

# Democracy Takes a Village

E.F. Schumacher argued that the cult of bigger is better has deformed our politics as well as our sense of economy.

By Joseph Pearce

*To the size of states there is a limit as there is to other things, plants, animals, implements; for none of these retain their natural power when they are too large or too small, but they either wholly lose their nature or are spoilt.*

—Aristotle

“IT’S HARD TO EQUAL the language of the ancients,” E.F. Schumacher remarked after quoting the above words. Echoing Aristotle’s wisdom, he reiterated his belief that “the question of the proper scale of things” was “the most neglected subject in modern society.”

Since Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful* was published a third of a century ago, millions of copies have been sold in many different languages. Few books have had such a profound influence on the way the world perceives itself.

The respected economist broke ranks with the accepted wisdom of his peers to warn of impending calamity if rampant consumerism and economic expansionism were not checked by human and environmental considerations. Like a latter-day prophet, he asserted that humanity was lurching blindly in the wrong direction, that the pursuit of wealth could not ultimately lead to happiness, that the pillaging of finite resources and the pollution of the planet were threatening global ecological collapse, and that a renewal of moral and spiritual perception was essential if disaster was to be avoided.

People, he argued, could only feel at home in human-scale environments. If structures—economic, political, or social—became too large, they became impersonal and unresponsive. Under these conditions individuals felt functionally futile, dispossessed, voiceless. Structures that have a genuinely human scale reveal a healthy culture, to use Wendell Berry’s language, that is part of an order of “memory, insight, value, work, conviviality, reverence, aspiration. It reveals the human necessities and the human limits. It clarifies our inescapable bonds to the earth and to each other.”

After *Small Is Beautiful* was published, Schumacher received a letter that explained the challenging problem of scale from an organizational point of view:

The crucial point is that as a monolithic organization increases in size, the problem of communicating between its components goes up exponentially. It is generally reckoned that the maximum size of a productive scientific research team is twelve; over that size everyone spends all his time finding out what everyone else is doing.

If this point is valid, and Schumacher clearly believed that it was, its implications are manifold. At the beginning of chapter 5 of *Small Is Beautiful*, titled “A Question of Size,” Schumacher discussed the political implications associated with scale. He had been brought up

to believe that the politics of scale were as powerful as the economies of scale. Such was the dogmatic assertion that the politics of scale were inexorable and inevitable that history was seen as being determined by them. According to this view, human society began with the family; then families joined together to form tribes; then several tribes formed a nation; then a number of nations formed a “Union” or “United States”; finally, the consummation of the entire process would be the formation of a single world government. This concept of political determinism could be called the theory of progressive centralization.

Schumacher confessed the apparent plausibility of such a line of reasoning but questioned its ultimate validity. If the process were as inevitable as its proponents claimed, why was there such a proliferation of nation states? Schumacher cited the example of the United Nations. When it had been formed it had some 60 members. Twenty-five years later, when Schumacher was writing, this number had more than doubled and was continuing to grow. The phenomenon has continued apace, most notably of course with the break-up of the Soviet empire.

Schumacher had been brought up on the theory that a country had to be big in order to be prosperous—the bigger the better. Winston Churchill had derided “the pumpnickel principalities” of Germany prior to the birth of the Bismarckian Reich. It was only through unification under Bismarck that German

prosperity was possible. At least that's how the theory goes. But Schumacher offered a cautionary counterstance: "the German-speaking Swiss and the German-speaking Austrians, who did not join, did just as well economically, and if we make a list of all the most prosperous countries in the world, we find that most of them are very small; whereas a list of all the biggest countries in the world shows most of them to be very poor indeed. Here again, there is food for thought."

Nonetheless, and in spite of voices such as Schumacher's, it is still often believed that big is best in politics and that Balkanization is bad. This view has been strengthened by the bloodshed in the Balkans itself in the last decade of the 20th century. From the security of stable political environments, whether in large or small nations, it is easy to deride as primitive or bigoted the issues that divide less stable areas. "Why can't everyone live in peace?" is a pertinent question, but it is all too often asked only as an exasperated exclamation at the perceived ignorance of others.

IN THE PAST CENTURY THE **THREE POLITICAL LEADERS** WHO WERE MOST **OBSESSED WITH CENTRALIZING POWER** AND WITH EMPIRE BUILDING WERE **STALIN, MAO, AND HITLER**. THE RESULT, APART FROM THE ABJECT FAILURE OF THEIR CENTRALIST BELIEFS, WAS THE **MURDER OF MILLIONS OF PEOPLE**.

