Against a Politics of Scale[*]

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The intellectual production of utopias can he a seductive enterprise for accommodating critical minds: you demonstrate radicalism hut are not challenged to translate it into empirical actions with real people as real actors. The project of "transnational democracy" is not immune to this syndrome of academic radicalism: it offers us the vision of a "brave new world" on such a high level of abstraction that it could lose the ground it's standing on.

  In contrast, we should consider a more limited perspective that gets more specific about the agents or "actors" it addresses. We can call it the perspective of a "Europe of the Communes." The commune, particularly the European urban commune and its republican self-government tradition, may be viewed as the basic unit of action and political identity, and as the agent of an internationalism and international order that differs from the bureaucratic economic and technical integration currently under way. A Europe of the Communes could become a realistic political project. It could unite concerned political scientists with political actors, and promote more effective political participation for concerned citizens than do larger units.

Two decades ago, Robert A. Dahl and Edward R. Tube presented research on a problem that has never been discussed seriously and systematically either before or since: the relationship between "size and democracy." While their empirical findings are outdated, their hypotheses and the tentative answers remain most challenging. While they estimated no single optimal size for democracy (as opposed to Plato, who calculated it as 5,040 heads of family), the authors nevertheless claimed:

> that among the units most needed in the world as it has been evolving lie several at the extremes: we need some very small units and some very large units ... If the giant units are needed for handling transnational matters of extraordinary importance, very small units seem to us necessary to provide a place where ordinary people can acquire the sense and the reality of moral responsibility and political effectiveness in a universe where remote galaxies of leaders spin on in courses mysterious and unfathomable to the ordinary citizen ... As a consequence, the very small unit will become more, not less, important to the sense of effectiveness of the ordinary citizen.

In emphasizing "the sense of effectiveness of citizens' participation," or its opposite-the alienation of people from remote and complex levels of national or international decision making Dahl and Tube raise a central issue lot democratic theory. Is democracy possible on a European scale or would the attempt to construct Europe as a supra-national unit produce more alienation,

frustration, and resignation within such a gigantic polity? "Regionalism" in the U.K., France, and Italy, and the break-up of states like Czechoslovakia and the former Soviet Union, might also be expressions of the alienation caused by the distance between the political decision-making centers and the subjects or objects of these policies.

Feelings and experiences of ineffectiveness, the dissatisfaction of not counting or not being listened to by faraway Brussels executives will likely produce ugly, xenophobic, and anti-internationalist resentments. It could become the fertile ground for demagogues. In the current debate on Europe among its wellmeaning advocates and policy makers, and their academic counterparts, very little concern has been shown for "the people's" relationship to a unified Europe. Instead, we see only a preoccupation with economic, monetary and technical problems.

As far back as 1974, Jean-Marie Guehenno, in his book *The End of Democracy,* warned us against hoping for democracy in units as large as a unified Europe. Democracy remains nothing but a facade if the polity loses its territorial foundation and identity. As Guehenno argued:

> The territorial basis of political modernity, as we have known it for centuries, is being undermined today through new forms of economic modernity ... The human society has become too large in order to still form a political community. Less and less do the citizens represent a unity which is able to express a collective sovereignty; ... they find themselves in an abstract space with increasingly uncertain territorial boundaries ... The nation has been rooted territorially, this is the foundation of freedom and has always been the precondition of an open society ... Between the concept of law and the territory of the state a firm tie was created: The law does not rule over man but over his actions in a defined territory ... Today we have to ask ourselves if democracy is possible without the nation.

Guehenno implies that the answer is no. Thus we should say good-bye to democracy as both an ideal and a political reality as we have known it during its short life span in the past two centuries. Instead, we should prepare ourselves for a "neo-imperial age," with new laws and with transnational hierarchies now represented by international finance managers and global corporations.

We need not accept the author's prognosis, even though he views it as inevitable and irreversible. But we should seriously consider his arguments about the relationship of territory to politics: we cannot have politics without territory, if we understand politics as trying to construct and reconstruct, form and reform the order with justice among socially aggregated people. Politics, as the ordercreating collective effort of human beings, needs both time and space.

