Elements of his thought are congenial to populism, libertarianism, communitarianism, and traditional conservatism. This is one reason Jefferson's influence is still widely found in American society and found across the political spectrum.⁴

Americans have traditionally been suspicious of highly centralized government because it tends to be directed by remote elitists and administered by remote bureaucrats. In their view, neither the elitists nor the bureaucrats are responsive to the actual needs and desires of ordinary citizens. In this way, decentralism is often linked to democracy. Decentralization involves more than states' rights although this principle is enshrined in the Constitution through the Tenth Amendment. It also means minimalistic government at every level. This is the negative state—a “bare bones” approach to government. The ultimate decentralization is individual self-governance (i.e., anarchy) although few Americans have ever embraced this as a goal. Much more common, over the years, is the idea expressed through popular expressions such as “don't tread on me,” “just want to be left alone,” “live and let live,” “it's a free country,” and “get the government off our backs.” This presupposes respect for the individual but it does not exclude the value of community.

The Tea Party movement is the latest political manifestation of traditional American tendencies: suspicion of power concentrated in the hands of the few, grumbling about big

government, preference for state and local control, and protectiveness toward individual liberties. In its own way, the Occupy Wall Street movement represents some of the same tendencies even though it is often depicted as the polar opposite of the Tea Party. Both are frustrated with a corporate-dominated status quo where Washington seems to be a rigged game while the middle class—or the 99 percent—are given empty promises by politicians who are discreetly leased by a financial elite.⁵ Tea Partiers are apt to identify the culprit as big government while Occupiers focus on big business but both are seeing the same thing: a mutually-beneficial yet often publicly-detrimental alliance between public power and private power.

The matter of scale when it comes to society is analogous to our perception of nature. There are some who are awed by the wonders of nature on a grand scale. Majestic mountains and beautiful beaches are certainly appealing but such macro appreciation of nature does not preclude micro appreciation. There are those of us who developed a love of creation sitting on the lawn looking closely at blades of grass and hills of ants. Or watching the comings and goings of squirrels. To take larger examples, we could mention the look of clouds as they drift through the sky or the feel of wind as a storm is coming up. All of these can be enjoyed in one's own backyard.⁶ Such experiences do not need the infrastructure of the federal government or the philanthropy of wealthy private interests. They do not cost money. In their own way, they are as moving and instructive as a trip to the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone.

A true love of nature can be enjoyed in a variety of ways. If you are only interested in the big and showy, the famous and distant, then you may be suffering from shallowness and egocentricity. In the same way, the local and provincial are often scorned by those whose political ambitions and power lusts lie on a national if not global scale. They care about humanity in the abstract but not actual human beings. Instead, the mundane lives of proles in

fly-over country and the geopolitically-inconsequential lives of collateral damage victims in foreign wars are of little interest to elite classes. A leader who feels no loyalty to his neighborhood or town is not likely to have a genuine affinity for his nation or world. From the perspective of such a leader, humans are something to be used . . . stepping stones on the way to self-aggrandizement. With that mindset, bigger is always better.

Beware of false messiahs who peddle their wares of national salvation and global utopia. That is the way to regimentation and genocide. Show me a man or woman who truly loves a neighbor and you will be showing me an internationalist in the best sense of the word. Even if susceptible to pro-war propaganda by manipulators in government and media, his or her instincts remain human if not divine. Attachment to the local and love of the little ought to be encouraged by all humanitarians and theists because one needs to know how to crawl before one can walk, one must know the alphabet before one writes a book, and one must care for those who live nearby before one can empathize with those who live thousands of miles away.

Wendell Berry spells out the connection between community and localism: “Community is a locally understood interdependence of local people, local culture, local economy, and local nature. (Community, of course, is an idea that can extend itself beyond the local, but it only does so metaphorically. The idea of a national or global community is meaningless apart from the realization of local communities.)”⁷

Finally, a word of caution is in order. Decentralization of power is not a panacea. The quality of decisions made at a local or state level is not necessarily better than the quality of those made at higher levels. Sometimes such decisions are better than those made at higher levels. Sometimes they are worse. Sometimes they are glaringly worse, as was the case with segregation

and Jim Crow laws in the South, among other places, for most of the twentieth century. Fidelity to an abstract principle should not be allowed to obscure the real human impacts on the ground.