Why then is the world so riven with conflict? Ironically, it is due in large part to the theory of the politics of scale. Balkanization, so derided by those who believe big is best, is actually the consequence of the politics of scale that they espouse. The problem is caused by those who most vociferously and patronizingly condemn it. Take, for example, the many conflicts that have erupted in the Balkans. They have been due principally

to the earlier attempt to fuse Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Albanians, and other nations into an artificially large state called Yugoslavia dominated by the Serbs. Yugoslavia's former dictator, Marshal Tito, could only prevent the mounting ethnic tension from spilling over into violence by keeping order with an iron fist. After his death in 1980 the various nationalities began to flex their democratic muscle, demanding autonomy.

The same problem was caused, on a much larger canvas, by the politics of scale adopted by the Soviet Union. Lenin and Stalin centralized political power in Moscow, annexing or invading neighboring nations. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Tadjikistan, and many others were swallowed up by Soviet political giantism. Beyond the Soviet border, Stalin consolidated communist power by forcing most of Eastern Europe into the Soviet empire. It was all part of the inexorable march to communist world government, or so Stalin believed. The peoples of the communist empire had other ideas. Preferring the beauty of their own small

nations to the power of the Soviet bloc, they began to fight for their independence. One by one the nations of the former Soviet empire seceded, toppling the largest and most powerful political empire on earth. All this has happened since Schumacher's words were written, vindicating his observations.

Of course, theories of the politics of scale and progressive centralization are not the sole preserve of communism.

The efforts of the imperial powers to consolidate their empires drove artificial frontiers through the ancestral territories of the African tribes. The great Masai nation was divided between Kenya and Tanzania. Similarly, a line was drawn through Somalia, separating part of the Somali people from their brethren and placing them inside Kenya. The result of imperialist meddling in Somalia, as in so many other parts of Africa, has been anarchy, war, and famine.

In recent years the role of empire builder in Africa has passed to the United States, whose colonialist impulse surfaced in Somalia in 1991. At first American intervention was ostensibly humanitarian, concerning itself with delivering food to famine-stricken areas. Soon, however, Operation Restore Hope had been transformed into a military operation, dubbed Operation Nation Build. Its purpose, however, had precious little to do with helping to rebuild the Somali nation, as the words of the U.S. ambassador in Somalia made plain: "There is no more Somalia. Somalia's gone. You can call the place where the Somali people live 'Somalia,' but Somalia as a state disappeared in 1991." It is unclear with what international authority the American ambassador declared the right to announce the destruction of Somalia, but to the Somali people the words of Uncle Sam must have sounded suspiciously like those of Big Brother. Either way, the U.S.-led military invasion failed to bring peace or stability, resulting instead in greater depths of anarchy and bloodshed.

The most telling condemnation of the politics of scale is to be found in those who took it to its logical extreme. In the past century the three political leaders who were most obsessed with centralizing power and with empire building were Stalin, Mao, and Hitler. The result, apart from the abject failure of their centralist beliefs, was the murder of mil-

lions of people in the name of ideological "progress."

Since the legacy of political giantism in the 20th century leaves much to be desired, what then is the alternative? Essentially it is that the principle of small is beautiful must apply to politics as much as to economics. Whereas believers in big is best look towards the evolution of ever larger, supranational political bodies to govern humanity, those who seek the human scale in human affairs call for devolution of power to smaller nations or to regions or states within nations.

Schumacher insisted that the question of "regionalism" was one of the most important problems facing humanity:

But regionalism, not in the sense of combining a lot of states into free-trade systems, but in the opposite sense of developing all the regions within each country. This, in fact, is the most important subject on the agenda of all the larger countries today. And a lot of the nationalism of small nations today, and the desire for self-government and so-called independence, is simply a logical and rational response to the need for regional development. In the poor countries in particular there is no hope for the poor unless there is successful regional development, a development effort outside the capital city covering all the rural areas wherever people happen to be.

In economic terms the regional development to which Schumacher is referring is linked to the application of intermediate, or appropriate, technology. In political terms it refers to the establishment, or re-establishment, of genuine small-scale local and regional self government. It is a call for the re-emergence of genuine democracy.