Neither of these are metaphors: they are real and concrete, real time and real space, that is, territory. Territory requires boundaries; not borders in the crude and power - political sense we have come to know them between states, sometimes even fortified by barbed wire and concrete walls. But rather boundaries in the sense of limitations, lines of demarcation in order not to be lost in the endlessness of the natural habitat. Nature sometimes provides us, in fact, with "natural boundaries" and whole civilizations have grown and flourished within them.

But even child psychologists not to mention sensitive parents-know that growing babies and young children need such boundaries, such limitations of their world in order to feel protected and to have a system of orientation, a frame of reference and demarcation. Borders must be transgressed all the time-as they are by collectives, by people, and by children growing up and leaving the limits of home and city. Here, in the transgression of given borders, conflicts develop that can and sometimes do lead to violence.

But mostly transgressions promote fertile encounters, productive frictions with "the other." They are exchanges and learning processes. Whatever else we might say about them, we should recognize the physical foundation of these social formations and thus of the politics of societies. Social scientists all too rarely elucidate these crucial anthropological axioms. And to them we can add still others: we often forget that humans are made of flesh and bones, equipped with their senses to see, perceive, and orient themselves in this world. Technology has increasingly displaced our senses with devices that make us see and perceive the unseeable, the imperceptible. The telescope and the microscope are the means and metaphors for the widening and deepening of our knowledge and perception of our physical ambience, our world.

But we've paid a price for it: the price of alienation from this world, which we perceive increasingly only through the mediation of "machines," of technical devices. Without them, we become blind and helpless. We see through looking glasses we see infinitely more, we know more than our predecessors, but at the same time we see and know much less about the world, about nature and about our societies. We have grand and sophisticated social theories, refined concepts and analytical tools. We fill our differentiated categories with infinitely rich data and figures but we lose, at the same time, the contact with the "man around the corner," the "woman next door," and the neighborhood we live in.

Deep down we or at least some of us know it and feel it. Intellectually, and as academics, we can play with the facts and figures we draw from books and statistics, and compose more books and new figures. But a gap remains, or rather a gap has opened that only now is being filled in by people who rebel against the alienation of bigness and grand dimensions. Such "rebels" are the agents of hope for a transformation of state-organized societies into "cosmopolitan democracy."
In their recent study *World Economy and the Misery of Politics,* Narr and Schubert argue that:

> As much as social understanding and action can bridge the widest physical, and can take place in the most diverse social, spaces, it would be mistaken to underestimate the role of vividnees, of sensual perception of the direct social contacts, of common action in one location. One could go so far and argue well-foundedly that phantasy for the most distant affairs and the capacity to comprehend large contexts in an unbiased and self-confident way presupposes in most cases a local praxis.

They draw this conclusion from the affirmation they, Guehenno, and others make that "society is first and foremost a space shaping event."

The loss of "physical contact," of "world alienation" as Hannah Arendt has called it, creates an abstract view or image of the world. It's a view international politicians hold in common with academic international relations experts (who, driven by their profession to "understand," often mimic the perspectives of the politicians). For the Great Statesman, the world consists of a gigantic map composed of *vacua,* power aggregates, spheres of influence, areas of conflicts, zones of interest, and so forth. That this world also consists of people, cultures, histories, religions, and so on, matters very little for those who only respect powers armed with atomic weapons, a high GNP, or similar hardware.

From the Cold War's long decades, we can see where this abstract world view has led us: into, among other things, the most absurd wars, with all their irreparable destructive consequences. The Cold War reflected our alienation from social and human space. It was built into the still prevailing world of power politics, of nation-states, and of bloated political aggregates.

In *Size and Democracy,* Dahl and Tufte quote the social philosopher and international relationist Leopold Kohr to expose him as an eccentric. They cite him as an example of the extreme and ridiculous oversimplifications that social scientists can sometimes generate. While admittedly exaggerated overall, the passage they cite from Kohr's 1957 book *The Breakdown of Nations,* nevertheless suggests something we should carefully consider:

> As the physicists of our time have tried to elaborate an integrated single theory, capable of explaining not only some but all phenomena of the *physical* universe, so I have tried on a different plane to develop a single theory through which not only some but all phenomena of the *social* universe can be reduced to a common denominator. The result is a new and unified political philosophy centering on the *theory of size*. It suggests that there seems only one cause behind all sorts of social misery: *bigness.* Oversimplified as this may seem, we shall find the idea more easily acceptable if we consider that bigness, or oversize, is really much more than just a social problem. It appears to be the one and only problem permeating all creation. Wherever something is wrong, something is too big.

