SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL —
HOW MUCH BIG IS NECESSARY?

<u>An Essay On Federalism</u>

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1. The structural and cultural heritage

In two earlier papers dealing with visions of desirable societies I have tried to prepare the ground for some of the explorations in the present paper. In the first paper, "On Alpha and Beta and Their Many Combinations"[1] two pure type social structures were defined: the vertical Alpha typified today by bureaucracies and corporations, even big research organizations, party, police and military machineries,[2] and Beta, horizontal and for that reason by necessity small, typified by small groups of friends and colleagures, sometimes by families, were presented. Concrete social structures were seen as mixtures of the two and some of the crisis of our times was seen in terms of the ever-growing Alpha and the crumbling, vanishing Beta structures and the need to reverse this trend. A Gamma structure, small but vertical (most family systems, most village systems) was also introduced, but the analysis was mainly cast in terms of Alpha vs. Beta.

The good society was seen as one that managed to steer the Alpha-Beta dialectics in such a way to avoid the extremes. The danger of the pure Alpha structure is obvious: the totalitarian system writ large, backed up with authoritarian components (party, police and military systems). But the dangers of the pure Beta structure are also very real: they can easily become totalitarian and authoritarian Gamma structures, mini-Alphas; they can become small, stagnant backwaters untouched by the challenge of interactions on larger scales; they can become highly vulnerable to external attacks; and they may be incapable of producing some of the material and non-material goods and services that we need, or at least want.[3] Alpha offers solutions to most of these problems, but at tremendous costs. Is there a compromose, a middle course?

In the second paper[4] there is an effort to discuss where visions come from. Largely they are seen as being rooted in the individual and collective unconscious, and more particularly in the deep structures of civilizations, in their cosmologies.[5] One approach to cosmologies is via dominant religious systems and it was pointed out that the Occidental religions (the religions of the kitab, particularly Christianity and Islam) tend to be missionary, meaning universalist, and centralizing.

Moreover, their utopias, their paradises, are seen as discontinuous
with this world (of .which they have a rather dim view) - and hence
as unrealistic as models. In the Orient (Buddhism of various varieties,
and also Confucianism and Daoism) there is much less of the missionary
complex, and life is seen as a striving towards a perfection attainable
in this world (or at least approximated) - there being no Thereafter.
In Buddhism and Daoism the small groups are seen as most conducive to
this type of perfection, and the visions, as well as the means of
approximating them, are seen as very flexible, fluid.

There is an obvious linkage between these two papers: the Occident
will tend to build Alpha structures; the Orient will be stronger in the
small, if not necessarily in the form of egalitarian Beta structures,
at least in the form of Gamma structures (eg. as headed by the guru or
the bikkhu).[6] This is certainly not a clear distinction. Institutionalized
Christianity (and not only the Catholic Church) as well as its legitimate
offspring, institutionalized liberalism (the corporation and the state,
the transnational corporation and the intergovernmental organizations)
and its illegitimate offspring, institutionalized marxism (the party and
the state, nationally and internationally) are clear Alpha structures.
But then there are the countertrends:small-scale Christianity, liberalism
and marxism, emphasizing closeness to others and togetherness in faith,
production and reproduction (the monastery and the small sect, the small
firm in a well regulated competitive setting, collective ownership at the
commune rather than at the state levels - commune-ism rather than etatism).
And correspondingly for the Orient: both Confucianism and Shintoism give
rise to the huge Alpha machineries of the mandarin and Meiji (and beyond)
systems - actually also the Tokugawa systems and what preceded it.[7]

There are Alpha and Beta traditions in both, and the same applies to
the in-between Hindu civilization. But as long as universalism and cen-
trism are such dominant factors in Occidental civilization my own judgment
would be more in favour of ex oriente lux. The efforts to have economic and
political life more rooted in the local level with a soft coordination on
top works not too badly in Switzerland. But the key carriers of instituio-
nalized liberalism and marxism, the United States and the Soviet Union

are both - as the names indicate - federated systems and Alpha structures in extremis, withint their own borders and in the way they transgress and crave for some kind of world domination. Even with the best intentions the unconscious carried other visions - universalist (world domination) and centrist (concentration of power in Washington-New York and in Moscow). On the other hand, the Occident, and particularly the "inner West", has a great tradition in trying to tame some of the wilder Alpha forces through systems of countervailing forces, checks and balances. Alpha power in the Orient tends to be more naked.[8] But these are the types of issues now to be explored.