Since democracy is a political dogma

to which most governments in the world claim allegiance, it is necessary to differentiate between nominal democracy and the genuine article. Nominal democracy, the form practiced in many of the world's largest countries and in supra-national bodies like the European Union, works more in theory than in practice. At best it is inefficient and inadequate; at worst it is little more than a sham.

The purpose of democracy for the inhabitants of the ancient Greek city-states was to give a voice to every free citizen not merely in principle but in practice. This was possible because the city-states were relatively small and because not every inhabitant was a citizen—some were slaves who had no political rights. Nonetheless, in ideal terms, pure democracy exists when the principle is incarnated into practice as it was in ancient Greece. Citizens should be their own representatives with both the theoretical right and the practical ability to express their views and influence their community.

Problems arise when societies become more complex or merge into ever larger political units. When the politics of scale apply there is little option for individuals but to delegate their democratic functions to a local council; the local council delegates its functions to a county council; the county council delegates to the regional council or state government; the regional council or state government delegates to the national government; the national government delegates to a continental union; and finally, so the theory implies, the continental union will delegate to a world government.

To what extent will the individual be able to influence a world government? Each of us is but one voice in an electorate of several billion. Clearly our democratic function will only exist as an abstract theory, leaving us with no practical ability to influence the society in

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which we live. Seen in this light, the theory of progressive centralization is, in relation to democracy, the practice of progressive usurpation.

This whole issue was discussed with polemical power by John Seymour, doyen of the self-sufficiency movement, in *Bring Me My Bow*. In a chapter entitled “The Horrible Disease of Gigantism,” Seymour let rip rhetorically against those who have usurped power in the name of democracy:

What is the cure for this beastly disease of gigantism? Break ‘Great Britain’ and the other huge nation-states up again. What do we want to be ‘Great’ for any more? I don’t want to be ‘Great’—I want to be wise, I want to be free, I want to be kind, I want to be happy. In what did our ‘Greatness’ consist anyway? In beating other people up and then saying to them: ‘Look—we’re the bosses of the Greatest Empire the World has ever seen!’ Did this make the average Englishman wise, free, kind and happy?

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Seymour’s robust denunciation of imperialism was motivated by a profound commitment to genuine democracy: “The unit which is small enough for every man to make himself personally heard is the only unit that can possibly claim to be a democracy.” Seymour’s democratic sensibilities and his belief in the break-up of Great Britain led him to dismiss the two major parties as intrinsically tied to theories of “gigantism”: “Fortunately, because I live in Wales, my choice is clear. I shall vote for Plaid Cymru, the devolutionist party. My men will not get in, but at least my tiny little voice will be heard, speaking out in favor of a country of humane size.” These words were written in 1977 when devolution seemed little more than a distant dream held by a few eccentric nationalists. Today Plaid Cymru has emerged as a major force in Welsh politics, and devolution, albeit only in a partial and emasculated form, has become a reality.

Yet Seymour, though he lived in Wales at the time, was an Englishman who loved his own country. England, like Wales, was distinct from Great Britain and should be liberated from it. Seymour, however, went still further: “I have another sort of pride, more private, more intimate, more my own perhaps, and that is in being an East Anglian. Ah, there could be a country! And to be a countryman of East Anglia would in no way lessen my pride at being an Englishman. ... East Anglia is a nation, and as large as any nation ought to be.”

Seymour’s characteristic candor will lead many to deduce that he is little more than a short-sighted romantic, and clearly it is questionable whether the concept of “nation” could be applied to areas such as East Anglia. Yet his call for power to be devolved from central government to smaller regions is valid. He was also enough of

a realist to pre-empt the objections of the believers in realpolitik who insist that the politics of scale make small nations, or other forms of small-scale government, impractical in the “real world”:

Now I must brace myself for the counterblast from the people who always say, at this juncture of this particular argument: ‘What we want is not more nations but fewer! We want to do away with nations altogether in fact. All men should unite in one nation, the nation of the world!’ ... Surely it can be seen that one government for the whole world, one all-embracing nation would be about as far from real democracy as you could get? If a man cannot make his voice heard in England how the hell is he going to make it heard in the world? Among—what is the latest guess: four thousand million people—how much is the voice of one honest man going to count? If there is ever a government of the world you can be sure of this: it will be despotism, not only the biggest but also the most despotic.