The localization of power has both potential and prudential aspects. It can be a force for good and a force for safety. If Lord Acton was correct in asserting that power corrupts—and there is every reason to believe that he was—it stands to reason that power is most safely wielded when it is most widely dispersed and when it is closest to the people being governed. Power is the heart of government. The foundational question for political philosophy, in both the Hebrew and Greek traditions, is “Who rules?” The ancient Jews exchanged the decentralized, quasi-anarchistic governance of judges for the centralized rule of a king. They did so over the objection of the judge/prophet Samuel and despite the warning of God.⁸

Plato was no admirer of democracy yet as a mature theorist he identified rule by the many, in the small-scale context of the Greek city-state, as the best form of government when society is corrupted by self-seeking and disregard of tradition. Under adverse conditions, rule by the common people remains unnatural and inefficient but is the best form of government because it is safest. In his *Statesman*, Plato wrote, “The rule of the many is weak in every way; it is not capable of any real good or of any serious evil as compared with the other two [rule of one and rule of the few]. This is because in a democracy sovereignty has been divided out in small portions among a large number of rulers. Therefore, of all three constitutions that are law-abiding, democracy is the worst; but of the three that flout the laws [i.e., justice, ethics, social customs], democracy is the best. Thus if all constitutions [forms of government] are unprincipled the best thing to do is to live in a democracy.”⁹ Democracy and decentralization go hand-in-hand.

We should not sugar-coat reality or inflate the claims of a particular mode of governance. Town hall meetings, municipal government, states' rights, and other manifestations of decentralism are not perfect. But Plato was correct in his ranking of constitutions. In a corrupt age and a fallen world, a generous sharing of power is best. It does not negate all potential abuse, including oppression of both minorities and majorities, but the damage done by tyrants and oligarchs is confined to a smaller scale. It also increases the likelihood of proximate diversity that can provide counter-examples when one's own community is experiencing unjust rule. The existence of a multitude of small-scale sovereignties provides for avenues of individual escape if community reform cannot be achieved. In other words, if your city or state is poorly governed, you may be able to move to a nearby community that is better served by its rulers and laws. If the entire region or nation is under the control of a single malevolent power, it becomes more difficult to see alternatives and to flee to those alternatives if need be. Such reform and emigration may not be easy but they are more possible in a decentralized context.

In an age of centralization, are decentralists doomed to wax nostalgic about the good old days, their engagement with contemporary culture sounding like the plaintive cry of a mourning dove? Maybe it is not as bad as all that. Yes, there is political and economic concentration but there is a countervailing force: social fragmentation. On the one hand, the mainstream media are more highly concentrated than ever, with six giant corporations dominating most of our news and entertainment. Yet there are positive signs. The Internet provides a wide diversity of opinion and information without the old establishment acting as regulators and gatekeepers. The Web provides the best of both worlds: decentralized yet global. This is a very positive development. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are often superficial and lacking in intellectual content, but they do provide decentralized communication by linking individuals

together in an instantaneous way and allowing them to share comments as they please. The fact that corporate, metropolitan newspapers have fallen on hard times, with some closing down altogether, and that the big television networks have lost most of their influence when it comes to news are two other signs of positive change.¹⁰ Decentralized, democratized decision-making is becoming the norm in some areas of society despite understandable resistance by established elites.¹¹

In an analysis of the future of American democracy, written as the twenty-first century began, political scientist and former Congressman Glen Browder (D-AL) asserted that centrifugal dynamics, driven by demographic changes, are “pushing us toward popular decentralization of the American political system.” He concluded, “While both community and diversity have always been competing strengths of American democracy, the prudent course is one which consciously balances ‘pluribus’ and ‘unum’ (and considers the possible consequences of ‘ex uno plures’ [out of one, many]).”¹² Browder considers not only changes in the ethnic composition of the U.S. but also ideological and theological divisions and partisan polarization: “Whatever their reasons, Americans seem to be settling, residing, working and conducting their public lives in subcultural enclaves (regions, communities, and groupings) distinctly defined by their demographics, lifestyle, philosophical outlook, and voting behavior.”¹³

This does not have to be viewed as a bad thing. Rather than resisting this trend toward centrifugal democracy—emanating from both deep local and regional ties stretching back centuries to more recent waves of immigration and dissatisfaction with mainstream culture—it could be respected and embraced. It would be to acknowledge the point made by Anti-Federalist writer Agrippa that “It is impossible for one code of laws to suit Georgia and Massachusetts” and

that it is absurd to force millions of diverse Americans to live under “the same standard of morals, or habits, and of laws.”¹⁴

In some ways, social fragmentation can be welcomed rather than feared. Leviathan, in its political and economic manifestations, may be forced into dismantlement because it cannot be sustained. The nation has become too large and too diverse. The root word of politics is *polis*. It was a city, not a colossus. It is time to get back to our roots. To the once-were city states of Greece, to the could-be ward republics of Jefferson, to the should-be reserved powers of the Constitution. We are human beings. We are not cogs in a machine of epic proportions. Let us have politics on a human scale.

