

The Contexts of Democracy

Robert Nisbet

Foreword by
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The March of Freedom by Edwin J. Feulner, Jr.

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Foreword

Although liberalism appeared to be the dominant political philosophy in America in the post–World War II period, it was already beginning to decline. In contrast, the pivotal years between 1950 and 1953 produced a series of brilliant books that exerted a profound influence on American conservatism and the course of American politics. They included William F. Buckley Jr.’s searing polemic, *God and Man at Yale*, Eric Voegelin’s magisterial *The New Science of Politics*, Russell Kirk’s masterwork, *The Conservative Mind*, and a classic of sociology that has been in print for fifty years—Robert Nisbet’s *The Quest for Community*. Not as well known among conservatives as it should be, I have selected an excerpt from the last work for the President’s Essay of 2003.

Robert Nisbet’s thesis (drawing on Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville) was that the emergence of the sovereign political state was “the greatest single influence upon social organizations in the modern West.” The West’s history since the Middle Ages was in fact the story of the decline of “intermediate associations” between the individual and the state. However, the deterioration of such institutions as the family, the church, and the neighborhood had not, as many intellectuals had predicted, liberated man. Instead, it had produced isolation, alienation, and despair. But the simple fact is that, in the words of historian George Nash, man cannot live in “Hobbesian isolation.”

“The quest for community will not be denied,” Nisbet maintained, “for it springs from some of the powerful needs of human nature—needs for a clear sense of cultural purpose, membership, status, and continuity.” Seeking to consolidate its power, the modern totalitarian state sought to satisfy these needs and, tragically, succeeded in many instances.

“The single most impressive fact in the twentieth century in Western society,” Nisbet said, “was the fateful combination of the widespread quest for community ... and the apparatus of political power” wielded by the totalitarian state. Not only did the centralized state perform more “efficiently” the social functions of the traditional smaller communities, it promised to alleviate the isolation and loneliness of the individual. In the promise of unity and belonging, Nisbet said, “lies much of the magic of totalitarian mystery, appeal and authority.”

The totalitarian state depended upon two devices to coax the individual into a new “national community”—the intoxicating spirit of war and the equally intoxicating rhetoric of a charismatic leader. Thus was created, according to Nisbet, the total political state of the twentieth century. Such a state, the author William A. Schambra stated, did not always manifest itself in the “brutal repression or naked terror of Soviet or Nazi totalitarianism.” It often appeared as the benevolent provider of the material needs of its citizens and the antidote to the unbearable sense of isolation—that is, as the modern welfare state created and nurtured in America by the Progressives from Woodrow Wilson to Franklin D. Roosevelt.

But for all its seeming benevolence, Nisbet insisted, the national political community, “centralized and omniscient,” remained the most profound threat to freedom in human history. “Total political centralization,” he said, “can lead only to social and cultural death.” To live in freedom, man must break the bonds between himself and the state through a revitalization of intermediate associations such as the family, the church and

the neighborhood, the “little platoons” of life about which Burke spoke so eloquently.

The desire for community, Nisbet also insisted, could not be satisfied by individualism which overlooked the fact that its ideals were unattainable except in a community. Individualists, said Nisbet, failed to recognize the close dependence of their thought on “the subtle, infinitely complex lines of habit, tradition, and social relationship.”

What was needed was neither centralized authority nor unrestrained individualism but a middle way—prudent planning that contented itself with “the setting of human life, not human life itself.” Echoing F. A. Hayek in *The Road to Serfdom*, Nisbet said that planning for masses of individuals was not only “a hopeless exercise” but likely to produce that “combination of externally contrived goals and unconditional power” that is “the substance of tyranny and the path to annihilation of personality.” Echoing the fusionist philosophy of Frank Meyer, Nisbet stated that man’s social needs could only be fulfilled “with the groups and associations that we are given in experience” along with “the prime conditions of individual integrity and autonomy.”

When *The Quest for Community* appeared in 1953, American liberals dismissed its message because they were wed to the idea of a national community while conservatives of a libertarian bent paid it scant attention because they favored an individualism that was, however, of little use against a totalitarian state. But Russell Kirk and other traditional conservatives praised *The Quest* warmly, and Nisbet received congratulatory letters from, among others, T. S. Eliot and Reinhold Niebuhr. Then and later, Nisbet acknowledged his deep debt to Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*, which, he said, “gave scholarly and timely pedigree to conservatism in England and the United States, demonstrating the key role of Burke in both countries.”

In time, *The Quest for Community* became a widely quoted classic, and the author has been recognized as “the most prominent and influential conservative sociologist in postwar America.”

Robert Nisbet was born in Los Angeles, California, on September 30, 1913, and grew up in the small oil town of Maricopa. Wherever they lived—Santa Cruz, San Luis Obispo—education was a constant of the Nisbet family. Robert enrolled at the University of California-Berkeley in 1932 and except when he was in the Army during World War II remained there for the next twenty-one years, as undergraduate, graduate student, and faculty member. He studied under the cultural historian Frederick J. Teggart, who was “almost evangelical” in his discussions of “the built-in conflict between family and state in the history of mankind,” and under Max Radin, an expert on Roman law.

By his own admission, Nisbet began as an ardent undergraduate supporter of the New Deal, but by the late 1930s, his support had turned to alienation. It seemed to Nisbet that the New Deal had immersed itself in “an impossible combination of political centralization and of administrative bureaucracy.” It was upon his return to Berkeley after the war, wrote his biographer Brad Lowell Stone, that Nisbet first probed the works of his “two greatest intellectual heroes,” Burke and Tocqueville, who strengthened his belief in the critical role of intermediate associations. Nisbet came to believe that “it is the family, not the individual, that is the real molecule of society, the key link of the social chain of being.” And as regards society and the state, society is both prior to the state and far more important.

Always a person of high energy, Nisbet accepted an appointment in 1953—the same year as the publication of *The Quest for Community*—as dean of a new liberal arts college established by the University of California in Riverside. He spent the next ten years in administration, except for one “splendid, invigorating” year as a visiting professor at the University of Bologna in Italy. Having rediscovered the joy of teaching at Bologna, Nisbet left administration in 1963 and returned to Riverside where in

addition to his classes he wrote five books on sociology and education over the next eight years, including *The Degradation of Academic Dogma: The University in America 1945–1970*. Nisbet left California for the University of Arizona but found the intellectual atmosphere there less stimulating than he had hoped and accepted in 1974 the Albert Schweitzer Chair of the Humanities at Columbia University. Among his friends on and off campus in New York were the renowned educator Jacques Barzun and the father of neoconservatism, Irving Kristol.

In an autobiographical introduction to *The Making of Modern Society*, Nisbet said that he hoped he would die over his typewriter, and he almost did. During his years at Columbia, he continued to write prolifically, publishing, for example, the highly regarded work, *Twilight of Authority*. He argued therein that although the full flowering of the welfare state occurred in the last four decades, its roots were in World War I and Woodrow Wilson. According to Nisbet, Wilson’s “political, economic, social and intellectual reorganization of America in the short period 1917–1919 is one of the most extraordinary feats in the long history of war and polity.” Within these few months, Nisbet wrote, Wilson “transformed traditional, decentralized, regional and localist America into a war state that at its height permeated every aspect of life.”

Having vowed to leave the academy before growing indifferent to the demands of teaching, Nisbet retired from teaching in 1978 (at age 65) and moved to Washington, D. C., where he joined the American Enterprise Institute as resident scholar and then adjunct scholar. But he still had much to say, publishing six more books—including *The Present Age: Progress and Anarchy in Modern America*—until his death in 1996, just short of his eighty-third birthday. With Richard Weaver, he argued that “everything vital in history reduces itself ultimately to ideas, which are the motive forces... Man is what he thinks the transcending moral values are in his life and in the lives of those around him.”

