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Decentralization and Self-Government

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The Anarchists propose that the state should be abolished; and in so far as it serves as the instrument by means of which the ruling class preserves its privileges; in so far as it is a device for enabling paranoiacs to satisfy their lust for power and carry out their crazy dreams of glory, the state is obviously worthy of abolition. But in complex societies like our own the state has certain other and more useful functions to perform. It is clear, for example, that in any such society there must be some organization responsible for coordinating the activities of the various constituent groups; clear, too, that there must be a body to which is delegated the power of acting in the name of the society as a whole. If the word "state" is too unpleasantly associated with ideas of domestic oppression and foreign war, with irresponsible domination and no less irresponsible submission, then by all means let us call the necessary social machinery by some other name. For the present there is no general agreement as to what that name should be; I shall therefore go on using the bad old word, until some better one is invented. No economic reform, however intrinsically desirable, can lead to desirable changes in individuals and the society they constitute, unless it is carried through in a desirable context and by desirable methods. So far as the state is concerned, the desirable context for reform is decentralization and self-government all round. The desirable methods for enacting reform are the methods of non-violence.

Passing from the general to the particular and the concrete, the rational idealist finds himself confronted by the following questions. First, by what means can the principle of self-government be applied to the daily lives of men and women? Second, to what extent is the self-government of the component parts of a society compatible with its efficiency as a whole? And, thirdly, if a central organization is needed to coordinate the activities of the self-governing parts, what is to prevent this organization from becoming a ruling oligarchy of the kind with which we are only too painfully familiar?

The technique for self-government all round, self-government for ordinary people in their ordinary avocation, is a matter which we cannot profitably discuss unless we have a clear idea of what may be called the natural history and psychology of groups. Quantitatively, a group differs from a crowd in size; qualitatively, in the kind and intensity of the mental life of the constituent individuals. A crowd is a lot of people; a group is a few. A crowd has a mental life inferior in intellectual quality and emotionally less under voluntary control than the mental life of each of its members in isolation. The mental life of a group is not inferior, either intellectually or emotionally, to the mental life of the individual composing it and may, in favorable circumstances, actually be superior.

The significant psychological facts about the crowd are as follows. The tone of crowd emotion is essentially orgiastic and dionysiac. In virtue of his membership of the crowd, the individual is released from the limitations of his personality, made free of the sub-personal, sub-human world of unrestrained feeling and uncriticized belief. To be a member of a crowd is an experience closely akin to alcoholic intoxication. Most human beings feel a craving to escape from the cramping limitations of their ego, to take periodical holidays from their all too familiar, all too squalid little selves. As they do not know how to travel upwards from personality into a region of super-personality and as they are unwilling, even if they do know, to fulfill the ethical, psychological and physiological conditions of self-transcendence, they turn naturally to the



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descending road, the road that leads down from personality to the darkness of sub-human emotionalism and panic animality. Hence the persistent craving for narcotics and stimulants, hence the never failing attraction of the crowd. The success of the dictators is due in large measure to their extremely skillful exploitation of the universal human need for escape from the limitations of personality. Perceiving that people wished to take holidays from themselves in sub-human emotionality, they have systematically provided their subjects with the occasions for doing so. The Communists denounce religion as the opium of the people; but all they have done is to replace this old drug by a new one of similar composition. For the crowd round the relic of the saint they have substituted the crowd at the political meeting; for religious processions, military reviews and May Day parades. It is the same with Fascist dictators. In all the totalitarian states the masses are persuaded, and, even compelled, to take periodical holidays from themselves in the sub-human world of crowd emotion. It is significant that while they encourage and actually command the descent into sub-humanity, the dictators do all they can to prevent men from taking the upward road from personal limitation, the road that leads toward non-attachment to the "things of this world" and attachment to that which is super-personal. The higher manifestations of religion are far more suspect to the tyrants than the lower – and with reason. For the man who escapes from egotism into super-personality has transcended his old idolatrous loyalty, not only to himself, but also to the local divinities – nation, party, class, deified boss. Self-transcendence, escape from the prison of the ego into union with what is above personality, is generally accomplished in solitude. That is why the tyrants like to herd their subjects into those vast crowds, in which the individual is reduced to a state of intoxicated sub-humanity.

