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Decentralism and the End of Dichotomous Thinking

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It's time to undertake long overdue improvements to that which we have been mistaking for democracy in the putatively liberal West. The process whereby some small number of people vote in periodic elections between two nearly identical parties, both bought and paid for, both clearly committed to the same oppressive bureaucracies of capital and the state, is a poor substitute for the promise of genuine people's self-government. We must begin to think about and formulate democracy in a fundamentally different way, as a network of active processes through which real communities of people govern common resources and hold shared service-providing organizations accountable. Active democracy cannot be today's hollow representative electoralism, but must mean engaged, collective participation in day-to-day issues, where the principle of self-governance permeates the social culture. If self-governance is to have any practical meaning, democracy cannot find the millions and billions of us governed by an extremely small subset in a faraway capital. The United States is home to an estimated 330 million or so

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people, and the voting members of Congress in both houses number 535. The absurdity of the situation is hard to overstate and is compounded by the fact that even those 535 are today a mere showpiece. The most important aspects of public policy are not subject to congressional debate or approval. They are carried out on bureaucratic autopilot by an unelected and permanent corps of, in award-winning journalist William M. Arkin's words, "gray men," professional, nonpartisan guardians of the status quo. This system rules with the tacit approval of legislators of both parties—at the very least, they are not positioned to check its power or hold it to account. Power has become totally distant and anonymous.

Any remedy, then, must entail the decentralization and re-localization of political power, the ability of communities to meaningfully govern their own affairs. In a short editorial published in 1985, Nigel Thrift examined "three key ideas" underpinning "the idea of a 'decentralist socialism.'" The first imperative of the idea is vigilance against the concentrated power of the centralized state, which acts as an impediment to genuine democracy and socialism. Given the dominance of the modern state both as a physical fact of life and as an idea in the minds of people around the world, this, the libertarian or anti-state prong, is arguably the most important. Second is the practical extension of democracy as a process to "all areas of social life," with democracy defined not as bureaucratic electoralism, but as the genuine "passage of power to the powerless." It is important to emphasize "that democracy of this type stands in direct opposition to the democracy of the bureaucratic state."¹ The latter is shaped and defined by "a strict hierarchical relationship between rulers and ruled," by the fact that the many people affected by policies and decisions are decidedly not the

¹ Brian C. Lovato, *Democracy, Dialectics, and Difference: Hegel, Marx, and 21st Century Social Movements* (Routledge 2016), page 44.

groups who will always attempt to impose vicious, hierarchical systems of domination. If the rest of us remain in a state of unawareness, bewilderment, and social alienation, we all but guarantee a future of extreme social and economic inequality and the authoritarianism that attends it. If we continue to reshape our social environments using the tools we've inherited, a sane, cooperative, libertarian future opens itself to us.

few people empowered to form those policies and make those decisions.²

We may contrast these “smaller, self-organized, and distributed” models to top-down market and state institutions. Here, the capitalist market and the state are treated quite correctly as examples of hierarchy, centralism, and authoritarianism, grouped together rather than mistakenly set in opposition to one another in a false, insufficiently articulated ideological paradigm. In her decentralist manifesto, *Decentralism: Where It Came From—Where Is It Going?*, Mildred Loomis remarked that both “Capitalists and Marxists,” “the powerful forces struggling for dominance” throughout most of the twentieth century, are alike in taking for granted the superiority of gigantic, hierarchical institutions. And yet decentralists must approach terms like capitalism and Marxism with caution, as these little words belie a diverse range of political philosophies and systems. For example, decentralized “libertarian socialism has long been an integral part of the Marxist tradition.”³ And, no doubt, some genuinely decentralist circles of the American libertarian movement use the word capitalism favorably (if mistakenly and misguidedly). In point of fact, while noting the movement’s mixed record on principled opposition to monopoly, Loomis cited the libertarian movement as among contemporary active decentralists.

More accurate and fine-tuned models of ideas would give us more descriptive political spectra that rely less on subjective, indexical terminology like “left-wing” and “right-wing.” The problem is not that this terminology is overly reductionist; rather, it fails to explain or predict anything at all, with normative positions frequently swapping sides in apparently random ways. Because the words “left” and “right” do not carry ethical or political content in themselves, they fail as a model

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

of political philosophy in the most fundamental way. The entire model lacks any real-world utility or predictive power; it is what Kirkpatrick Sale called “the flat-earth delusion of politics.” We continue to employ it only because we seem to lack a better vocabulary, a set of terms and ideas that more fully and accurately reflects the range of possibilities open to us. We continue also because this otherwise useless framework has largely overtaken religion as a source of meaning and tribal membership in an increasingly secular West.

There are several clear similarities between Elinor Ostrom’s approach to commons governance and the mutualism of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Both emphasize the power of people working in and through flat, cooperative structures to “solve social dilemmas such as the over-harvesting of common-pool resources and the underprovision of local public goods.” They articulate a less socially alienated form of political and economic decision making, one that attaches practical, on-the-ground knowledge and information to decision-making capacity, and attaches that capacity, in turn, to accountability mechanisms. Both Ostrom and Proudhon knew that “isolated, anonymous” individuals would behave in socially and economically irresponsible ways, harming the larger community, defecting, in game-theoretic terms.

Much as Proudhon’s had in the context of the mid-nineteenth century, Ostrom’s project set out to both deconstruct and ignore the limitations and imprecisions of the state vs. market, public sector vs. private sector binaries. Her work challenges us to think beyond “the dichotomy of the institutional world into private property exchanges in a market setting and government-owned property organized by a public hierarchy,” where people are mere consumers or voters. In establishing this challenge, Ostrom made both a descriptive claim—that past and currently existing real-world phenomena often are not accurately described by either the

capitalist market or state models—and a normative claim about the relative merits of such alternative arrangements.

The ideas of today’s decentralists often do not fit well (or at all) within the confused left-right or market-state dichotomies. They address problems in their communities with the tools that they have, without permission. Most of the participants in these many overlapping movements “have no idea that they are redeveloping anarchism.” Some may regard themselves as small-government libertarians, some as green leftists. The convergence of belief is not perfect, only important—more important indeed than is popularly understood. We might observe at this point that “all manner of relations of production were and remain widely intermingled even within any one ‘society,’ not to mention world society as a whole.”⁴ This observation can buoy our spirits when we’re dominated by the sense that capitalism and the cold-monster state are unbeatable, that the holders of economic privilege will perpetuate their system forever. Already their power is imperfect, its stranglehold incomplete. More than a century later, it remains difficult to improve upon the words of Peter Kropotkin

True progress lies in the direction of decentralization, both *territorial* and *functional*, in the development of the spirit of local and personal initiative, and of free federation from the simple to the compound, in lieu of the present hierarchy from the centre to the periphery.

The people of the future can have it all—equality, leisure, appropriate, humane technology, etc. Every single possibility is open. But human freedom will have to be a choice made again and again against the predatory impulses of certain sociopathic

⁴ Andre Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (University of California Press 1998), page 331.