2.   The case for a new federalism

Not repeating the arguments of the first paper referred to above I shall simply take it as axiomatic that the good life is lived in the small, but that something big is necessary to protect it. The problem is how small, how big, and how are the small woven together into something bigger.

My vision has at the core the basic autonomous unit (BAU). It has these characterstics, spelt out in basic human needs categories[9] that are seen as fundamental in informing social analysis.

(1) Survival: it has its own defense system, possibly based on a combination of

- small conventional military defense
- para-military defense (guerilla)
- non-military defense

(2) Well-being: it is economically self-reliant, meaning that it puts first priority on the optimal utilization of its own resources, second priority on the exchange with other units - and then primarily with other units at the same level to avoid building dependencies. It aims at self-sufficiency in three particular fields

- food
- health
- energy

producing enough foodstuffs, health inputs and converting enough energy to be viable even under isolation and pressure, so as not to submit to blackmail, or to dependency for sheer survival.

(3) Identity: it has its own ethos, its own culture in religious and ideological terms, also in terms of idiom (including language), and its own structure economically and politically, as way of life. This is shared, more or less, by all inhabitants.

(4) <u>Freedom</u>:   its borders are permeable, it is possible to leave and
possible to join. But for freedom (not only of expression,
also of impression) to be meaningful there must outside
the borders be at least some BAUs that are different,with
a different culture and/or structure. In the vision of the
good society there would be not only BAUs but sufficiently
different BAUs for the society to be <u>pluralist</u>.

(5) <u>Structure</u>:   the BAU is essentially Beta, small and horizontal. <u>The</u>
<u>society is a Beta structure of Beta structures</u>.

Classical federalism has produced very interesting ideas and practices
about the relations between the two levels in a federal society, with divi-
sion of labour, bicameral representation, etc.. There is much to learn and
much to change and improve upon[10]. Basic in this <u>new federalism</u>[11], however,
would be the autonomy of the basic unit. Classical federalism seems to
be blind to its size, admitting California in the US and RSFSR in the SU
as "basic units".[12] New federalism, informed by the tendency of power
to drift upwards and of federal systems to become rather unitary in practice,
would insist much more on the <u>autonomy</u> of the basic unit in terms of sur-
vival, well-being and identity, producing its own defense, satisfiers of
basic material needs (well-being) and basic non-material needs (identity -
with oneself, with others, with the basic units at least, with culture
and nature). It would also insist on one of the key advantages of the federal
as opposed to the unitary society: <u>the potential for pluralism</u>[13]. But
for pluralism to be real the basic units have to be more singularist <u>at</u>
<u>the same time as</u> there is freedom to move between them , for instance as
the units speak to the subjective condition of a person in the various
stages of his/her life-cycle. For this to become reality both the <u>identity</u>
<u>of the basic unit</u> and the <u>diversity of the society of units</u> have to be pro-
tected.

How small? There cannot be any standard answer to this. The most
important and smallest BAU in human history has probably been the family
farm: self-sufficient, with its own culture and structure (each family,
in fact,has its own culture, producing its own idiom) - and tied to
similar units through inter-marriage. The defense system may have been weak.
Then there is the village system, still the major human <u>habitat</u>, with im-
portant improvements such as the sarvodaya, ujamaa, People's Communes and
all the "green",alternative ways of life communities with their rapidly
growing networks.[14] It is probably something more like the latter one
might have in mind; perhaps larger units. The order of magnitude would not
be 10^0 (the individual hermit), nor 10^1 (family).But 10^2 (a network of families?),

10^3 (the typical village), 10^4 (big villages or systems of hamlets) and 10^5 (networks of villages, cities) are all in the picture of BAUSs. On the one hand they should be <u>big enough</u> to become economically viable on the other hand they should be <u>small enough</u> to permit the advantages of the Beta logic to unfold themselves: direct democracy as the basic mechanisms of governance with the possibility of participatory plenary meetings; concern for others, empathy; integrated, not segmented participation, and closeness, not fragmentation.