Robert Nisbet received many honors and awards throughout his life, including the Award of Merit from Italy, the Ingersoll Award for Scholarly Letters, and the 1988 Jefferson Lectureship, one of the most prestigious academic awards in the nation. Within and without the United States, biographer Stone summed up, Nisbet is recognized as “one of the most original and influential American social theorists of his generation.” Although he published several works deserving of study and acclamation, his reputation rests most securely on *The Quest for Community*.

We are fortunate to have Robert Nisbet’s mature reflections on his most enduring work (written forty years after publication) and how he came to be a self-described conservative. Although he did not think of *The Quest for Community* as “a conservative treatise,” he wrote, he was not taken aback by its identification as such. He himself had become increasingly conservative by the early 1950s, influenced by the “ascent to conservatism” of such individuals as Malcolm Muggeridge in Great Britain and the “spectacular conversions” of once fervid Marxists like Arthur Koestler in the West. Nisbet also noted the signal influence of F. A. Hayek, whom he called “the morning star of America’s oncoming conservatism,” and works like Richard Weaver’s *Ideas Have Consequences*, which drew “surprisingly good reviews even in the liberal press.”

Contributing significantly to the conservative renaissance of the 1950s, he said, was the restoration to proper intellectual status of Alexis de Tocqueville and Edmund Burke. Over faculty club lunch tables, he recalled, he heard Tocqueville referred to as often as Marx—“what a thrill!” Burke enjoyed a restoration nearly as dramatic, “thanks in very considerable part to Kirk’s *The Conservative Mind*.” Nisbet admitted that he wrote *The Quest* “with the feeling that both Burke and Tocqueville were near at hand.” Paraphrasing Burke, he remarked that “society is a partnership of the dead, the living, and the unborn.”

Nisbet's conservatism was reinforced by the ever-increasing pervasiveness of government. It seemed, he said, "as if centralization and bureaucracy have lives of their own, independent of the convictions of the occupants of the White House and Congress." He once wrote that "efforts to reduce the state are like nothing so much as chipmunks trying to bring down a giant redwood." Despite the best intentions of even so committed a conservative as Ronald Reagan, he said, the pattern continued into the 1990s "with this malign difference:" more and more were heard the magic words, "National Community." It should be the prime business of any serious conservative group, Nisbet said sternly, "to expose the fraudulence of such a phrase as 'national community.'"

The offer of "individualism" as the logical alternative to national community, Nisbet stated in 1993 as he had in 1953, was misconceived. It was not "lone individuals" who developed America from one coast to the other. It was groups of every kind—neighborhoods, extended families, and voluntary associations—that built the schools, churches, and other community enterprises.

A nation, stated Nisbet, needed a strong government, local and central, because there were "necessities in our lives" like national defense which required government. But it was also the function of government "to shore up, to reinforce, and otherwise nurture the natural communities in society." Conservative groups, he concluded, therefore had a double task: to work "tirelessly" toward the diminution of the centralized, omnicompetent, and unitary state with its ever-soaring debt and deficit; and to protect and nurture where necessary the varied groups and associations which formed "the true building blocks of the social order."

Nisbet was quite specific, Brad Lowell Stone pointed out, as to what he meant by communities. They are human groups that spring up to fill perennial human needs and to solve problems. Communities are built around some *function*. They have a tran-

scending purpose based on ideals or *dogma*. They are characterized by *authority*, not by power. They are *hierarchical*. They display *solidarity*. They have a strong sense of *honor*. They seek to place themselves at some distance from the surrounding world.

“The Contexts of Democracy” is the penultimate chapter of *The Quest for Community* and reaffirms the central theme of the work—the major objective of political democracy should be to harmonize and make effective the “varied group allegiances which exist in society,” not sterilize them in the interest of a centralized political community. Nisbet traces the origins of the unitary state to the latter part of the eighteenth century and to such thinkers as Rousseau. It is “the widening appeal of the collectivist, unitary ideal of democracy” within conditions of social dislocation and moral alienation, he says, “that makes the problem of power so ominous in the Western democracies.”

He quotes Tocqueville on the dangers of enslaving men “in the minor details of life” and Jefferson’s shrewd observation that a state with the power to do things *for* people has the power to do things *to* them. He says that mass warfare has contributed profoundly to the development of the unitary state. He notes two other supports of the collectivist view of democracy—the desire for unity, in the face of discord, and the faith, “derived from ancient, medieval, and modern ideas of change,” in historical necessity. He argues that the appeal of Marxism is due, in part, to Marx’s argument that socialism was a stage of society “that must develop dialectically out of the *significant* present.”

Popular sovereignty, Nisbet argues, is not enough to assure liberal democracy. A single-minded concentration upon the individual as the sole unit of society is not sufficient for the preservation of freedom. Freedom, he insists, thrives in cultural diversity, in local and regional differentiation, in pluralism and, above all—acknowledging the wisdom of the Founding Fathers—“in the diversification of power.”

Nisbet dissects the accelerating power of the bureaucratic state, quoting David Lilienthal, the first head of the heralded Tennessee Valley Authority, that administrative decentralization is absolutely indispensable to modern democracies “if they are not to become victims of the creeping totalitarianism inherent in administrative monopoly and centralization.” Nisbet notes the inter-dependent relationship of big government, big business, and big labor in modern America and asserts that decentralization in these great associations is just as necessary as in the political state.

Robert Nisbet ends with what seems at first reading to be a wildly provocative statement: “what we need above all else in this age is a new philosophy of *laissez-faire*.” But he quickly makes clear that he is not advocating the creation of a new mass of unrelated individuals but a vast complex of associations that would comprise individuals, families, clubs, trade unions, colleges, and professions. We need, he says, a *laissez-faire* “in which the basic unit will be the social group.”

Certainly, he concedes, autonomy and freedom of personal choice are indispensable to a genuinely free society, but they can only be maintained under the conditions in which liberal democracy thrives—diversity of culture, plurality of associations, and divisions of authority.

I am pleased to present this excerpt from *The Quest for Community* by Robert Nisbet as the 2003 President’s Essay.



As in past years, I am indebted to my colleagues, Lee Edwards, Ph.D., and Matthew Spalding, Ph.D., for their suggestions and assistance, and I am grateful to William F. Campbell, Ph.D., long-time Secretary of The Philadelphia Society, for his insights and counsel. Richard Odermatt, Michelle Smith, and Drew Bond have all helped in the production of this essay.

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Definitions of democracy are as varied as the interests of persons and generations. Democracy is made identical with intellectual freedom, with economic justice, with social welfare, with tolerance, with piety, moral integrity, the dignity of man, and general civilized decency. As a word, democracy has come to be a kind of terminological catch-all for the historic virtues of civilization even as the word totalitarianism has become a catch-all for its evils. But the understanding of political democracy, its excellences and capacities, is served no better by this indiscriminating approach than is the understanding of totalitarianism.

Democracy may be associated with any and all of the virtues listed above, but it is, fundamentally, a theory and structure of *political power*. The historical root of democracy, as distinguished from liberalism which is historically a theory of *immunity* from power, is the proposition that the legitimacy of all political power arises from, and only from, the consent of the governed, the *people*. Lincoln's famous definition of democracy as government of, by, and for the people cannot be improved upon either as a moral ideal or as a historical description. And it

is as right and as institutionally relevant today as it was in Lincoln's day.

But with respect to the "people," as with the "individual," everything depends upon the practical, cultural contexts in which we choose to regard the people. The "people," no less than the "individual," is an abstraction, subject not merely to varying verbal uses but also to historically changing political demands and moral imperatives.

