

The Fallacy of Decentralization

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In 1947, I was delivering hay from Tel Yoseph, an Israeli kibbutz, to Ein Harod, another kibbutz less than a mile away. The farm manager of Ein Harod signed the delivery papers for twenty-eight bales, and I filed the papers with the office of Tel Yoseph. "How much will Ein Harod be charged?" I asked the clerk. He was astonished by my question. "By Afula prices, of course." Afula is a town not far from both kibbutzim. While the kibbutzim neither use money nor set prices in their internal transactions, they charge each other the prices which prevail in the "free" (i.e., capitalistic) market of Afula. The national kibbutz associations help fledgling kibbutzim, but in general the mechanisms for transfer payments are very weak. No wonder that rather well-off kibbutzim are to be found next to extremely poor ones. And over the years, the rich kibbutzim get richer while the poor ones remain poor.

The kibbutz movement is of considerable interest to those who favor decentralization as a way of providing a genuinely participatory system. But it also illustrates the fact that decentralization often serves ineffectively those values which require a national mechanism that is sufficiently powerful to reallocate sources among local units (a prerequisite for social justice) and the handling of many other "inter-unit," nation-wide issues and values (e.g., the financing of institutions of higher education which would advance the movement).

I am far from being an expert on Yugoslavia, but I understand from those who are that the relatively considerable decision-making power given to small residential and work units generates some similar, symptomatic problems. Thus, for instance, I am told that there is little "income transfer" from the more affluent parts of Yugoslavia to such poverty-stricken, underdeveloped regions as Mace-

donia, Yugoslavia's equivalent of our South. Efforts to establish inter-local bus lines, especially, those which require inter-regional coordination, are said to face difficulties similar to those encountered in attempts to establish rapid transit systems in our cities, when the consent and financial support of a large number of independent local governments are needed.

To generalize, a truly decentralized participatory system will tend to be highly responsive to the needs of the members in each participatory locality, but will tend to neglect inter-local, inter-regional and national needs, both of the allocative (e.g., social justice) type and those which are best served collectively (e.g., a priming of the economy).

Decentralization offers a significant basis for participation. It fosters a citizenry that is informed and in control, tending to make society and its governance more humane. Hence, it is not surprising that many attempts are made to explain, or to explain away, the drawbacks of decentralization. Some anarchists suggest that the values fostered by decentralization are of such high priority that its disadvantages are more than acceptable. Laissez-faire liberals say, as Kenneth Boulding has argued, that once we have a large number of small, competitive political units, the laws of free competition will operate so as to promote various "inter-unit" values without the need for an institutionalized "super-unit" (or national) mechanism.

Another "automatic" solution comes from the New Left; Berndt Rabehl has written, "How will the structure of the city look? It can be divided up into many, individual collectivities of three, four or five thousand men, who center themselves around a factory. Thereby the factory becomes not merely a work center, but a place offering all possibilities for the unfolding of life. Computers will be used to figure what has to be built, how the plans must look, what dangers may appear." This approach ignores moral and political questions, making all of the issues seem to be merely factual. In short, it may be said that what we seek

for America is a system that is less centralized than the existing one, but not a system which is completely or even highly decentralized.

This brings up the question of the nature of our national system and what its decentralization would entail. As I see it, the formulation of military, foreign and space policy is centralized, especially those decisions which may involve life or death for millions in nuclear war. If there were a realistic way by which *these* decisions could be decentralized, the welfare of all of us would probably be enhanced. (Even here, however, there would be a hidden assumption: that people are good, at least peace-loving, while governments, ours at any rate, are evil and war-oriented. Possibly the increased participation of citizens in foreign-policy decisions would have the desired effect only when the citizens themselves were liberated from the effects of the centralized society. How we might survive the transition period is a problem almost as intractable as the original one of a decentralized power to declare war.)

For domestic policy, quite a different system seems to prevail in the contemporary United States; hence an approach quite different from decentralization may be required to make the governance of society in this area more participatory and humane. While the foreign-policy state is run chiefly from Washington by generals and bureaucrats in coalition with national power groups, the domestic state is largely fragmented and controlled locally from city halls, state capitals and "private governments" (such as universities and hospitals) in coalition with local power groups and with only spot interference from Washington. Thus, for example, it is empirically incorrect to assume that anyone in Washington has effective control over the educational system; decisions are made by fifty state Departments of Education, thousands of local school boards, and the trustees of 2,000 colleges and universities, with surprisingly little coordination. The same holds for police departments, health and welfare services, etc. Even the funds which come from Washington are spent largely according to local decisions. When national standards exist at all, they are frequently not effectively enforced; the HEW guidelines for desegregation are a case in point.

Domestic policy cannot be *much* more decentralized than it is now. And in considering whether or not to decentralize further, one must take into account that, by and large, the domestic services provided by the federal government—while highly bureaucratic, too-late too-little, slow to reflect innovations, and more slanted toward the middle class than the underclass—are more responsive to human needs, minority groups, etc., than those provided by most local authorities. Some, actually surprisingly few communities, are progressive but the administration of most cities and states (and, I suspect, of the remaining villages) is significantly inferior to that provided by federal agencies on all conceivable criteria. On the local level, power elites can gain their way more readily, nepotism and unvarnished corruption are more rampant, civil service standards are lower, the cost per unit of achievement is higher, and disregard for minorities is greater. It is the

pull of national forces—both the organization of people on relief, and HEW—which increases the level of welfare payments, while most states seek to keep it down; the desegregation that has occurred is due largely to nationwide efforts by such forces as the civil rights movement and the Department of Justice, and so forth. It is quite

unclear, at least to me, why the sum of the parts of this country is less reactionary (when one reviews domestic programs) than most of the parts taken singly, but I am quite sure that it is so.