Jeff Taylor is professor of political science at Dordt College. This paper is excerpted from chapters 3, 1, and 8 of the book *Politics on a Human Scale: The American Tradition of Decentralism* © Lexington Books, 2013.

Notes

¹ John C. Miller, *Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, c1936, 1960), 375.

² Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (New York: Cosimo, 2008), 131, 133. (part II - chapter I: Of Society and Civilization)

³ James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 19-44, 480-81.

⁴ This interplay or balance of seemingly contradictory, or at least different, ideologies is not unique to Jefferson. For instance, a different set can be found in John Stuart Mill: utilitarianism, libertarianism, socialism, and feminism.

⁵ “Among the constant facts and tendencies that are to be found in all political organisms, one is so obvious that it is apparent to the most casual eye. In all societies . . . two classes of people appear—a class that rules and a class that is ruled. The first class, always the less numerous, performs all political functions, monopolizes power and enjoys the advantages that power brings, whereas the second, the more numerous class, is directed and controlled by the

first . . . In the United States all powers flow directly or indirectly from popular elections . . . What is more, democracy prevails not only in institutions but to a certain extent also in morals. The rich ordinarily feel a certain aversion to entering public life, and the poor a certain aversion to choosing the rich for elective office. But that does not prevent a rich man from being more influential than a poor man, since he can use pressure upon the politicians who control public administration. It does not prevent elections from being carried on to the music of clinking dollars. It does not prevent whole legislatures and considerable numbers of national congressmen from feeling the influence of powerful corporations and great financiers.” – Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, trans. Hannah D. Kahn, ed. Arthur Livingston (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939), 50, 57-58. (chapter II: The Ruling Class) Mosca’s *Elementi di Scienza Politica* was first published in Italy in 1896. That was the same year Bryan made his famous Cross of Gold speech at the Democratic National Convention in the U.S. and first received his party’s presidential nomination.

⁶ It could be objected that not everyone has a backyard. This is true. It is also part of the problem. Modern urban life involves a disconnect from nature whereby grass of much quantity is experienced only through a park maintained by the government. We cannot all live on farms, and big cities have their charms, but everyone can benefit from easily-accessible spaces that offer dirt, rock, vegetation, wildlife, and open sky for clouds and stars. To think and feel, study and connect, pray and worship. Concrete and plastic and man-made noise can only take us so far. As Bill Anderson, in his homespun way, wrote in the country song “City Lights”: “The world was dark and God made stars to brighten up the night. But I don’t believe that God above made those city lights.” One need not be a creationist to recognize the distinction. As wonderful as civilization can be, it is still not the same as nature. The poet William Cowper put it this way: “God made the country, and man made the town.” – Ray Price, “City Lights” in: *Country Music Hall of Fame, 1996* [sound recording] (Nashville: King Records, 1998) (orig. 1958); William Cowper, “The Task” in: *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, complete ed. (New York: John Wurtele Lovell, ca. 1881) (orig. 1785), 264. (book I, “The Sofa”)

⁷ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 120.

⁸ Judges 21:25; I Samuel 8:1-22. The Book of Judges closes with the observation, “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did what was right in his own eyes.” Although this passage is sometimes used by clergy to condemn individual conscience and personal liberty, it is a flat statement that includes no value judgment. The corresponding passage, found earlier in Deuteronomy 12:8-10, implies that such self-governance was a blessing bestowed by God on his chosen people after they had reached the Promised Land and entered into their rest and inheritance.

⁹ Plato, *Statesman*, trans. J.B. Skemp, ed. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 83. (9. Digression on the Imitative Constitutions, 303a)

¹⁰ Historically, the pecuniary press has not had a good track record when it comes to sociopolitical objectivity or being a force for the common good. See: Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism* (Pasadena, Calif.: The Author, 1920); Lundberg, *America’s 60 Families*, 244-319.

¹¹ James Surowiecki, *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many are Smarter than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies, and Nations* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

¹² Glen Browder, *The Future of American Democracy: A Former Congressman’s Unconventional Analysis* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002), 168, 174. The unofficial U.S.A. motto *e pluribus unum* means “Out of many, one”; *ex uno plures* means “Out of one, many.”

¹³ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁴ Herbert J. Storing, ed., *The Anti-Federalist: An Abridgment, by Murray Dry, of The Complete Anti-Federalist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, c1981, 1985), 235-36.