We may regard the people as simply a numerical aggregate of individuals regarded for political and administrative purposes as discrete and socially separated, an aggregate given form and meaning only by the nature of the State and its laws. Or, alternatively, we may regard the people as indistinguishable from a culture, its members as inseparable from the families, unions, churches, professions, and traditions that actually compose a culture.

The differences between the two ways of considering the people is vast, and it is decisive in any political theory of democracy. The "will of the people" is one thing, substantively, when it is conceived in purely political terms as arising from a vast aggregate of socially separated, politically integrated *individuals*. It is something very different when it is conceived in terms of the social unities and cultural traditions in which political, like all other, judgments are actually formed and reinforced.

In the first view of the people, a conception of political democracy must inevitably rest heavily upon the State and its formal agencies of function and control. Units of administration become, necessarily, atomistic individuals, conceived abstractly and divorced from the cultural contexts. When the people are regarded in this way, the principal problem of democratic theory and administration becomes not the larger problem of distribution of function and authority in *society* but, rather, the discovery of means by which the human being is brought ever closer to the people *in their political wholeness* and, in practical

terms, to the formal administrative structure of the State. By omitting reference to the other authority-wielding and need-gratifying associations in society, by focusing on the abstract political mass, this view of the people becomes administratively committed at the outset to a potentially totalitarian view of the State.

But if we take the second view of the people, the State emerges as but *one* of the associations of man's existence. Equally important to a democratic theory founded on this perspective is the whole plurality of other associations in society. The intermediary associations and the spontaneous social groups which compose society, rather than atomized political particles, become the prime units of theoretical and practical consideration. The major objective of political democracy becomes that of making harmonious and effective the varied group allegiances which exist in society, not sterilizing them in the interest of a monistic political community.

Historically, we find both conceptions of the people in the writings of democratic philosophers and statesmen. But it is the second, the pluralist, conception that is more relevant to the actual history of democracy, especially in the United States, England, the Scandinavian countries, and Switzerland. And, as I shall emphasize in this chapter, it is the reaffirmation of this conception that seems to me absolutely indispensable to the success of liberal democracy at the present time.

It would be naïve, however, to fail to see the powerful influence that is now exerted everywhere by the first, the unitary, view of the people and democracy. It is highly important that we examine this unitary tradition of democracy, for the difference between it and the pluralist tradition may well determine our effort to maintain liberal democracy under the pressure of the powerful quest for community in the present age.



The unitary view of democracy, like the ideology of the political community with which it is so closely allied, arose in France during the latter part of the eighteenth century. As a theory it was constructed in light of prevailing rationalist conceptions of man and society, and as an attack upon the still largely feudal social structure. It was based foremost upon the premise that the authorities and responsibilities wielded historically by kings, nobles, and churchmen belonged by nature to the people and should, as a matter of practical policy, be transferred to the people. But the French rationalists used the term people in a way that was remarkably abstract and as divorced from circumstance as some of their other terms.

The image of the people that governed the minds of men like Rousseau and Condorcet and was to spread in revolutionary fashion throughout the world in the nineteenth century was an image derived not from history or experience but from the same kind of conceptualization that had produced the fateful conception of the General Will. Just as the “real” will of the people was distinguished by Rousseau and his disciples from the attitudes and beliefs actually held at any given time by the people, so, in this rationalist view, the “people” had to be distinguished from the actual plurality of persons which experience revealed. If right government was to be made a reality by the rationalists, the “people” had to be separated from existing institutions and beliefs and brought into the single association of the people’s State.

Just as the rationalist made the realization of individuality contingent upon the individual’s release from his primary contexts of association, so he made the realization of the “people’s will” dependent on the release of the whole people—abstractly regarded—from traditional institutions and authorities. And just as the rationalist conceptually endowed the individual with social instincts and drives independent of any social organization, so he endowed the people itself with a natural harmony and stability that would give it all the necessary requisites of persistence and continuity. What we may notice in the case of

the rationalist's construct of the people, as in his construct of the individual, is the unconscious transfer of virtues, stabilities, and motivations from a *historical social organization* to an entity regarded as naturally independent of all historical change and social pressure.

Here, of course, the philosophy of Progress was marvelously comforting. For the very essence of the idea of secular progress was its premise that history is inherently organizational in direction, leading always, and without the need of man's guiding hand, to ever higher conditions of civilization. The consequences of institutional dislocation, of the ruthless separating of the people from cherished values and memberships, could be disregarded. History would supply its own correctives. It was only necessary to be certain that the *obstacles* to progress—classes, religious institutions, family solidarities, guilds, and so forth—were removed.

Inevitably the principal strategy of unitary democracy came to be fixed, like the strategies of nationalism and military socialism, in terms of the sterilization of old social loyalties, the emancipation of the people from local and regional authorities, and the construction of a scene in which the individual would be the sole unit, and the State the sole association, of society. Hence, the rising stress on large-scale bureaucracy: to provide new agencies representative of the *whole* people for the discharge of powers and responsibilities formerly resident in classes, parishes, and families. Hence, the increasing administrative centralization of society: to reduce in number and influence the intermediate social authorities. Hence the growing stress upon standardization: to increase the number of cultural qualities shared by the people as a whole and to diminish those shared only by fractions of the population. Hence, also, the drive toward political collectivism: to bring into full light that pre-existent harmony which the rationalists never doubted made a natural unity of the people.

State and individual were the two elements of the unitary theory of democracy. The abstract individual was conceived as the sole bearer of rights and responsibilities. The State, conceived in the image of people who lay incorruptible beneath the superstructure of society, would be the area of fraternity and secular rehabilitation. All that lay between these two elements—gilds, churches, professions, classes, unions of all kinds—were suspect for their fettering influence upon the individual and their divisive consequences to the people's State.

This, in its essentials, is the unitary tradition of democracy. It is, despite its exalted motives, almost indistinguishable from the ideology of the absolute political community. This is the tradition that provides so much of the historic relation between democracy and nationalism, between democracy and collectivism, between democracy and that whole tendency toward cultural standardization which has periodically alienated some of the most liberal of minds. This is the tradition that offers so many of the catchwords and deceptive slogans of contemporary Communism in its typical forms of the "People's States." This is the tradition that led Proudhon to define democracy, bitterly, as the State magnified to the *n*th power, and Tocqueville to see in it, for all his reluctant admiration for democracy, the seeds of despotism greater than anything before provided by history.

In its most impressive form, this tradition of unitary, collectivist democracy was largely confined, in the nineteenth century, to France and Germany, and to areas that came under their political and cultural influence. The long tradition of Roman law, with its unitary legal premises, the profound influence of the French Revolution, and the growing attraction of the centralized Napoleonic Code provided in these countries a highly propitious set of circumstances for the development of the unitary conception of democracy.

From the Continent, however, the ideas of unitary democracy and centralized administration have spread widely during the past half-century. Beginning in the last part of the nineteenth

century these ideas took root in the United States and England, fed by the soil of nationalism which, in the United States, had been enriched by the Civil War, and given increasing relevance by the social callousness of the new business class. Given the mounting evils of the new industrialism, the appearance of new structures of economic power beyond anything seen before, and the widening incidence of economic insecurity, the techniques of administrative centralization were tempting indeed to men of good will. As against the possibilities of redress and security inherent in voluntary association, in the church, and in the local community, those of the State seemed not merely greater but infinitely more swift in possible attainment. Increasingly, American liberalism became committed to the State as the major area of social rehabilitation and to administrative centralization as the means. Imperceptibly the historic emphasis upon localism was succeeded by nationalism, pluralism by monism, and decentralization by centralization.

Today, it is the widening appeal of the collectivist, unitary ideal of democracy, set in conditions of social dislocation and moral alienation, stimulated by the demands of mass warfare, that makes the problem of power so ominous in the Western democracies.



