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Reflections on decentralism

George Woodcock

1969

I was asked to write on decentralism in history, and I find myself looking into shadows where small lights shine as fireflies do, endure a little, vanish, and then reappear like Auden's messages of the just. The history of decentralism has to be written largely in negative, in winters and twilights as well as springs and dawns, for it is a history which, like that of libertarian beliefs in general, is not observed in progressive terms. It is not the history of a movement, an evolution. It is the history of something that, like grass, has been with us from the human beginning, something that may go to earth, like bulbs in winter, and yet be there always, in the dark soil of human society, to break forth in unexpected places and at undisciplined times.

Palaeolithic man, food-gatherer and hunter, was a decentralist by necessity, because the earth did not provide enough wild food to allow crowding, and in modern remotenesses that were too wild or unproductive for civilized men to penetrate, men still lived until very recently in primitive decentralism: Australian aborigines, Papuan inland villagers, Eskimos in northern Canada. Such men developed, before history touched them, their own complex techniques and cultures to defend a primitive and precarious way of

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life; they often developed remarkable artistic traditions as well, such as those of the Indians of the Pacific rain forests and some groups of Eskimos. But, since their world was one where concentration meant scarcity and death, they did not develop a political life that allowed the formation of authoritarian structures nor did they make an institution out of war. They practised mutual aid for survival, but this did not make them angels; they practised infanticide and the abandonment of elders for the same reason.

I think with feeling of those recently living decentralist societies because I have just returned from the Canadian Arctic where the last phase of traditional Eskimo life began as recently as a decade ago. Now, the old nomadic society, in which people moved about in extended families rather than tribes, is at an end, with all its skills abandoned, its traditions, songs and dances fading in the memory. Last year the cariboo-hunting Eskimos probably built their last igloo; now they are herded together into communities ruled by white men, where they live in groups of four to six hundred people, in imitation of white men's houses and with guaranteed welfare handouts when they cannot earn money by summer construction work. Their children are being taught by people who know no Eskimo, their young men are losing the skills of the hunt; power élites are beginning to appear in their crowded little northern slums, among a people who never knew what power meant, and the diminishing dog teams (now less than one family in four owns dogs and only about one family in twenty goes on extended hunting or trapping journeys) are symbolic of the loss of freedom among a people who have become physically and mentally dependent on the centralized, bureaucratic-ridden world which the Canadian Government has built it since it set out a few years ago to rescue the people of the North from "barbarism" and insecurity.

The fate of the Eskimos, and that of so many other primitive cultures during the past quarter of a century, shows that the old, primal decentralism of Stone Age man is doomed even when it has survived into the modern world. From now on, man will be

decentralist by intent and experience, because he has known the evils of centralization and rejected them.

Centralization began when men settled on the land and cultivated it. Farmers joined together to protect their herds and field from other men who still remained nomadic wanderers; to conserve and share out the precious waters; to placate the deities who held the gifts of fertility, the priest who served the deities, and the kings who later usurped the roles of priest and god alike. The little realms of local priest-kings grew into the great valley empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and overtowering these emerged the first attempt at a world empire, that of the Achaemenian Kings of Persia who established an administrative colossus which was the prototype of the centralized state, imitated by the despots of Northern India, the Hellenistic god-kings, and the divine Caesars of Rome.

We have little knowledge how men clung to their local loyalties and personal lives, how simple people tried to keep control of the affairs and things that concerned them most, in that age when writing recorded the deeds of kings and priests and had little to say about common men. But if we can judge from the highly traditional and at least partly autonomous village societies which still existed in India when the Moghuls arrived, and which had probably survived the centuries of political chaos and strife that lay between Moghuls and Guptas, it seems likely that the farther men in those ages lived away from the centres of power, the more they established and defended rights to use the land and govern their own local affairs, so long as the lord's tribute was paid. It was, after all, on the village communities that had survived through native and Moghul and British empires that Gandhi based his hopes of *panchayat raj*, a society based on autonomous peasant communes.

In Europe the Dark Ages after the Roman Empire were regarded by Victorian historians as a historical waste land ravaged by barbarian hordes and baronial bandits. But these ages were also in fact an interlude during which, in the absence of powerful centralized authorities, the decentralist urge appeared again, and village

communes established forms of autonomy which in remoter areas, like the Pyrenees, the Alps and the Appennines, have survived into the present. To the same "Dark" Ages belong the earliest free city republics of mediaeval Europe, which arose at first for mutual protection in the ages of disorder, and which in Italy and Germany remained for centuries the homes of European learning and art and of such freedom as existed in the world of their time.

Out of such village communes and such cities arose, in Switzerland, the world's first political federation, based on the shared protection of local freedoms against feudal monarchs and renaissance despots.

Some of these ancient communes exist to this day; the Swiss Canton of Appenzell still acts as a direct democracy in which every citizen takes part in the annual voting on laws; the Italian city state of San Marino still retains its mountain independence in a world of great states. But these are rare survivals, due mainly to geographic inaccessibility in days before modern transport. As national states began to form at the end of the Middle Ages, the attack on decentralism was led not merely by the monarchs and dictators who established highly organized states like Bourbon France and Cromwellian England, but also by the Church and particularly by the larger monastic orders who in their house established rules of uniform behaviour and rigid timekeeping that anticipated the next great assault on local and independent freedom and on the practice of mutual aid; this happened when the villages of Britain and later of other European countries were depopulated in the Agricultural Revolution of the eighteenth century, and their homeless people drifted into the disciplined factories and suffered the alienation produced by the new industrial towns, where all traditional bonds were broken, and all the participation in common works that belonged to the mediaeval villages became irrelevant.