If, however, this theoretical world government should ever become a reality, it will almost certainly call itself a democracy. People will have a vote even if they don’t have a voice. The problem, therefore, is not whether democracy is the way forward—almost everyone believes that it is—the problem is undemocratic “democracy.” The challenge for the future is how to make democracy democratic. ■

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# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[Borat]

### Polish Joke for a New Century

By Steve Sailer

ENGLISH IMPROVISATIONAL comedian Sacha Baron Cohen first broke through with his striking concoction Ali G, the British-born Pakistani nitwit with a bling-laden, canary-colored tracksuit and an Andy-Capp-meets-Snoop-Dogg vocabulary. Ali G posed as a news personality popular with “the yoof,” enabling him to ask smart people imbecilic questions. In one memorable interview on his HBO show, our own ever gracious Pat Buchanan gallantly (and effectively) parried Ali’s queries about why America hadn’t found “any BLTs in Iraq” and “Is it ever worth fighting a war over sandwiches?”

Ali G functioned as a brilliant satire on the neoconservative dogma that any problems caused by mass immigration will automatically disappear due to the magic of assimilation. While Ali G was, as promised, wholly assimilated into English culture, it was not the England that gave us Shakespeare and Locke but the lowest common denominator Cool Britannia of council estate chavs from the unworking class.

Eventually, every publicist in the English-speaking world was warned about Ali G, so Baron Cohen has now been forced to fall back on his less inspired secondary character, Borat, a grinning idiot of a TV reporter from a phenomenally backward Kazakhstan. The Min-

istry of Information sends the likeable lunkhead to report on the “U.S. and A.” in the hit mockumentary “Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan.”

Baron Cohen, who wrote his thesis at Cambridge on Jewish participation in the American civil-rights movement, modeled Borat on an unintentionally funny Russian he had met. His character started out as Moldovan and then became Albanian. There are plenty of scary Albanian gangsters in Western Europe who might have taken active offense, however, and Borat was relocated to far-off Kazakhstan in Central Asia.

In reality, Kazakhstan is an arid land of mostly Asian-looking people, but in Baron Cohen’s imagination, it’s a travesty of old stereotypes about Eastern Europe. The vulgar yet somehow innocent journalist’s home was filmed 2,500 miles away in an impoverished Romanian village so that Baron Cohen could indulge in traditional Ashkenazi anti-gentilism, the clever townsman’s disdain for the slower-witted peasant.

“Borat” is a 21st-century version of the Polish jokes that Borscht Belt comedians like Henny Youngman once helped popularize. While Ali G was a milestone in contemporary social satire, the anti-Slavic depiction of Borat as the ultimate *goyishe kop* (he carries a chicken in his suitcase and has no idea what a toilet is for) is old-fashioned and purposeless.

Still, the film is awfully funny in its intentionally lowbrow way. One highlight is Borat warmly assuring a Virginia rodeo audience, “We support your war of terror ... And may George Bush drink the blood of every man, woman, and child in Iraq!”

What are almost as amusing are the rapturous critics’ attempts to explain why the film is Good for You. “The brilliance of ‘Borat,’” enthuses Manohla

Dargis in the *New York Times*, “is that its comedy is as pitiless as its social satire, and as brainy.” Huh?

“Borat,” we are advised, is an Important Message Movie because it portrays Kazakhs—and Red State Americans—as anti-Semites. I suspect the critics (and Baron Cohen himself) are confusing “Kazakhs” with “Cossacks,” the Czar’s irregular cavalry who were notorious perpetrators of pogroms. Actually, the Cossacks began as Slavic serfs who escaped to the steppe and adopted some of the horse-centered culture of the Asiatic Kazakhs. Anti-Semitism, however, has not been a major theme in Kazakh life.

Dargis assures us the semi-scripted movie “will freeze your blood,” exposing the hidden anti-Semitism of the American South when Borat says something casually anti-Semitic to an American, who fails to gasp with appropriate horror or to immediately bundle the visitor off to a cultural sensitivity re-education camp. In truth, Borat must have struck most Americans not in on the joke as either a harmless boob or a demented lunatic. Humoring him would be the sanest strategy for getting him to go away.

The Fox studio has marketed the low-budget “Borat” superbly, with Baron Cohen working harder to garner free publicity than any self-promoter since Spike Lee’s 1992 campaign for “Malcolm X.” Fox’s masterful hyping of “Borat” is in ironic contrast to how in September the studio drowned like an unwanted kitten the similarly crude and hilarious but much smarter and more politically daring “Idiocracy,” the sci-fi black comedy about America’s dysgenic future by the dazzling but diffident Mike Judge. ■

Rated R for relentless filthiness.