We may see in the administrative techniques of unitary democracy certain justifications of a historical nature. Given a society overpowered by inherited traditions, traditions manifestly inimical to both technical advancement and human rights; given a society that is nearly stationary from the hold of ecclesiastical, class, or kinship ties, and overrich to the point of chaos in local and regional diversity, the techniques of administrative uniformity and centralization can have a pragmatic value that is unquestionable. Such, in considerable degree, was the European society of the eighteenth century. Such, in even larger degree, is the society of, say, contemporary India.

Plainly, however, we are not, in the United States, living in that kind of society. Ours is a society characterized increasingly, as we have seen, by the sterilization of group differences—local, class, regional, and associative—which lie outside the administrative framework of the State. And ours is a State society characterized by ever-rising centralization of function and authority. Both characteristics—social atomization and political centralization—are the unmistakable attributes of the beginnings of mass society. And because of these social and political realities the requirements of liberal democracy are profoundly different from what they were a century or two ago.

The principal problems of liberal democracy today arise from what Philip Selznick has so aptly called the “institutional vulnerability” of our society.¹ This is a vulnerability reflected in the diminished moral appeal of those primary centers of cultural allegiance within which the larger ends of liberal society take on binding meaning. It is reflected in the relative ease with which totalitarian strategies penetrate the normal cultural enclosures of institutional life.

“The decay of parliaments,” G. D. H. Cole has written, “has accompanied the democratization of electorates not because democracy is wrong, but because we have allowed the growth of huge political organizations to be accompanied by the atrophy of smaller ones, on which alone they can be securely built.”² While we seek constantly to make democracy more secure in the world by diplomatic agreements and national security legislation, we do not often remind ourselves that the most powerful resources of democracy lie in the cultural allegiances of citizens, and that these *allegiances* are nourished psychologically in the smaller, internal areas of family, local community, and association.

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1. “Institutional Vulnerability in Mass Society,” *The American Journal of Sociology* (January 1951).
 2. “Leviathon and Little Groups,” *The Aryan Path* (October 1941).

These are the areas that contain the images of the larger society, the areas within which human beings are able to define, and render meaningful, democratic values. When the small areas of association become sterile psychologically, as the result of loss of institutional significance, we find ourselves resorting to ever-increasing dosages of indoctrination from above, an indoctrination that often becomes totalitarian in significance. We find ourselves with a society that suffers increasingly from, to use the expressive words of Lamennais, apoplexy at the center and anemia at the extremities. To be sure, liberals strive earnestly to maintain the rights and equalities of individuals before the rising structure of legislative and executive political power. They appeal to the courts, but not even the American judicial system can remain for very long untouched by the drive toward political uniformity and centralization. They appeal to the rights of man but, except in a religious sense which few liberals take seriously, there are no rights of man that do not proceed from the society in which human beings live. In any event, it is the liberal concentration of interest upon the *individual*, rather than upon the associations in which the individual exists, that serves, paradoxical as it may seem, to intensify the processes that lead straight to increased governmental power.

“More and more is it clear,” wrote J. N. Figgis in 1911, “that the mere individual’s freedom against an omnipotent State may be no better than slavery; more and more is it evident that the real question of freedom in our day is the freedom of the smaller unions to live within the whole.”³ The prophetic quality of these words will not be lost upon even the most insensitive observer of our period. It has surely become obvious that the greatest single internal problem that liberal democracy faces is the preservation of a culture rich in diversity, in clear alternatives—and this is a cultural problem that cannot be separated from the preservation of the social groups and associations within which all culture is nourished and developed.

3. *Churches in the Modern State* (London, 1913), p. 51–52.

Individual *versus* State is as false an antithesis today as it ever was. The State grows on what it gives to the individual as it does on what it takes from competing social relationships—family, labor union, profession, local community, and church.

And the individual cannot but find a kind of vicarious strength in what is granted to the State. For is he not himself a part of the State? Is he not a fraction of the sovereign? And is he not but adding to his political status as citizen what he subtracts from his economic, religious, and cultural statuses in society?

He is; and in this fractional political majesty the individual finds not only compensation for the frustrations and insecurities to which he is heir in mass society but also the intoxicating sense of collective freedom.

To find the essence of freedom in the fact of the ultimate political sovereignty of the people, in the existence of mass electorates, in the individual's constitutionally guaranteed participation every two or four years in the election of his public servants, is tempting in the modern world. For it is supported by the premise, so alluring to the reformer and the disinherited alike, that political power, however great and far-reaching it may be, if it is but continuously and sensitively in touch with mass wish and acquiescence, ceases to be power in the ordinary sense. It becomes collective self-determination, collective freedom. Power becomes, in this view, marvelously neutralized and immaterialized.

“Our contemporaries,” Tocqueville observed a century ago, “are constantly excited by two conflicting passions: they want to be led and they wish to remain free. As they cannot destroy either the one or the other of these contrary propensities, they strive to satisfy them both at once. They devise a sole, tutelary, and all-powerful form of government elected by the people. They combine the principle of centralization and that of popular sovereignty; this gives them respite: they console themselves for being in tutelage by the reflection that they have chosen their

own guardians. Every man allows himself to be in leading strings, because he sees that it is not a person or class of persons, but the people at large who hold the end of the chain...

“I admit that by this means room is left for the intervention of individuals in the more important affairs: but it is not the less suppressed in the smaller and more private ones. It must not be forgotten that it is especially dangerous to enslave men in the minor details of life. For my own part, I should be inclined to think freedom less necessary in the great things than in the little ones, if it were possible to be secure of the one without possessing the other.”⁴

It is especially dangerous to enslave men in the minor details of life. Could any insight be more relevant to the contemporary problem of power in Western society? Too often in our intellectual defenses of freedom, in our sermons and manifestos for democracy, we have fixed attention only on the more obvious historical threats to popular freedoms: kings, military dictators, popes, and financial titans. We have tended to miss the subtler but infinitely more potent threats bound up with diminution of authorities and allegiances in the smaller areas of association and with the centralization and standardization of power that takes place in the name of, and on behalf of, the *people*.

Here, of course, it is always persuasive to argue that modern increases in the administrative authority of the State have been generally associated with the enhancement of mass welfare. But this is no answer to the problem of power. As Jefferson shrewdly pointed out, the State with the power to do things *for* people has the power to do things *to* them. In plain fact the latter power increases almost geometrically in proportion to the former.

4. *Democracy in America*, Reeve translation edited by Phillips Bradley (New York, 1945), vol. 2, p. 319–20.

Nor is it the answer to the problem of power to argue that political power in the democracies is achieved in the name of the people and through actions of representatives of the people. For we have learned from European experience that it is not primarily the source of power that is at issue but the nature of the power and the degree of unity and unconditionality which it holds over human beings.

The collective political power of the people has increased enormously during the past century. So have available means of political participation by the common man: the referendum, the direct primary, the recall, the continuous abolition of restrictions on voting, and other even more direct means of participation. Yet, along with these increases in popular democracy, it must be observed that there has been a general leveling of local, regional, and associative differences, a nationalization of culture and taste, a collectivization of mind, and a continuous increase in the real powers of government over management, labor, education, religion, and social welfare. Democracy, far from heightening human autonomy and cultural freedom, seems rather to have aided in the process of mechanization that has weakened them. It must be repeated again, however, that this is not the inevitable consequence of the democratic ideal of power vested residually in the people. It is the consequence of the systems of public administration which we have grafted onto the democratic ideal.