It is time now to consider the group. The first question we must ask ourselves is this: when does a group become a crowd? This is not a problem in verbal definition; it is a matter of observation and experience. It is found empirically that group activities and characteristic group feeling become increasingly difficult when more than about twenty or less than about five individuals are involved. Groups which come together for the purpose of carrying out a specific job of manual work can afford to be larger than groups which meet for the purpose of pooling information and elaborating a common policy, or which meet for religious exercises, or for mutual comfort, or merely for the sake of convivially "getting together." Twenty or even as many as thirty people can work together and still remain a group. But these numbers would be much too high in a group that had assembled for the other purposes I have mentioned. It is significant that Jesus had only twelve apostles; that the Benedictines were divided into groups of ten under a dean (Latin decanus from Greek Ten); that ten is the number of individuals constituting a Communist cell. Committees of more than a dozen members are found to be unmanageably large. Eight is the perfect number for a dinner party. The most successful Quaker meetings are generally meetings at which few people are present. Educationists agree that the most satisfactory size for a class is between eight and fifteen. In armies, the smallest unit is about ten. The witches' "coven" was a group of thirteen. And so on. All evidence points clearly to the fact that there is an optimum size for groups and that this optimum is round about ten for groups meeting for social, religious or intellectual purposes and from ten to thirty for groups engaged in manual work. This being so, it is clear that the units of self-government should be groups of the optimum size. If they are smaller than the optimum, they will fail to develop that emotional field which gives to group activity its characteristic quality, while the available



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quantity of pooled information and experience will be inadequate. If they are larger than the optimum, they will tend to split into sub-groups of the optimum size or, if the constituent individuals remain together in a crowd there will be a danger of their relapsing into the crowd's subhuman stupidity and emotionality.

The technique of Industrial self-government has been discussed with a wealth of concrete examples in a remarkable book by the French economist Hyacinth-e-Dubreuil, entitled, A Chacunsa Chance. Among the writers on industrial organization Dubreuil occupies a place apart; for he is almost the only one of them who has himself had experience of factory conditions as a workman. Accordingly, what he writes on the subject of industrial organization carries an authority denied to the utterances of those who rely on second-hand information as a basis for their theories. Dubreuil points out that even the largest industries can be organized so as to consist of a series of self-governing, yet co-ordinated, groups of, at the outside, thirty members. Within the industry each one of such groups can act as a kind of sub-contractor, undertaking to perform so much of such and such a kind of work for such and such a sum. The equitable division of this sum among the constituent members is left to the group itself, as is also the preservation of discipline, the election of representatives and leaders. The examples which Dubreuil quotes from the annals of industrial history and from his own experience as a workman tend to show that this form of organization is appreciated by the workers, to whom it gives a measure of independence even within the largest manufacturing concern, and that in most cases it results in increased efficiency of working. It possesses, as he points out, the further merit of being a form of organization that educates those who belong to it in the practice of co-operation and mutual responsibility.

Under the present dispensation, the great majority of factories are little despotisms, benevolent in some cases, malevolent in others. Even where benevolence prevails, passive obedience is demanded of the workers, who are ruled by overseers, not of their own election, but appointed from above. In theory, they may be the subjects of a democratic state; but in practice they spend the whole of their working lives as the subjects of a petty tyrant. Dubreuil's scheme, if it were generally acted upon, would introduce genuine democracy into the factory. And if some such scheme is not acted upon, it is of small moment to the individual whether the industry in which he is working is owned by the state, by a co-operative society, by a joint stock company or by a private individual. Passive obedience to officers appointed from above is always passive obedience, whoever the general in ultimate control may be. Conversely, even if the ultimate control is in the wrong hands, the man who voluntarily accepts rules in the making of which he has had a part, who obeys leaders he himself has chosen, who has helped to decide how much and in what conditions he himself and his companions shall be paid, is to that extent the free and responsible subject of a genuinely democratic government, and enjoys those psychological advantages which only such a form of government can give.