We should be sceptical of single-cause explanations of the socio-political world. Nevertheless, we should not throw out the baby with the bath water. We can always find a "but" in every position or program designed to address problems at their roots. But by doing so, we deter social scientists from even considering root causes.

Consider E.F. Schumacher's once widely read but now often ignored 1973 study, *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered.* It proposes an alternative economic structure to alleviate, if not "solve" the problem of world poverty. At the center of his argument lies the problem of size, not only for economic but also for socio-political units. While he makes a powerful case for smallness, he accepts, as he must, the "duality" of our systems: "We always need both freedom and order. We need the freedom of lots and lots of small, autonomous units, and at the same time, the orderliness of large-scale, possibly global, unity and coordination."

His case for smallness provides the negative answer to a traditional misconception of the "politics of scale," that is, the argument that the bigger the better, the more unification, the more peace, freedom, prosperity, and so forth. This

"misconception" entails a socio-ideological logic that reflects the one-dimensional concept of progress that came to dominate over other conceptions of time, history, future, and progress only in the modern era; that is, since the 15th and 16th centuries. It did not just "become" dominant but rather was imposed hegemonically as part of the solidification of the modern European territorial state.

As a result of this process, the small communes and eventually the powerful cities whether city-state republics or commercial cities with special privileges granted by the overarching empire were absorbed by the larger units, the states. Their consolidation was achieved through, among other things, a systematic militarization of society, the political sphere, and the mercantilist economies. The 1910 book *Capitalism and War,* written by the German economic and social historian Werner Sombart, describes this process.

At about the same time, Max Weber observed the structural similarity if not symbiosis between capitalism and the modern state: both enterprises relied on the principle of rational efficiency. Small political units, on the other hand, became equated with parochialism and backwardness, not to mention their inability to withstand the overwhelming power of a state organized and bureaucratically trained army and an industrialism of large-scale manufacturing.

These brief reminders about European socio-economic history help us understand the critical implications of a strategy for a "Europe of the Communes," especially compared to the developing "Maastricht Europe" of territorial states. A democratic, or rather a "republican," tradition can be found in the various networks of the "Internationale" of European cities. One of the most famous, the Hanse, comprised a league of the big port cities around the Baltic Sea. It's still remembered since its ties were never completely severed. Without such history, we cannot construct the future. Any "transnational democracy" project might have more roots and revivable forerunners than its proponents know about.

We would be wise to learn from the people working in the cultural, commercial and educational departments of the once famous and still proud great cities from Milan to Lubeck, from Riga to Antwerp, from Marseille to Nuremberg, from Amsterdam to Venice, and from London to Stockholm. We would probably discover the rudimentary ties that survive between them, historical memories of their pre-state identities, and serious motivation for reviving such common interests. The "Council of European Cities" might be very grateful to have an interest taken by scholars and academics, committed to constructing an internationalism "with its feet on the ground," where, as Schumacher wrote, "people matter."

Any points these considerations might have in common with the American debate on, "communitarianism" would be purely coincidental, even though we should always seek common ground with those dealing with similar problems. Nevertheless, the "Communes" discussed here have European roots, in European history and the European tradition.

The international orientation, the boundary-transgressing dynamics that a "return" to more communal autonomy hopes to set free, emerges as an essential corollary to the perspective of small size. There is a dialectical relationship

between the small and the cosmopolitan. A duality exists between the sphere of action where we can cooperate directly with others an issues to which we can lend a certain practical competence and the sphere of action where we see local problems and their possible solutions within a framework of worldwide consequences.