In this development of unitary democracy, of bureaucratic centralization, contemporary mass warfare has, of course, a profoundly contributory significance. "War is the health of the State," Randolph Bourne once declared. It is the health of the State as it is the disease, or rather the starvation, of other areas of social function and authority. Everything we observed earlier in this book with respect to the community-making properties of mass warfare in the contemporary world is deeply relevant to the administrative problem of liberal democracy. Even Toc-

queville, with all his fear of centralization, was moved to write: “I do not deny that a centralized social power may be able to execute great undertakings with facility in a given time and on a particular point. This is especially true of war, in which success depends much more on the means of transferring all the resources of a nation to one single point than on the extent of those resources. Hence it is chiefly in war that nations desire, and frequently need, to increase the powers of the central government. All men of military genius are fond of centralization, which increases their strength; and all men of centralizing genius are fond of war which compels nations to combine all their powers in the hands of the government.”⁵

It is precisely this military imperative of governmental centralization that makes continued warfare, or preparation for war, have so deadly an effect on all other institutions in society. For it is difficult to perform the administrative measures necessary to political and military centralization without drawing in drastic fashion from the functions, the authorities, and the allegiances that normally fall to such institutions as religion, profession, labor union, school, and local community. Quite apart from direct administrative action, the sheer brilliance of the fires of war has the effect of making dim all of the other lights of culture. The normal incentives of family, occupation, education, and recreation—already so weakened as the result of processes embedded in modern history—become singularly unattractive and irrelevant compared with the intoxicating incentives that arise from war and its now unlimited psychological demands. Given the quickening effects of war on social dislocation and cultural sterilization, it is not strange that the State should become, in time of war, the major refuge of men. Democracy cannot but become ever more unitary, omnicompetent, centralized.

To the imperatives of modern war must be added two other supports of the unitary, collectivist view of democracy. These

5. Op. cit. vol. 2, p. 300–301.

are two intellectual perspectives, idols of the mind, as Francis Bacon might have called them. The first is the veneration, nurtured by countless centuries of discord, for *unity*. The second is the seemingly ineradicable faith, derived from ancient, medieval, and modern ideas of change, in *historical necessity*.

With respect to the first, it is hard to avoid the fact that unity has had, historically, a symbolic appeal greater than any possessed by the values of plurality and diversity. From the earliest Greek metaphysicians down to the present, the greatest single objective of philosophy has been that of converting plurality into unity, "chaos" into intellectual order. Mind itself has been interpreted in terms that suggest monistic sovereignty by so many philosophers. The deep religious appeal of unity in experience, the craving of all human beings for an inner sense of order, and the age-old rationalist desire to transmute the flux and diversity of experience into symmetrical schemes of meaning have all, in one way or another, contributed to the modern veneration for unity and uniformity in society.

The worship of unity offers no problems so long as it is confined to areas of aesthetics, religion, and metaphysics. But when transferred, under the stress of social dislocations, to the area of politics, it frequently becomes sinister. For then it tends to become absorbed, as an ideal, by existent structures of administrative power. The philosophical quest for unity and certainty becomes, as it were, a kind of apologetics for political standardization and centralization. It is assumed that the spiritual unity which every human being inwardly prizes can be achieved only by an environment made ever more uniform institutionally. In the present age, certainly, he who cries Unity will inevitably have more listeners than he who cries, so irrelevantly it must seem, Plurality and Diversity.

The second intellectual perspective reinforcing the unitary view of democracy is that of historical necessity. The tendency of the human mind to convert the empirical order of changes and events in history into a logical, *necessary* order gives strong sup-

port to the view that centralization and political collectivism are somehow in the ordained direction of the future even as they have been the apparent logical development of the past.

The greatest intellectual and moral offense the modern intellectual can be found guilty of is that of seeming to think or act outside what is commonly held to be the linear progress of civilization. It is not the deviation from opinions of others that is censured. Nor is it deviation from established morality, religious or secular. Among modern intellectuals the cardinal sin is that of failing to remain on the locomotive of history, to use Lenin's expressive phrase. This is the most damnable of all offenses in the modern rational mentality. Ordinary heresies, defections, and moral obliquities may be excused, but not the offense of being willfully outside the presumed course of historical realization. In practical terms, we are dealing with a habit of mind that seizes selectively upon *certain* aspects of the present age, e.g. political omniscience and administrative centralization, and invests these not just with the ordinary attributes of goodness or rightness, but with that far greater virtue of *necessity*.

We tend thus to subordinate our planning to an imaginary course of evolution in society. In the perspective of Progress the data of the past are necessarily ruled out of practical consideration for present planning purposes simply because, within this perspective, the past can only be likened to the infancy or youth of an organism that is now in maturity and looking toward endless intensification of maturity. History is conceived as a continuous movement, a flow, a unified process, a development, with a beginning, a middle, and a logical, ethical end. This process is regarded as inherently *selective*, always pushing what is good to the chronological front. The evil in an age is held to be no more than persistences or outcroppings of the past. Social philosophy and social planning that do not accept the "necessity" of modern changes are consequently damned as utopian or nostalgic.

The supremacy of Marxism in the modern history of socialism comes in large part from the tactical success Marx and Engels had in investing the ethical ideal of socialism with historical necessity. Other socialists had held up their ideal as something to be described in detail, planned for, and worked for. When Marx scorned such efforts as being utopian and unhistorical and insisted that the future must develop inexorably out of the present, he not only prevented any further consideration of what he contemptuously called “kitchen recipes” but also placed the ideal of socialism firmly in the context of existent trends toward national collectivism and administrative centralization. For Marx, socialism was a stage of society that must develop dialectically out of the *significant* present. Pluralism, localism, voluntary association—all of these to Marx were mere survivals of medievalism. What was *real* in the present was industrialism, collectivism, and administration centralization.

What is true of Marxian socialism has been true of a great deal of modern political and economic philosophy. As Martin Buber⁶ has recently reminded us, the intellectual’s dread of utopianism and his pious desire to be historically “realistic” have led him generally to an all too willing subordination of moral categories to the presumed “direction” of history.

The modern facts of political mechanism, centralization, and collectivism are seen in the perspective of inevitable development in modern history. They seem to be the very direction of history itself. Present differences of political opinion hence usually resolve themselves into differences about who shall guide this developing reality and how little or how much should be administered it in the way of fuel. Any sharp alternative has the disadvantage of running up against the widely flung facts of uniformity and centralization, and the additional disadvantage of seeming to be filiated with historical conditions of the past which give it a manifestly “unprogressive” character.

6. *Paths in Utopia* (London, 1949).

The imperatives of war, the veneration of unity and uniformity, and the faith in historical necessity, with its corollary of irreversible historical processes—these, then are the most powerful supports for the unitary perspective of democracy at the present time. Given these, together with the constant diminution in the significance of the nonpolitical areas of kinship, religion, and other forms of association, the task of centralization and omniscience is not too difficult even in the presence of liberal values. Given these conditions and perspectives, the transition from liberal democracy to totalitarianism will not seem too arduous or unpleasant. It will indeed be scarcely noticed, save by the “utopians,” the “reactionaries,” and similar eccentrics.



Admittedly, there is a degree of unity without which any culture, like any musical composition, would become chaotic. And there is indeed a degree of centralization of authority apart from which no structure—political government, church, or labor union—could operate. So much is true. Yet, given the society in which we now live, it is difficult not to conclude that the requirements of liberal democracy are very different from those which seemed so necessary to men of good will a century ago.

The problem of freedom and authority can no longer be given even the semblance of solution by appeals to the talisman of popular sovereignty. For, despite the unquestioned moral rightness of the proposition that all legitimate political power must flow from the people, we are living in an age in which *all* forms of government, totalitarianism as well as liberal democracy, seek to root their authority in the soil of popular acquiescence. The greatest discovery in nineteenth-century politics, as we have seen, was the principle that the real power of a State may actually be enhanced, not diminished, by widening its base to include the whole of a population. The exploitation of this revolutionary principle of power reaches its highest development in the total State where no effort is spared to drive the functions and symbols of political authority as deeply as possible into the

minds and wills of all the people, thus making State power a part of human personality, a projection of the self.

