SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL - 
HOW MUCH BIG IS NECESSARY?

An Essay On Federalism

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Goals, Processes and Indicators of Development Project
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, and Beta, horizontal and for that reason by necessity small, typified by small groups of friends and colleagues, 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 compromise, 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). 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 marxisnm (the party and the state, nationally and internationally) are clear Alpha structures. But then there are the countertrends: small-scale Christianity, liberalism and marxisnm, 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 statism). 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.

There are Alpha and Beta traditions in both, and the same applies to the in-between Hindu civilization. But as long as universalism and centrism 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 institutionalized liberalism and marxisnm, the United States and the Soviet Union
are both - as the names indicate - federated systems and Alpha structures in extremis, within 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. 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 characteristics, spelt out in basic human needs categories 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) **Freedom:** 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 pluralist.

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

Classical federalism has produced very interesting ideas and practices about the relations between the two levels in a federal society, with division of labour, bicameral representation, etc. There is much to learn and much to change and improve upon. Basic in this new federalism, 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". 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 autonomy of the basic unit in terms of survival, 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: the potential for pluralism. But for pluralism to be real the basic units have to be more singlarist at the same time as 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 identity of the basic unit and the diversity of the society of units have to be protected.

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 habitat, with important improvements such as the sarvodays, ujamaa, People's Communes and all the "green", alternative ways of life communities with their rapidly growing networks. 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 BAUS. On the one hand they should be big enough to become economically viable; on the other hand they should be small enough 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 $10^9$ 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 $10^2$-10$, 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, which intuitively does not look too unreasonable. It does call for the breakdown of a considerable number of countries, 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 metafederation, 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 violence? 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. 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:

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-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.

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:

- 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 individual with sufficient variety so 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) 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, avoiding 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 ecologists as the necessary conditions for mature eco-systems, 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 culturally, is not a mature but highly vulnerable system, regardless of how strong and impressive it may look. 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 interdependence, 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). 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 capitalist, parliamentary democracies. No doubt homology makes interaction easy, but it also facilitates the growth towards superstates where diversity 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 superstructure 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.

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?
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? 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"?

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.

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? The Swedes have the expression "marmorrumpa" (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? 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 populace, 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!