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Presenting the KEY VALUE of Decentralism (PART ONE)

JEFF TAYLOR

A government that presides over a vast expanse of land and a multitude of people does not necessarily bring greater happiness or justice.

Government functions should be as close to the people as practicable.

Power needs to be held in check, partly through decentralization, because power holds a great attraction for humans.

Addressing progressive, 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. Modern liberalism usually means putting a premium on the value of equality above all else. "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."

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."

DECENTRALIZATION AND THE GREENS

The Green Party, partly descended from the Counterculture and the New Left, has three decentralist positions among its Ten Key Values: decentralization, grassroots democracy, and community-based economics. Nonetheless, Greens often default to a knee-jerk defense of federal, or even global, bureaucratic control in policy debates, thereby acting more as an auxiliary of the Democratic Party than as a genuine alternative to big government liberalism. This approach undercuts one of the original appeals of the international Green movement/party: its slogan "We are neither Left nor Right; we are in Front."

When it began, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the West German Green Party (*die Grünen*) attracted mostly disenchanting Social Democrats but also some populist,

eco-minded Christian Democrats. Gradually, its ideologically-transcendent nature diminished as it became more conventionally leftist. The U.S. Green Party, with roots in the Counterculture and New Left movements, was solidly on the Left side of the spectrum from the start. These antecedent movements did, however, have a decentralist or even anarchistic flavor that set them apart from standard Democratic liberals. (See the classic book *Green Politics* by Spretnak and Capra.)

Some Green leaders, such as John Rensenbrink, have emphasized a deep ecology philosophical basis for the party in a way that gets past conventional modern liberalism. They have also attempted to build bridges to the populist Right but these efforts have not met with much practical success. The Nader campaigns have been only marginally more successful in this regard. Still, expression of common interest in decentralization is a significant effort to tap into the wide American tradition of being suspicious of concentrated power, of disliking bigness whether in business or government. It partly explains why Wendell Berry is admired by both left-wing ecologists and right-wing traditionalists.

HUMAN POLITICS

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 LURE OF POWER

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 people 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.

And yet... You are reading this. It is something. It is a start. First let us figure out how we got here, then we can work on getting to a better place. There are others who care. More important movements than this have begun with smaller numbers. One advantage we have is that those of us who care about restoring

Standardization is not a natural fit for humans.

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.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

In an American context, the word *federalism* usually refers to the division of power between the federal government and the fifty state governments. Political scientists call this vertical federalism. It connotes a sharing of social responsibilities, a constitutional two-way flow of the line of authority. In contrast to a federal system of power distribution, a unitary system is one in which most or all power is concentrated at the upper level and a confederal system is one in which most or all power is concentrated at the lower levels. A federal system is a compromise between unitary (centralized) and confederal (decentralized).

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.

A.W. Tozer once wrote, "Truth is like a bird: it cannot fly on one wing. Yet we are forever trying to take off with one wing flapping furiously and the other tucked neatly out of sight. I believe it was Dr. G. Campbell Morgan who said that the whole truth does not lie in 'It is written,' but in 'It is written' and 'Again it is written.' The second text must be placed over against the first to balance it and give it symmetry, just as the right wing

must work along with the left to balance the bird and enable it to fly." If this is an accurate insight when applied to theology, the same can be said for any discipline, including political theory.

When it comes to statecraft, perhaps truth is more like a butterfly than a bird. Butterflies and moths have two pairs of wings, for a total of four wings: left forewing, right forewing, left hindwing, and right hindwing. Decentralized political power is similarly characterized by four values.

FOUR CRUCIAL VALUES

The quadratic persuasion of decentralism includes four philosophical underpinnings: democracy, liberty, community, and morality. Democracy is championed by the philosophy of populism. It is linked to equality, majority rule, popular sovereignty, we the people, and competitive elections. Liberty is championed by the philosophy of libertarianism. It is linked to freedom, individualism, natural rights, civil liberties, and a pluralistic society. Community is championed by the philosophy 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 philosophy of traditional conservatism. It is linked to social ethics, virtue, personal and social improvement, righteousness exalts a nation, and the beatitudes.

Philosophies 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. (This interplay or balance of seemingly contradictory, or at least different, ideologies is not unique to Jefferson; a different set can be found in J.S. Mill: utilitarianism, libertarianism, socialism, and feminism.

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.



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