Popular sovereignty, then, is not enough. As a moral principle it must remain our point of departure, but if democracy is to remain liberal democracy, if it is not to become transmuted into the State of the masses, with its power converted into a monolith, we must face the crucial problems of the relation of political authority to all the other forms of authority in society. The reinforcement of these and their constitutional relationship to the political authority of the State become, in the present century, the major problem of democracy. Because of our single-minded concentration upon the individual as the sole unit of society and upon the State as the sole source of legitimate power, we have tended to overlook the fact that freedom thrives in cultural diversity, in local and regional differentiation, in associative pluralism, and above all, in the *diversification of power*.⁷

Basically, all of these are reducible, I believe, to the single massive problem of the relation of political government to the plurality of cultural associations which form the intermediate authorities of society. These are many: religious, economic, professional, local, recreational, academic, and so forth. Each of them is a structure, often large, of authorities and functions. Each of them is an organization of human purposes and allegiances related to some distinctive institutional end. Each of them is, apart from the checks provided by the existence of other and competing forms of association, potentially omnipotent in its relation to its members. And whether it is the economic corporation, the huge labor union, or the profession, each offers, in its own way, innumerable problems of freedom

7. Works that have stressed the crucial role of associative pluralism and diversification of social power in the structure of liberal democracy are, unhappily, not numerous. It is a pleasure however to mention the writings of such men as Ernest Barker, A. D. Lindsay, John Dewey, R. M. MacIver, Lewis Mumford, Sidney Hook, and Frank Tannenbaum.

and control in society. There is no unalterable guarantee of freedom in any one of them.

Nevertheless, it is the continued existence of this array of intermediate powers in society, of this plurality of “private sovereignties,” that constitutes, above anything else, the greatest single barrier to the conversion of democracy from its liberal form to its totalitarian form. It is the fact of *diversity* of appeal that is foremost in this social constitution. Apart from its setting in a competitive framework, any one of these large-scale intermediate authorities is capable of expanding its own control over members to a point that exceeds the requirements of freedom. But the most notable characteristic of this whole array of social authorities in European history has been the ceaseless competition for human allegiance that goes on among them.



Historically, there are to be seen in Western society recurrent waves of intermediate association.⁸ In the eleventh and twelfth centuries arose the guilds, the communes, the universities, and all the other fellowships of interest and belief which, taken together, provided so much of man’s protection from the vicissitudes of fortune and the despotism of kings, popes, and feudal lords. The rise of the sovereign national State, as we have seen, weakened or destroyed many of these. Doctrines of political monism and legal individualism became dominant. But these notwithstanding, we are struck by a renewed efflorescence of social and cultural associations in Western society in the seventeenth century, particularly in England—new organized professions, learned societies, and scientific associations. These have proved among the most powerful supports of cultural diversity

8. It is unfortunate that no single, systematic historical study of intermediate association exists. The nearest approximation is the massive study done by Otto von Gierke three-quarters of a century ago in Germany, but, except for the fragments translated by F. W. Maitland and Ernest Barker, this work is virtually inaccessible and, in any event, it was written from a point of view that killed much of the work’s substance.

and freedom in modern Western Europe. They were weakened in France by the Revolution, as were almost all forms of autonomous association, but in England they proved resistant to administrative centralization and Utilitarian individualism alike.

In the nineteenth century we see another great wave of association rolling over large areas of the Western world. Trade unions, benevolent societies, cooperatives, and mutual aid associations of all kinds arose spontaneously, in Europe and the United States, to meet the problems of individual security and freedom that had been created by the spread of national centralization and by the burgeoning factory system. In these associations, lying intermediate to man and the State, to the worker and market society, lay the promise of both security and freedom—security within the solidarity of associations founded in response to genuine needs; freedom arising from the very diversity of association and from the relative autonomy these associations had with respect to central systems of law and administration. These were the associations that Tocqueville saw, during his visit to the United States, as the real protections of personal liberty, the actual supports of parliamentary or representative government, and the major barriers to the peculiar and oppressive despotism he found latent in the democratic State.

Modern liberalism unfortunately has tended on the whole to step from the cherished individual of the nineteenth century to the myth of the all-benign State in the twentieth. While it has seldom been intolerant of intermediate associations, it has made little effort to formulate a theory of liberal democracy that includes them, that makes them indispensable to free, representative government. In general, modern democratic thought has settled single-mindedly upon the same elements that are crucial to the political community: the abstract individual and the State.

Yet, any careful historical examination reveals the roots political democracy has had in practice in social groups and cultural

communities. Man does not live merely as one of a vast aggregate of arithmetically equal, socially undifferentiated, individuals. He does not live his life merely in terms of the procedures and techniques of the administrative State—not, at least, in a free society. As a concrete *person* he is inseparable from the plurality of social allegiances and memberships which characterize his social organization and from the diversities of belief and habit which form a culture.

Most of the tendencies in contemporary society toward the erosion of cultural differences and the standardization of cultural tastes, beliefs, and activities, which are so often charged, mistakenly, against technology and science, are the product, actually, of a centralization of authority and function and a desiccation of local and cultural associations.

The great cultural ages of the past were, almost invariably, ages of social diversity, of small, independent communities and towns, of distinct regions, of small associations which jealously guarded their unique identities and roles. In the competition and rivalry of these, as Bertrand Russell has pointed out,⁹ lay the conditions of cultural energy and diversity which gave imperishable works to the world. Culturally, there is little to hope for from a world based increasingly upon mass relationships and upon the sterilization of intermediate associations.

Nor is there much to hope for in the way of freedom. “Who says liberty, says association,” declared Lamennais in the early nineteenth century, and he was echoed a generation later by Proudhon: “Multiply your associations and be free.”

Only through its intermediate relationships and authorities has any State ever achieved the balance between organization and personal freedom that is the condition of a creative and enduring culture. These relationships begin with the family and with the small informal social groups which spring up around com-

9. *Authority and the Individual* (London, 1949), p. 59.

mon interests and cultural needs. Their number extends to the larger associations of society, to the churches, business associations, labor unions, universities, and professions. They are the real sources of liberal democracy.

The weakening of these groups reflects not only growing spiritual isolation but increasing State power. To feel alone—does this not breed a desire for association in Leviathan? The individual who has been by one force or another wrenched from social belonging is thrown back upon himself; he becomes the willing prey of those who would manipulate him as the atom citizen in the political and economic realms. Given nothing but his own resources to stand on, what can be his defenses against the powerful propaganda of those who control the principal means of communication in society? The recent history of Western Europe should remind us that a sense of the past, even more than a hope of the future, is the basis of the will to resist; and a sense of the past presupposes cultural continuities within associations which have deep moral appeal.

Only in their social interdependences are men given to resist the tyranny that always threatens to arise out of any political government, democratic or other. Where the individual stands alone in the face of the State he is helpless. “Despotism,” wrote Tocqueville, “is never more secure of continuance than when it can keep men asunder; and all its influence is commonly exerted for that purpose.” The desire for freedom arises only out of men’s reverence for exterior and competing values. Genuine freedom is not based upon the negative psychology of release. Its roots are in positive acts of dedication to ends and values. Freedom presupposes the autonomous existence of values that men wish to be free to follow and live up to. Such values are social in the precise sense that they arise out of, and are nurtured by, the voluntary associations which men form.



But neither social values nor autonomous social relationships can thrive apart from their possession of meaningful functions

and authorities. We end this chapter on the theme with which it began: the centrality of the problem of power, its distribution in society, and its control. Man may be a social animal, but he does not devote himself in any serious way to groups and associations that are no longer clearly related to the larger structure of function and authority in society.