Those who favor decentralization, at least if they come from the Left, will say that they have in mind units smaller than states or cities. But even these units—South Boston or East Palo Alto—tend to be monopolized and corrupt in their governance. The reformers may say that they seek still *smaller* units, like the student communes, but these are at best a way of life for a very tiny minority. Moreover, they are too small to attend to most human needs, and the coordination of scores of such units to provide the needed services collectively is nearly impossible.

It is further said that local units can more easily be made participatory. This may be true for a few communities, mainly campus towns and select suburbs, but is not the case for most localities. On the contrary, it seems to me comparatively easier (though still far from easy) to gain participation in decisions made on the national level

and to achieve the measure of transformation (e.g., un-tightening) of which this society is capable by joining into national social movements such as peace, civil rights, and now that of the students. By coordinated effort, scores of Congressmen can be influenced, the outcomes of elections affected, Washington (or the Pentagon) confronted, etc. All this does *not* yield an open, participatory society, but it does fuel more reforms *and* radicalization than most strictly local efforts (as distinct from local projects which are part of a national movement).

Furthermore, I hold, though this cannot be elaborated here, that from a psychological viewpoint, participation will have a restless, Sisyphean quality unless it is tied to causes beyond personal gratification. Without helping to liberate others, without helping to create the *societal* conditions for personal liberation—without *macro*-participation—there cannot be authentic micro-participation.

The main opportunities to broaden the participation of all citizens in domestic policies—and, to the degree that the national Establishment does not respond to this pressure, the radicalization of those not yet radicalized—lie in *national* social movements, usually combining a broad critical perspective with mobilization around a specific issue. To anchor this point further, I must digress briefly to indicate my views of the national power structure and of how it may be transformed. The American reality seems to me to stand somewhere between the vulgar conception of the power elite, which sees the control of society as monopolized by one well-coordinated group, and the conception of democratic pluralism, which sees the country taking its direction as the result of interaction among a large variety of autonomous “interest groups.” There is, I think, a plurality of national actors, but they are far from being equal in power. In other words, there is a highly *slanted* pluralism, with the country’s course being determined to a large extent, but not exclusively, by a not well coordinated group of powerful actors (e.g., the National Association of Manufacturers, the Armed Services), with a significant role being played—especially on the domestic front—by secondary groups (e.g., AFL-CIO) and, occasionally, by the least powerful groups, such as the farm workers.

To view the same structure dynamically, there is an option other than the four now most frequently discussed: disintegration or anarchy, revolutionary change, token ameliorations (“reforms”), or open authoritarianism following a right-wing backlash. The fifth alternative consists of significant *and* accumulative changes that result in a gradual although not necessarily slow transformation to a fundamentally different society.

The extent to which this option is realizable depends directly on whether or not change in the *national* power balance is possible. The more the least powerful groups become politically aware and mobilized for political action on the national level (as is gradually happening with the blacks), and the more they find partners in “secondary” groups which have some power but also have, or can find, an interest in societal transformation (e.g., students, middle-class ethnic minorities), the greater the chance that a

fundamental transformation will take place. In short, national movements are an essential propellant for social change. And only *after* such transformation is accomplished can I foresee the conditions under which decentralization would lead not to greater oligarchization but rather to the local transformation of ecological units in the direction of broadened participation.

I deliberately focus here on power, mobilization for political action and national coordination—issues which to some members of the New Left seem rather old-fashioned as compared to “deeper” existential matters. The mere fact that these issues have been raised before does not automatically make them obsolete. And while I can see the appeal of the short cuts offered by the Theatre of the Absurd, the student communes, and even the social islands of the hippies, the integrated and spontaneous way of life cannot, as I see it, be sustained unless the *national* structures are first transformed. Moreover, whatever progress can be made locally, unless it is very microscopic (limited to a few pads or barns), depends on the moral and intellectual sustenance as well as the political protection of a national movement.

There seems to be one exception to this sociological iron law: participation in “private governments” of corporate units as distinct from ecological-residential ones. Universities, churches, hospitals and some places of work can be made more participatory without first transforming the national structures. Again, I am much more confident about the sociological observation than about the reasons. Perhaps this capacity to evolve autonomously in smaller units without first unlocking larger structures is due to the fact that forces of control and sanctioning, that is, the police, are more closely tied to ecological units and elites than to private governments. These governments seem reluctant to resort to such forces because a measure of corporate autonomy serves their interests, and they are afraid—as university faculties so obviously are—that once the government is regularly invited to deal with their rebels, it will stay to deal with them. The result is well illustrated by the relative reluctance of churches, universities and other private governments to call in the police, as compared with the cities of Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles, Oakland and Newark, and by the difficult time Congress has in finding ways to legislate about conduct in the action-space of these private units.

In short, on the domestic front (as distinct from military and foreign policy), little will be achieved by most forms of decentralization, because the system is already rather decentralized, and the local-ecological units are chiefly controlled by oligarchies which are tighter than the national domestic system. The greatest, although far from great, opportunities for mobilizing power toward transformation are on the national level, including unlocking the system for broader local participation. Participation in “private governments” is an exception so far, but it is not clear how long it will remain so; they, too, may become tied into municipal and state sanctioning systems to be controlled like local-ecological units.