Of modern wage-slaves, Lenin writes that they "remain to such an extent crushed by want and poverty that they 'can't be bothered with democracy,' have 'no time for politics,' and in the ordinary peaceful course of events, the majority of the population is debarred from participating in public political life." This statement is only partially true. Not all those who can't be bothered with democracy are debarred from political life by want and poverty. Plenty of well-paid workmen and, for that matter, plenty of the wealthiest beneficiaries of the capitalistic system, find that they can't be bothered with politics. The reason is not economic, but psychological; has



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its source, not in environment, but in heredity. People belong to different psycho-physiological types and are endowed with different degrees of general intelligence. The will and ability to take an effective interest in large-scale politics do not belong to all, or even a majority of, men and women. Preoccupation with general ideas, with things and people distant in space, with contingent events remote in future time, is something which it is given to only a few to feel. "What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba?" The answer in most cases is: Nothing whatsoever. An improvement in the standard of living might perceptibly increase the number of those for whom Hecuba meant something. But even if all were rich, there would still be many congenitally incapable of being bothered with anything so far removed from the warm, tangible facts of everyday experience. As things are at present, millions of men and women come into the world disfranchised by nature. They have the privilege of voting on long-range, large-scale political issues; but they are congenitally incapable of taking an intelligent interest in any but short-range, small-scale problems. Too often the framers of democratic constitutions have acted as though man were made for democracy, not democracy for man. The vote has been a kind of bed of Procrustes upon which, however long their views, however short their ability, all human beings were expected to stretch themselves. Not unnaturally, the results of this kind of democracy have proved disappointing. Nevertheless, it remains true that democratic freedom is good for those who enjoy it and that practice in self-government is an almost indispensable element in the curriculum of man's moral and psychological education. Human beings belong to different types; it is therefore necessary to create different types of democratic and self-governing institutions, suitable for the various kinds of men and women. Thus, people with short-range, small-scale interests can find scope for their kind of political abilities in self-governing groups within an industry, within a consumer or producer cooperative, within the administrative machinery of the parish, borough or county. By means of comparatively small changes in the existing systems of local and professional organization it would be possible to make almost every individual a member of some self-governing group. In this way the curse of merely passive obedience could be got rid of, the vice of political indolence cured and the advantages of responsible and active freedom brought to all. In this context it is worth remarking on a very significant change which has recently taken place in our social habits. Materially, this change may be summed up as the decline of the community; psychologically, as the decline of the community sense. The reasons for this double change are many and of various kinds. Here are a few of the more important.

Birth control has reduced the size of the average family and, for various reasons which will be apparent later; the old habits of patriarchal living have practically disappeared. It is very rare nowadays to find parents, married children, and grandchildren living together in the same house or in close association. Large families and patriarchal groups were communities in which children and adults had to learn (often by very painful means) the art of co-operation and the need to accept responsibility for others. These admittedly rather crude schools of community sense have now disappeared.

New methods of transport have profoundly modified the life in the village and small town. Up to only a generation ago most villages were to a great extent self-sufficing communities. Every trade was represented by its local technician; the local produce was consumed or exchanged in the neighborhood; the inhabitants worked on the spot. If they desired instruction or entertainment or religion, they had to mobilize the local talent and produce it themselves. Today



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all this is changed. Thanks to improved transport, the village is now closely bound up with the rest of the economic world. Supplies and technical services are obtained from a distance. Large numbers of the inhabitants go out to work in factories and offices in far-off cities. Music and the drama are provided, not by local talent, but over the ether and in the picture theater. Once all the members of the community were always on the spot; now, thanks to cars, motor cycles and buses the villagers are rarely in their village. Community fun, community worship, community efforts to secure culture have tended to decline for the simple reason that, in leisure hours, a large part of the community's membership is always somewhere else. Nor is this all. The older inhabitants of Middletown, as readers of the Lynds' classical study of American small-town life will remember, complained that the internal combustion engine had led to a decline of neighborliness. Neighbors have Fords and Chevrolets, consequently are no longer there to be neighborly; or if by chance they should be at home, they content themselves with calling up on the telephone. Technological progress has reduced the number of physical contacts, and thus impoverished the spiritual relations between the members of a community. Centralized professionalism has not only affected local entertainment; it had also affected the manifestations of local charity and mutual aid. State-provided hospitals, state-provided medical and nursing services are certainly much more efficient than the ministrations of the neighbors. But this increased efficiency is purchased at the price of a certain tendency on the part of neighbors to disclaim liability for one another and throw their responsibilities entirely upon the central authority. Under a perfectly organized system of state socialism charity would be, not merely superfluous, but actually criminal. Good Samaritans would be prosecuted for daring to interfere in their bungling amateurish way with what was obviously a case for state-paid professionals.