How big? How big could the society be, based on such units? Again, no number magic, no numerical dogmatism should be encouraged. I shall argue below that there is a certain minimum number of BAUs that should enter in a viable federated society. Is there also a maximum? If there is it could probably be arrived at using some of the same logic as above. It should be possible to develop a sense among everybody of a shared concern and understanding. How many different units can one comprehend? How many can interact meaningfully around the complexities of economic and political life? The order of magnitude of 10^0 is out - then we would be back to singularist systems again. At the other end 10^3 also seems to be out - it becomes impossible to comprehend, and hence the subject of manipulation by those who possess more information and data processing skills than others. We are left with 10^1-10^2, or to be more precise: maybe 5-50? That would, combined with the reasoning above, yield a maximum size for societies of something between a half on five millions,[15] which intuitively does not look too unreasonable. It does call for the breakdown of a considerable number of countries,[16] though - but that is not necessarily the worst thing that could happen in this stage of history. It should also be remembered that the building process does not necessarily stop at the societal level: they can also be joined together in a meta-federation, something like what is found in the Nordic and ASEAN systems. In those systems, however, the countries joining are not federations in the sense developed here - they are all singularist states with the exception of Malaysia (which is a classical federal country).

3. How does one weave together societies of autonomous units?

There are traditionally two approaches to this question: the
institutional and the structural. For the result to be viable one
definitely has to make use of both, starting with the structural. The
problem is: what is the structure of the set of BAUs we want to weave
together in a cohesive, viable society that at the same time leaves
the BAUs cohesive and viable and - one must add - does not constitute
a threat to other societies in terms of direct and/or structural vio-
lence? We have said above that the structure should be "Beta", meaning
horizontal and small - but how to spell out that? This is actually
given in the definition of "horizontal": equitable, autonomous/mutual,
participatory, close and integrated.[17] We shall be drawing on that
type of thinking, but give it a slightly new twist inspired by conflict
and peace research rather than by development thinking, meaning by efforts
to counteract violence rather than efforts to counteract exploitation.

Here is a proposal for a catalogue of six structural conditions or
at least dimensions to be taken into consideration:[18]

SYMBIOSIS   —   there should be positive interaction; the units should
be mutually useful to each other. The level of symbiosis
should not be so low that the units could just as well
do without, nor so high that it creates a dependency to
the point that the units can no longer withdraw without
incurring intolerable damage. The assumption of self-[19]
reliance combined with self-sufficiency in essentials
is another way of saying precisely this, and it focusses
the attention on the technologies that make defense,food,
health and energy self-sufficiency at the level of small
units possible.[20]

SYMMETRY   —   meaning that the relationship should be balanced with no
unit exploiting, penetrating or dominating the other.
If there is such a unit, meaning a big community or country
which is the natural neighbour of smaller ones, then there
are three ways of approaching the problem: [21]

- splitting that unit up into smaller ones, of a size
compatible with the neighbours

- joining the smaller ones together into a bigger one
which then can relate to the big one, possibly together
with other big ones, in a federation

- abstain from efforts at federating as they are almost
certain to fail

ENTROPY   —   meaning that interaction flows in all directions among the
units, saturating the interaction network relatively
evenly, making for no fragmentation

DIVERSITY   —   meaning that the units are culturally and/or structurally
diverse, at this level of arguing not to provide the indi-
vidual with sufficient variety s/he can see and enjoy,but
for the total society to have sufficient variety to draw
upon, a broad field of structural experience (eg. different
patterns where ownership of means of production is concerned)[22]
and cultural variety (not to suffer from entropy death).

No.OF UNITS —   which should definitely be more than 2 to avoid built-in
polarization as automatic response to issue. There should be
so many that shifting coalitions and alliances are possible
and so that trilateral and generally multilateral conflict
resolution are facilitated. On the other hand there is the
problem of comprehension, of systems so big that they become
unmanageable by ordinary human beings and for that reason
opens for too much technocratic, even computer management.

No.OF ISSUES — the argument would be in favour of having more than one, avoi-
ding the one overriding, ever recurring issue (eg. language,
economic domination) in favour of a widening agenda of many
issues so as to open for bargaining - trading a stand on one
issue against one on another issue.

It should be noted that diversity (pluralism) and symbiosis (mutually
beneficial interaction) are precisely the two conditions pointed out by eco-
logists as the necessary conditions for mature eco-systems,[23] meaning
systems with a high level of resilience, of ability to withstand changes in
the external surroundings. Maybe one should learn from this the most general
of the life sciences? A unitary nation state with a periphery that is the
center reproduced on a smaller scale by cloning and the center preying on
the periphery to the point of their gradual withering away, at least cul-
turally, is not a mature but highly vulnerable system, regardless of how
strong and impressive it may look.[2] And the other conditions on the
list are actually ways of qualifying the two basic ones . The symbiosis
should be symmetric and entropic, leaving out no unit in a network of inter-
dependence, neither dependence, nor independence. And the diversity should
be in terms of the units and in terms of the issues. Systems such as those
satisfying to a reasonable extent these conditions are mature systems, in
the social as well as the ecological sense. They exhibit some level of
homeostasis - in the type of social systems discussed here showing up as
ability to handle conflicts.