It was these developments, the establishment of the centralized state in the seventeenth century and of industrial centralization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that made men for the

to health and peace by breaking down the pyramids of authority, so that men can be given to eat the bread of brotherly love, and not the stones of power — of any power.

first time consciously aware of the necessity of decentralism to save them from the soulless world that was developing around them.

Against Cromwell's military state, Gerrard Winstanley and the original Diggers opposed their idea and practice of establishing new communes of landworkers on the waste lands of England, communes which would renounce overlords and extended participation and equality to men, women, and even children.

When the French Revolution took the way of centralism, establishing a more rigidly bureaucratic state than the Bourbons and introducing universal conscription for the first time, men like Jacques Roux and his fellows *enragés* protested in the name of the local communes of Paris, which they regarded as the bases of democratic organization, and at the same time in England William Godwin, the first of the philosophic anarchists, recognized the perils of forms of government which left decision making in the hands of men gathered at the top and centre of society. In his *Political Justice* Godwin envisaged countries in which assemblies of delegates would meet — seldom — to discuss matters of urgent common concern, in which no permanent organs of central government would be allowed to continue, and in which each local parish would decide its own affairs by free agreement (and not by majority vote) and matters of dispute would be settled by *ad hoc* juries of arbitration.

The British and French Utopian socialists of the early nineteenth century, as distinct from the Marxists and the revolutionary socialists led by Auguste Blanqui, were inspired by their revulsion against monolithic industrial and political organization to base the realization of their theories on small communal units which they believed could be established even before the existing society had been destroyed. At that period the American frontier lay still in the valley of the Mississippi, and there was a tendency — which existed until the end of the pioneering days — for the small pioneers societies of trappers and traders, miners and farmers, to organize themselves in largely autonomous communities, that managed their own affairs and in many senses of the word took the

law into their own hands. In this society, where men responded to frontier conditions by *ad hoc* participatory and decentralist organization, the European and American Utopian socialists, as well as various groups of Christian communities, tried to set up self-governing communes which would be the cells of the new fraternal world. The followers of Cabet and Fourier, of Robert Owen and Josiah Warren, all played their part in a movement which produced hundreds of communities and lasted almost a century; its last wave ebbed on the Pacific coast in the Edwardian era, when a large Finnish socialist community was established on the remote island of Sointula off the coast of British Columbia. Only the religious communities of this era, which had a purpose outside mere social theory, survived; even today some of the Mennonite communities of Canada keep so closely to their ideals of communitarian autonomy that they are leaving the country to find in South America a region where they can be free to educate their children as they wish. The secular communities all vanished; the main lesson their failure taught was that decentralist organization must reach down to the roots of the present, to the needs of the actual human beings who participate, and not upward into the collapsing dream structures of a Utopian future.

Other great crises in the human situation have followed the industrial revolution, and every one has produced its decentralist movements in which men and women have turned away from the nightmares of megapolitics to the radical realities of human relationships. The crisis of the Indian struggle for independence caused Gandhi to preach the need to build society upon the foundation of the village. The bitter repressions of Tsarist Russia led Peter Kropotkin to develop his theories of a decentralised society integrating industry and agriculture, manual and mental skills. World War II led to considerable community movement among both British and American pacifists, seeking to create cells of sane living in the interstices of a belligerent world, and an even larger movement of decentralization and communitarianism has arisen

in North America in contradiction to the society that can wage a war like that in Vietnam. Today it is likely that more people than ever before are consciously engaged in some kind of decentralist venture which expresses not merely rebellion against monolithic authoritarianism, but also faith in the possibility of a new, cellular kind of society in which at every level the participation in decision-making envisaged by nineteenth-century anarchists like Proudhon and Kropotkin will be developed.

As the monstrous and fatal flaws of modern economic and political centralism become more evident, as the State is revealed ever more convincingly as the enemy of all human love, the advocacy and practice of decentralism will spread more widely, if only because the necessity for it will become constantly more urgent. The less decentralist action is tied to rigid social and political theories, and especially to antediluvian ones like those of the Marxists, the more penetrating and durable its effects will be. The soils most favourable to the spread of decentralism are probably countries like India, where rural living still predominates, countries like Japan where the decentralization of factories and the integration of agricultural and industrial economies has already been recognized as a necessity for survival, and the places in our western world where the social rot has run deepest and the decentralists can penetrate like white ants. The moribund centres of the cities; the decaying marginal farmlands; these are the places which centralist governments using bankers' criteria of efficiency cannot possibly revivify, because the profit would not be financial but human. In such areas the small and flexible cell of workers, serving the needs of local people, can survive and continue simultaneously the tasks of quiet destruction and cellular building. But not all the work can be done in the shadows. There will still be the need for theoreticians to carry on the work which Kropotkin and Geddes and Mumford began in the past, of demonstrating the ultimately self-destructive character of political and industrial centralism, and showing how society as a whole, and not merely the lost corners of it, can be brought back