The last three generations have witnessed a vast increase in the size and number of large cities. Life is more exciting and more money can be earned in the cities than in villages and small towns. Hence the migration from country to city. In the van of this migrating host have marched the ambitious, the talented, and the adventurous. For more than a century, there has been a tendency for the most gifted members of small rural communities to leave home and seek their fortune in the towns. Consequently what remains in the villages and country towns of the industrialized countries is in the nature of a residual population, dysgenically selected for its lack of spirit and intellectual gifts. Why is it so hard to induce peasants and small farmers to adopt new scientific methods? Among other reasons, because almost every exceptionally intelligent child born into a rural family for a century past has taken the earliest opportunity of deserting the land for the city. Community life in the country is thus impoverished; but (and this is the important point) the community life of the great urban centers is not correspondingly enriched. It is not enriched for the good reason that, in growing enormous, cities have also grown chaotic. A metropolitan "wen," as Cobbett was already calling the relatively tiny London of his day, is no longer an organic whole, no longer exists as a community, in whose life individuals can fruitfully participate. Men and women rub shoulders with other men and women; but the contact is external and mechanical. Each one of them can say, in the words of the Jolly Miller of the song, "I care for nobody, no, not I, and nobody cares for me." Metropolitan life is atomistic. The city, as a city, does nothing to correlate its human particles into a pattern of responsible, communal living. What the country loses on the swings, the city loses all over again on the roundabouts.



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In the light of this statement of the principal reasons for the recent decline of the community and of the community sense in individuals, we can suggest certain remedies. Schools and colleges can be transformed into organic communities and used to offset, during a short period of the individual's career, the decay in family and village life. (A very interesting experiment in this direction is being made at Black Mountain College in North Carolina.) To some extent, no doubt, the old, "natural" life of villages and small towns, the life that the economic, technological and religious circumstances of the past conspired to impose upon them, can be replaced by a consciously designed synthetic product – a life of associations organized for local government, for sport, for cultural activities and the like. Such associations already exist, and there should be no great difficulty in opening them to larger numbers and, at the same time, in making their activities so interesting that people will wish to join them instead of taking the line of least resistance, as they do now, and living unconnected, atomistic lives, passively obeying during their working hours and passively allowing themselves to be entertained by machinery during their hours of leisure. The existence of associations of this kind would serve to make country life less dull and so do something to arrest the flight toward the city. At the same time, the decentralization of industry and its association with agriculture should make it possible for the countryman to earn as much as the city dweller. In spite of the ease with which electric power can now be distributed, the movement toward the decentralization of industry is not yet a very powerful one. Great centers of population, like London and Paris, possess an enormous power of attraction to industries. The greater the population, the greater the market; and the greater the market, the stronger the gravitational pull exercised upon the manufacturer. New industries establish themselves on the outskirts of large cities and make them become still larger. For the sake of slight increased profits, due to lower distributing costs, the manufacturers are busily engaged in making London chaotically large, hopelessly congested, desperately hard to enter or leave, and vulnerable to air attacks as no other city of Europe is vulnerable. To compel a rational and planned decentralization of industry is one of the legitimate, the urgently necessary functions of the state.