What has been so apparent in the modern history of the family will be no less apparent in the future histories of profession, university, labor union, and all other forms of association in our culture. Deprive these entities of their distinctive functions through increasing nationalization of service and welfare, divest them of the authorities over their members through increasing centralization of political power in society, and these associations, like the extended family, the church, and the local community, must shrink immeasurably in their potential contributions to culture.

Modern philosophies of freedom have tended to emphasize, as we have seen, either the individual's *release* from power of every kind—generally, through an appeal to natural rights—or the individual's *participation* in some single structure of authority like the General Will, which replaces all other structures.

But from the point of view of the real, the historical roots of liberal democracy, freedom has rested neither upon release nor upon collectivization but upon the *diversification* and the decentralization of power in society. In the division of authority and the multiplication of its sources lie the most enduring conditions of freedom. "The only safeguard against power," warned Montesquieu, "is rival power." He was echoed by Lord Acton more than a century later, who declared that "Liberty depends upon the division of power."

Freedom, it has been well said, lies in the interstices of authority. This is indeed, I believe, the real reconciliation of the demands of order and the demands of freedom. Authority, any society, any association, must have. It is simply the structure of

the association. But the sole possibility of personal freedom and cultural autonomy lies in the maintenance of a plurality of authorities in any society. Each of these may be tight enough as an individual system to provide a context of security for its members. So long as there are other and competing authorities, so long as man has even the theoretical possibility of removing himself from any that for him has grown oppressive and of placing himself within the framework of some other associative authority, it cannot be said that his freedom has suffered.

It is in these terms, I think, that the role of political government becomes clear in the democracies. Not to sterilize the normal authorities of associations, as does the total State through a pre-emption of function, a deprivation of authority, and a monopolization of allegiance, but to reinforce these associations, to provide, administratively, a means whereby the normal competition of group differences is held within bounds and an environment of law within which no single authority, religious or economic, shall attain a repressive and monopolistic influence—this is the role of government in a democracy.

In what Frank Tannenbaum has well termed “the balance of institutional power” lie the possibilities for a harmonization of personal freedom and associative authority. “The road to social peace,” Mr. Tannenbaum writes, “is the balance of the social institutions, and a wise statesman would strengthen those institutions that seemed to be losing ground, even if he were not addicted to them; for the only way to peace in this world of fallible human nature is to keep all human institutions strong, but none too strong; relatively weak, but not so weak as to despair of their survival. *It is only thus that peaceful irritation and strife, so essential to social and individual sanity, can be maintained.*”¹⁰

How can the power of the State or that of any large-scale association be limited if there do not exist authorities that are always

10. “The Balance of Power in Society,” *Political Science Quarterly* (December 1946), p. 501. Italics mine.

in competition? No one can doubt that there are by now many areas of function which must come under the exclusive jurisdiction of the State. No longer can one doubt that, in modern society, mundane power over human beings will lie in the State itself. And it has become obvious that a politically planned society is, in one degree or another, absolutely essential. These points are not in question.

What is crucially important is not the residual location of power in society. Rather it is the formal administration of that power and the relation between formal public administration of political power and the administrations of the various other forms of power in society—religious, economic, educational, and the like. The philosophy of administrative centralization had its origin at a time when the extrication of the State's power from other powers in society—mostly feudal in nature—was a matter of burning importance. But this problem now belongs in the dustbin of history. There is no other institution that can seriously challenge the sovereignty of the State in the contemporary world.

Unfortunately, our philosophy of administration has not, on the whole, kept pace with the history of sovereignty. We have at the present time only the beginnings of a theory of administration to do justice to the psychological complexities of personality and culture which contemporary social science has discovered. Modern public administration has been too generally dominated by the nineteenth-century rationalist's conception of society as a vast aggregate of unconnected political particles.

It is easy—too easy—to plan for abstract aggregates of *individuals*, regarded for planning purposes as so many arithmetically equal units composed of identical drives and needs. It is far more difficult to plan for, to legislate for, *persons* who live not in simple economic or political perspectives but in complex associative and normative systems that are the product of tradition and custom. But planning blind to the autonomous groups and traditional values of a society is a planning likely to be effect-

ated by an administration that seeks to obliterate, for purposes of rational simplicity, these groups and values.

A distinction has grown up in the literature of applied anthropology relevant to the needs of public administration in contemporary democracies. It is the distinction between direct and indirect rule. In indirect administration every effort is made by colonial administrators to work with and through traditional relationships and lines of authority in native cultures. In direct administration, on the other hand, such relationships and authorities are disregarded, supplanted by new and more "rational" administrative relationships and powers. Not a few of the tragedies connected with Western administration of native cultures in so many areas of the world have come from the well-meaning efforts of administrators, steeped in the intellectual resources of Western political rationalism, to minister directly to the supposed life needs of natives.

Similar tragedies of "direct" administration fill the social histories of Western nations themselves. Under the spur of unitary democracy and through rationalist techniques of administrative centralization, planners and reformers have systematically disregarded local and regional cultures and the traditional social relationships and values of ethnic minorities, and have planned instead from abstract values and assumed "needs," and through channels created by fiat.

It has been one of the deficiencies of much public administration in Western democracies that little distinction has been made between the demands of sovereignty and the possibilities of governmental administration. Sovereignty, we may agree with every major political philosopher since Bodin, is unitary, absolute, and imprescriptible. This is as true in democracy as in any other type of government. No other conception of State authority has been feasible since the breakup of the medieval synthesis. In power the contemporary State is, and must be, *sui generis*. Not all the semantic analyses of misguided pluralists or the adjurations of moralists will change this fact.

But the centrality of sovereignty does not lead logically to the centralization of administration in public affairs. Because the theory and practice of modern administration arose at a time when sovereignty itself was struggling for supremacy against inherited structures of feudal power, it was perhaps inevitable that early conceptions of governmental administration should have been based upon the example of military government. But the residual power of the State is today no longer seriously questioned. The political relationship is as central as was the relationship of the Church in the thirteenth century. Decentralization of administration is not merely feasible technically; it is a prime necessity of free culture.

David Lilienthal is an eloquent public servant who has discovered from practical experience that administrative decentralization is absolutely indispensable to modern democracies if they are not to become victims of the creeping totalitarianism inherent in administrative monopoly and centralization. The Tennessee Valley Authority is itself a magnificent illustration of the basic compatibility between democratic government and administrative decentralization. With all allowance for its errors and for the impatience of certain disciples of centralization, TVA demonstrates that central planning is not inconsistent with local and associative autonomies. We readily admit that planning in terms of aggregates of abstract individuals, conceived in the image of Economic Man, is much easier than planning in terms of existent families, professional associations, labor unions, churches, and regions. But such planning is the surest avenue to an eventual sterilization of the moral appeal of these unities. And from the decline of these and similar associations can come only the cultural atomization that leads to irresistible Power.

Planning that dispenses with the autonomous, traditional values of a population can be effectuated only by a system of administration that is eventually forced to liquidate these values. For these will then constitute forces of distraction, even of subversion, to the abstract ends of planning.

The assumption that centralized power must carry with it centralized administration was tenable only in a day when the range of governmental activities was limited. It is no longer tenable. As government, in its expanding range of functions, comes ever closer to the primary spheres of man's existence, the need is intensified for a theory of public administration alive to the fact that the necessary roots of democracy are in the decisions and responsibilities of the people diversified in regions, communities, and associations.

