The Fallacy of Decentralization

AMITAI ETZIONI
Mr. Etzioni is professor of sociology at Columbia University and author of The Active Society (Free Press).

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 Macedonia, 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
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 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 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 nation-wide efforts by such forces as the civil rights movement and the Department of Justice, and so forth.
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 elec-
tions 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 con-
ditions for personal liberation—without macro-participa-
tion—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 pres-
sure, 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 con-
ception 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 Ser-
VICES), 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 follow-
ing 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, mid-

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fundamental transformation will take place. In short, na-
tional movements are an essential propellant for social
change. And only after such transformation is accom-
plished can I foresee the conditions under which decen-
tralization 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-fash-
toned 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 pro-
gress 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 protec-
tion of a national movement.

There seems to be one exception to this sociological
iron law: participation in "private governments" of cor-
porate 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 cor-
porate 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 mili-
tary 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 unlock-
ing the system for broader local participation. Participa-
tion in "private governments" is an exception so far, but it
is not clear how long it will remain so; they, too, may be-
come tied into municipal and state sanctioning systems to
be controlled like local-ecological units.