Life in the great city is atomistic. How shall it be given a communal pattern? How shall the individual be incorporated in a responsible, self-governing group? In a modern city, the problem of organizing responsible community life on a local basis is not easily solved. Modern cities have been created and are preserved by the labors of highly specialized technicians. The massacre of a few thousands of engineers, administrators and doctors would be sufficient to reduce any of the great metropolitan centers to a state of plague-stricken, starving chaos. Accordingly, in most of its branches, the local government of a great city has become a highly technical affair, a business of the kind that must be centrally planned and carried out by experts. The only department in which there would seem to be a possibility of profitably extending the existing institutions of local self-government is the department concerned with police-work and the observance of laws. I have read that in Japan, the cities were, and perhaps still are, divided into wards of about a hundred inhabitants apiece. The people in each ward accepted a measure of liability for one another and were to some extent responsible for good behavior and the observance of law within their own small unit. That such a system lends itself to the most monstrous abuses under a dictatorial government is obvious. Indeed, it is reported that the Nazis have already organized their cities in this way. But there is no governmental institution that cannot be abused. Elected parliaments have been used as instruments of oppression;



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plebiscites have served to confirm and strengthen tyranny; courts of justice have been transformed into Star Chambers and military tribunals. Like all the rest, the ward system may be a source of good in a desirable context and a source of unmitigated evil in an undesirable context. It remains in any case a device worth considering by those who aspire to impose a communal pattern upon the atomistic, irresponsible life of modern city dwellers. For the rest, it looks as though the townsman's main experience of democratic institutions and responsible self-government would have to be obtained, not in local administrations, but in the fields of industry and economics, of religious and cultural activity, of athletics and entertainment. In the preceding paragraphs I have tried to answer the first of our questions and have described the methods by which the principle of self-government can be applied to the daily lives of ordinary men and women. Our second question concerns the compatibility of self-government all round with the efficiency of industry in particular and society as a whole. In Russia self-government in industry was tried in the early years of the revolution and was abandoned in favor of authoritarian management. Within the factory discipline is no longer enforced by elected representatives of the Soviet or worker's committee, but by appointees of the Communist Party. The new conception of management current in Soviet Russia was summed up by Kaganovitch in a speech before the seventeenth congress of the Communist Party. "Management," he said, "means the power to distribute material things, to appoint and discharge subordinates, in a word, to be master of the particular enterprise." This is a definition of management to which every industrial dictator in the capitalist countries would unhesitatingly subscribe.

By supporters of the present Russian government it is said that the change over from self-government to authoritarian management had to be made in the interests of efficiency. That extremely inexperienced and ill educated workers should have been unable to govern themselves and keep up industrial efficiency seems likely enough. But in Western Europe and the United States such a situation is not likely to arise. Indeed, Dubreuil has pointed out that, as a matter of historical fact, self-government within factories has often led to increased efficiency. It would seem, then, that in countries where all men and women are relatively well educated and have been accustomed for some time to the working of democratic institutions, there is no danger that self-government will lead to a breakdown of discipline within the factory or a decline in output. But, like "liberty" the word "efficiency" covers a multitude of sins. Even if it should be irrefragably demonstrated that self-government in industry invariably led to a greater contentment and increased output, even if it could be proved experimentally that the best features of individualism and collectivism could be combined if the state were to co-ordinate the activities of self-governing industries, there would still be complaints of "inefficiency." And by their own lights, the complainers would be quite right. For to the ruling classes, not only in the totalitarian, but also in the democratic countries, "efficiency" means primarily "military efficiency." Now, a society in which the principle of self-government has been applied to the ordinary activities of all its members, is a society which, for purely military purposes, is probably decidedly inefficient. A militarily efficient society is one whose members have been brought up in habits of passive obedience and at the head of which there is an individual exercising absolute authority through a perfectly trained hierarchy of administrators. In time of war, such a society can be manipulated as a single unit and with extraordinary rapidity and precision. A society composed of men and women habituated to working in self-governing groups is not a perfect war-machine. Its members may think and have wills of their own. But soldiers must not

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think nor have wills. "Theirs not to reason why; theirs but to do and die."