Do such systems exist in the world today, among countries? The nearest
would probably be the Nordic countries and the European Community, five of
the former (soon to be eight when Faroe islands, the Åland islands and
Greenland all become fully fledged members) and ten of the latter (soon to

be twelve when Spain and Portugal join).[25] The numbers are about right,
so is the number of issues (although it may possibly be too high, too
insurmountable) and no party to these communities has an absolute edge
in terms of domination - relations are relatively symmetric and entropic.
But they are short on diversity. Rather than diversity the focus has been
on homology, on like-mindedness and like-structuredness, on recognizing
oneself in the other (particularly important in the Nordic case), on
having opposite numbers with whom to interact - all of them being capi-
talist, parliamentary democracies. No doubt homology makes interaction
easy, but it also facilitates the growth towards superstates where diver-
sity would impede such (cancerous)growth, and make for the diversity of
experience good to draw upon in times of crisis.

This is the structural base. What about the institutional super-
structure that would transcend the system just described, a smoothly working
multilateralism ? To coordinate that one annual meeting might be sufficient,
or meetings with some other periodicity; to build a society something more
permanent may be needed. How much is needed? Would anybody claim to know
the answer to that question? The whole nation state structure that we
know so well, with cabinets and ministries and sprawling bureaucracies,
coming out of the French and Ottoman models from the sixteenth century is
predicated on the assumption that much is needed. But of course much is
needed when then basic units have been made non-autonomous by the center,
a center which makes itself ever more indispensable by making the basic
units always less autonomous, and dependent on them![26]

One hypothesis can now be put forward: the better the structural
base, the less need is there for an elaborate institutional superstructure.
That superstructure can usually be seen in terms of an assembly and a
secretariat, and whereas the assembly is probably indispensable, there is
a question of how much of the secretariat is needed. Does one need a
cabinet, or could this be the rotating executive committee of the assembly?
Does one need ministries with the consequent fragmentation of issues and
interests, or could one work for institutions more capable of retaining
visions and practices geared to the totality? In other words, could it be
that we are approaching a phase in human history where we could move forward
towards real innovations,beyond the cabinet/ministries model that has now
been with us for so long?[27]

Obviously, one condition for this would be that the BAUs are both so autonomous and so transparent that holistic visions and patterns of governance are made possible, otherwise we would get the cabinet/ministries model reproduced at this level. As a matter of fact, there is probably much to learn from cities and municipalities in general here: where is the cut-off point where they go from holism to fragmentation by reproducing the cabinet/ministries' model at the level of the municipalities as is now done in all big cities around the world?[28] Could we have a pattern whereby countries would move "downwards" rather than cities moving "upwards" along the axis of degree of division of labour? At the level of the BAUs as well as at the level of the societies constituted by them - as a movement one day even touching the United Nations system with its highly counterproductive specialization into mutually disjointed "agencies" ?[29]

Obviously, that will have something to do with the capacity for filling in gaps, putting something in its place. A well informed citizenry serviced by a critical social science in the broadest sense would be one important element here. Another would be systems for the election of delegates and trustees which would make it possible to recall them, make it clear that they would have to rotate by making re-election impossible (except, possibly after one or two periods have passed), and giving them so few privileges that they do not become dependent on hanging on. Above all, they have to be accountable.[30]

These are the types of problems that have to be analysed in great detail. In conclusion let us only focus on one related problem, the solution to which is by no means clear: how many meetings can a normal human being stand per week, month or year without having irreparable damage done to his/her humanity?[31] The Swedes have the expression "marmorrumpe" (marble ass) for the delegates so trained in sitting around conference tables that they can sit for ever - how many such people do we want around us? Is this the New Class of the participatory future, homo reuniensis ? Would it help if some of the meetings were tele-conferences or tele-meetings, based on tele-networking?[32] Are there new ways of doing meeting after the important innovations of working groups and reports have been somehow exhausted? How can people be better prepared both for participating in meeting and for leaving them when their time is up - -

Difficult questions. A tried and tired populance, bored to death by meetings beyond any possible upper limit will easily render its bitterly won power to the specialist and cabinets and ministries again - as was probably one factors in what happened in China after the cultural revolution. So again we are up against the same problem: some meetings are good, more is even better up to a certain point. How do we recognize that point, preferably in advance!