“Centralization in administration,” David Lilienthal has written, “promotes remote and absentee control, and thereby increasingly denies to the individual the opportunity to make decisions and to carry those responsibilities by which human personality is nourished and developed. I find it impossible to comprehend how democracy can be a living reality if people are remote from their government and in their daily lives are not made a part of it, or if the control and direction of making a living—in industry, farming, the distribution of goods—is far removed from the stream of life and from the local community. ‘Centralization’ is no mere technical matter of ‘management,’ of ‘bigness versus smallness.’ We are dealing here with those deep urgencies of the human spirit which are embodied in the faith we call ‘democracy.’”¹¹



We cannot be reminded too often that the stifling effects of centralization upon society are as evident in large-scale private industry as they are in political government. Big government and big business have developed together in Western society, and each has depended on the other. To these two has been added more recently a third force in society—big labor. In all three spheres, and, for that matter in our universities, charities, and various other activities, there is a strong tendency to orga-

11. T.V.A.: *Democracy on the March* (New York, 1944), p. 139.

nize administration in terms of the ideas of power inherited from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

But there is a point beyond which centralized administration cannot go if the meaning and urgency of the ends of any association are to be kept alive in the minds of the individuals who comprise the association. Bertrand Russell has recently written: "In a highly organized world, personal initiative connected with a group must be confined to a few unless the group is small. If you are a member of a small committee you may reasonably hope to influence its decisions. In national politics, where you are one of some twenty million voters, your influence is infinitesimal unless you are exceptional or occupy an exceptional position. You have, it is true, a twenty-millionth share in the government of others, but only a twenty-millionth share in the government of yourself. You are therefore much more conscious of being governed than of governing. The government becomes in your thoughts a remote and largely malevolent 'they,' not a set of men whom you, in concert with others who share your opinions, have chosen to carry out your wishes. Your individual feeling about politics, in these circumstances, is not that intended to be brought about by democracy, but much more nearly what it would be under a dictatorship."¹²

It will be recognized at once that planning and administration in terms of decentralization, localism, and associative autonomy is far more difficult than administration carried on under the myth of territorial masses of discrete individual atoms. Not only does it go against the tendency of the whole history of modern economic, educational, and political administration, but, on its own terms, it raises problems of organization that are immense. "It is obvious," Karl Mannheim wrote, "that the modern nature of social techniques puts a premium on centralization, but this is only true if our sole criterion is to be technical efficiency. If, for various reasons, chiefly those concerned with the mainte-

12. Op. cit. p. 98.

nance of personality, we deliberately wish to decentralize certain activities within certain limits, we can do so.”¹³

What Lewis Mumford has written in *The Culture of Cities* is eloquent and irrefutable. “We need, in every part of the city, units in which intelligent and cooperative behavior can take the place of mass regulations, mass decisions, mass actions, imposed by ever remoter leaders and administrators. Small groups: small classes: small communities: institutions framed to the human scale, are essential to purposive behavior in modern society. Very stupidly we have overlooked the way in which large units limit opportunity all along the line: not merely by physical friction of space, or the burden of a vast mechanical and administrative overhead, but also by diminishing opportunities for people with special capacities. Thus Sir Raymond Unwin has pointed out that twenty communities with a population of fifty thousand people would not merely be more adequately governed, probably, than one city that contained a million: it would, for example, give an opportunity for twenty mayors or city managers, against one in the big center. This rule holds true in every other part of society. We demand the impossible in the way of direction and specialized service from a few people, and we fail to demand the possible from those who are better equipped to handle adequately a smaller job. With our overgrown institutions, overgrown colleges, overgrown corporations, overgrown cities, is it any wonder that we easily become the victims of propaganda machines, routineers, and dictators?”¹⁴

The passage from Mr. Mumford’s book makes it plain that the necessity of decentralization is by no means confined to the structure of the political State, great as the need there may be. Decentralization is just as necessary in the operation of the other great associations of modern society—the industrial corporation, the labor union, the large church, the profession, and

13. *Man and Society in an Age of Reconstruction* (New York, 1940) p. 319.

14. *The Culture of Cities* (New York, 1938), p. 475–6.

the great university. More than a little of the diminution in the psychological and cultural influence of these associations in recent times results from their failure to remain responsive to the small areas of association and collectivization we see in politics. The fault lies in the common failure to unite the broad purposes of the larger associations with the small, informal relationships composing them.

The labor union, the legal or medical association, or the church will become as centralized and as remote as the national State itself unless these great organizations are rooted in the smaller relationships which give meaning to the ends of the large associations. To conceive of a great labor union, industrial enterprise, or church as an association of *individual* members is but to intensify the processes of atomization which such associations can and should counteract. No large association will remain an object of personal allegiance, no matter how crucial its goals may be, unless it is constantly sensitive to the existence of the informal but potent relationships of which it is really composed. It has surely become evident by this time that the most successful and allegiance-evoking business enterprises and cultural associations in modern life are those that regard themselves as associations of *groups*, not of raw individuals. To recognize the existence of informal social relationships, to keep central purposes constantly alive in these small groups, and to work toward the increased spontaneity and autonomy of these groups is, I believe, the cardinal responsibility of the great private association.

Only thus will the large formal associations remain important agencies of order and freedom in democracy. Only thus will they succeed in arresting and banishing the augmenting processes of insecurity and moral isolation which now paralyze individual wills and strike at the roots of stable culture.

There is a vast difference between the type of planning—whether in the large State, industry, or the school—that seeks to enmesh the individual in a custodial network of detailed

rules for his security and society's stability, and the type of planning that is concerned with the creation of a political and economic *context* within which the spontaneous associations of men are the primary sources of freedom and order. The latter type of planning is compatible with competition, diversity, rivalry, and the normative conflicts that are necessary to cultural creativity. The former type is not.



I cannot help thinking that what we need above all else in this age is a new philosophy of *laissez faire*. The old *laissez faire* failed because it was based on erroneous premises regarding human behavior. As a theory it failed because it mistook for ineradicable characteristics of individuals qualities that were in fact inseparable from social groups. As a policy it failed because its atomistic propositions were inevitably unavailing against the reality of enlarging masses of insecure individuals. Far from proving a check upon the growth of the omniscient State, the old *laissez faire* actually accelerated this growth. Its indifference to every form of community and association left the State as the sole area of reform and security.

We need a *laissez faire* that will hold fast to the ends of autonomy and freedom of choice; one that will begin not with the imaginary, abstract individual but with the personalities of human beings as they are actually given to us in association. "What we actually see in the world is not on the one hand the State, and on the other, a mass of unrelated individuals; but a vast complex of gathered unions, in which alone we find individuals, families, clubs, trade unions, colleges, professions, and so forth."¹⁵

To create the conditions within which autonomous *individuals* could prosper, could be emancipated from the binding ties of kinship, class, and community, was the objective of the older

15. J. N. Figgis, *Studies in Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius*, second edition (Cambridge, 1923), p. 70.

laissez faire. To create conditions within which *autonomous groups* may prosper must be, I believe, the prime objective of the new *laissez faire*.

I use the word create advisedly. We should not suppose that the *laissez faire* individualism of the middle nineteenth century was the simple heritage of nature, the mere untrammelled emergence of drives and motivations with which man is naturally endowed. *Laissez faire*, as the economic historian, Polanyi, among others, has emphasized, was *brought* into existence.¹⁶ It was brought into existence by the planned destruction of old customs, associations, villages and other securities; by the force of the State throwing the weight of its fast-developing administrative system in favor of new economic elements of the population. And it was brought into existence, hardly less, by reigning systems of economic, political, and psychological thought, systems which neglected altogether the social and cultural unities and settled single-mindedly on the abstract individual as the proper unit of speculation and planning. What we need at the present time is the knowledge and administrative skill to create a *laissez faire* in which the basic unit will be the social group.

The liberal values of autonomy and freedom of personal choice are indispensable to a genuinely free society, but we shall achieve and maintain these only by vesting them in the conditions in which liberal democracy will thrive—diversity of culture, plurality of association, and division of authority. 🗨

16. *The Great Transformation* (New York, 1944), *passim*.