Furthermore a society in which authority is decentralized, a society composed of co-ordinated but self-governing parts, cannot be manipulated so swiftly and certainly as a totalitarian society under a dictator. Self-government all round is not compatible with military efficiency. So long as nations persist in using war as an Instrument of policy, military efficiency will be prized above all else. Therefore schemes for extending the principle of self-government will either not be tried at all or, if tried, as in Russia, will be speedily abandoned. Inevitably, we find ourselves confronted, yet once more, by the central evil of our time, the overpowering and increasing evil of war.

I must now try to answer our questions concerning the efficiency of a society made up of co-ordinated self governing units and the nature of the co-ordinating body.

Dubreuil has shown that even the largest industrial undertakings can be organized so as to consist of a number of co-ordinated but self-governing groups; and he has produced reasons for supposing that such an organization would not reduce the efficiency of the businesses concerned and might even increase it. This small scale industrial democracy is theoretically compatible with any kind of large-scale control of the industries concerned. It can be (and in certain cases actually has been) applied to industries working under the capitalist system; to businesses under direct state control; to co-operative enterprises; to mixed concerns, like the Port of London Authority, which are under state supervision, but have their own autonomous, functional management. In practice this small-scale industrial democracy, this self-government for all, is intrinsically most compatible with business organizations of the last two kinds – co-operative and mixed. It is almost equally incompatible with capitalism and state socialism. Capitalism tends to produce a multiplicity of petty dictators, each in command of his own little business kingdom. State socialism tends to produce a single, centralized, totalitarian dictatorship, wielding absolute authority over all its subjects through a hierarchy of bureaucratic agents.

Co-operatives and mixed concerns already exist and work extremely well. To increase their numbers and to extend their scope would not seem a revolutionary act, in the sense that it would probably not provoke the violent opposition which men feel toward projects involving an entirely new principle. In its effects, however, the act would be revolutionary; for it would result in a profound modification of the existing system. This alone is a sufficient reason for preferring these forms of ultimate industrial control to all others. The intrinsic compatibility of the co-operative enterprise and mixed concern with small-scale democracy and self-government all round constitutes yet another reason for the preference. To discuss the arrangements for co-ordinating the activities of partially autonomous co-operative and mixed concerns is not my business in this place. For technical details, the reader is referred once again to the literature of social and economic planning. I will confine myself here to quoting a relevant passage from the admirable essay contributed by Professor David Mitrany to the Yale Review in 1934. Speaking of the need for comprehensive planning, Professor Mitrany writes that "this does not necessarily mean more centralized government and bureaucratic administration. Public control is just as likely to mean decentralization – as, for instance, the taking over from a nation-wide private corporation of activities and services which could be performed with better results by local authorities. Planning, in fact, if it is intelligent, should allow for a great variety of organization, and should adapt the structure and working of its parts to the requirements of each case."

A striking change of view on this point is evident in the paradox that the growing demand for

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state action comes together with a growing distrust of the state's efficiency. Hence, even among socialists, as may be seen from the more recent Fabian tracts, the old idea of the nationalization of an industry under a government department, responsible to Parliament for both policy and management, has generally been replaced by schemes which even under public ownership provide for autonomous functional managements. After describing the constitution of such mixed concerns as the Central Electricity Board (set up in England by a Conservative government) the British Broadcasting Corporation and the London Transport Board, Professor Mitrany concludes that it is only "by some such means that the influence both of politics and of money can be eliminated. Radicals and conservatives now agree on the need for placing the management of such public undertakings upon a purely functional basis, which reduces the role of Parliament or of any other representative body to a distant, occasional and indirect determination of general policy."

Above these semi-autonomous "functional managers" there will have to be, it is clear, an ultimate coordinating authority – a group of technicians whose business it will be to manage the managers. What is to prevent the central political executive from joining hands with these technical managers of managers to become the ruling oligarchy of a totalitarian state? The answer is that, so long as nations continue to prepare for the waging of scientific warfare, there is nothing whatever to prevent this from happening – there is every reason, indeed, to suppose that it will happen. In the context of militarism, even the most intrinsically desirable changes inevitably become distorted. In a country which is preparing for modern war, reforms intended to result in decentralization and genuine democracy will be made to serve the purpose of military efficiency – which means in practice that they will be used to strengthen the position of a dictator or a ruling oligarchy.

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