We must consider the differences and possible contradictions between indirect global awareness and direct local action. For one thing, as Schumacher reminds us, there is a difference between an abstract consciousness and concrete behavior, and quite understandably so:

> It is true that all men are brothers, but it is also true that in our active personal relationships we can, in fact, be brothers to only a few of them, and we are called upon to show more brotherliness to them than we could possibly show to the whole of mankind. We all know people who talk freely about the brotherhood of man while treating their neighbors as enemies, just as we also know people who have, in fact, excellent relations with all their neighbors while harboring, at the same time, appalling prejudices about all human groups outside their particular circle.

Cosmopolitanism without roots in the "polis" becomes a volatile, hollow and abstract proposition, an empty play on words. And localism without the "cosmos" as a frame of reference becomes narrow-minded, egoistical, parochial, and regressive. We might remind ourselves that the Greek *polis,* the place where politics as a collective human activity was discovered some 2,600 years ago, certainly saw itself within the wider context of a divinely ordered cosmos.

Education plays an important role here: the globe and "global issues" cannot be physically experienced (or only in a limited and superficial way). Instead, we have to learn about them. Pollution is largely invisible, the ozone hole cannot be seen or touched, the global warming of the earth can only be measured by specialists and their technical equipment to name only a few global problems. Even poverty, famine, and the dramatic "population explosion" can be difficult to see and experience by people from richer parts of the world. But we can know about these issues by learning, studying, informing ourselves.

It's quite another thing, however, to act upon these global problems. Arguably, such actions should be pursued only or mainly on the so-called grassroots level: by us, by the people and not for us, not for those people impose technical means solutions. Of course, to build a garbage incinerator requires technological competence. But its framework, the functions it will serve, the problems it will solve, and the conditions it must meet these must be defined from below, from the people an the spot who "act locally" while formulating their goals "globally."

The Shell Oil Company's plan to shuttle their old oil platforms in Europe challenge the globally thinking community of concerned citizens. The Company was defeated, however, locally at the tens of thousands of gas stations all over the continent. We must support such networks of activists who work "from below," horizontally, mobilizing across state and other borders to produce consequences for the hierarchically organized economic and political world structure.

These are the building blocs of transnational democracy. Its actors constitute true "cosmopolitans" much more so than the people who operate politically or economically an a "world scale." The latter often get removed or "abstracted"

so far from real people living in real communes, cities, and socio-historical regions that they lose touch with this world, which becomes for them only a conglomerate of data, facts, and statistics. Their world becomes a real fiction or a fictional reality, but one that cannot be sensually experienced in anything remotely resembling human proportions.

To embrace the form of socio-political organization based on the small-scale commune will challenge the structure of traditional nation-state politics, with the military as its last resort of order, and of the capitalist mode of production, with its economy of scale. We must devise concrete alternatives to the international order and its founding stone, the territorial state. We have to recapture from their historical roots a different concept of progress than the one that has so long monopolized the theory and praxis of our social actions.

The rebirth of the democratic movement during the second half of the 18th century was based explicitly on community. It imagined a Europe of socio-historical regions rather than exclusive nation-states. Such states emerged from the French Revolution, or rather from its perversion by militarization. Rousseau was the spiritual father of small-scale republicanism in Western Europe, and Jefferson based his hopes for a democratic American future on the strength of the wards.

In the Central Europe of the early 19th century, most "progressive intellectuals" saw political diversity as an asset rather than a hindrance to true cosmopolitanism: they opted for *Weltburgertum* and against the *Nationalstaat*. A small dukedom like Weimar was intended to be, under the guidance of Goethe, a model and alternative to the nation-state backed by nationalists and a competitive power-oriented bourgeoisie. Of course, that classical Weimar was not the winning model. But which contributed more to world culture and transnational understanding (the precondition for cosmopolitan cooperation): Weimar or the unified German state?

This is not a historical question but one that deals with contemporary Europe and its future. It asks what type of Europe we want, and beyond that, what type of international society we want: do we seek a world rich in cultural diversity and socio-political diversity between many regions and communes? Or, do we seek a world unified, integrated, and standardized in the interests of banks and transnational corporations? So far, the latter seems to predict the future. The former remains a perspective yet to be constructed, against many powerful tendencies and forces.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Dahl, Robert A. & Edward R. Tufte. 1973. *Size and Democracy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Schumacher, E.F. 1973. *Small is Beautiful. A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*. London: Blond & Briggs.

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