#85 Decentralization and Freedom

Governments are responsible for some of the greatest atrocities in history. The 20th century was particularly brutal in this respect, with tens of millions of people dying at the hands of their own government. It is said that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. Thus, in this video, relying on Leopold Kohr's fascinating book The Breakdown of Nations, we will examine the factors that contribute to the rise of tyrannical government and with this knowledge discuss how the threat of tyranny can best be mitigated.

To account for the rise of oppressive government, many explanations have been put forth, however, there are two theories which have been especially prominent – these are the ideological and personal theories. The ideological theory proposes that oppressive government is primarily the result of bad ideas infiltrating a society, while the personal theory places blame at the feet of morally corrupt or even malevolent leaders who deceive their way into power and then wreak havoc on the nations which they rule.

There is some truth to both theories as leaders such as Stalin, Hitler and Mao, to name but a few of the morally corrupt politicians of the 20th century, were responsible for much suffering. It is also obvious that when entire nations fall victim to corrupt ideologies, be it Nazism or Stalin's communism, that the proliferation of these beliefs also assists in the growth of tyranny. Leopold Kohr, however, suggests that there is another factor more fundamental to the rise of tyranny than either ideology or the ruler in power. This factor is the size of the social unit – or in other words, the population of a society ruled under a single governing entity.

That there are issues with large social units has long been recognized. Aristotle cautioned that "to the size of states there is a limit" (Aristotle) while also stating that "[f]or law is order, and good law is good order; but a very great multitude cannot be orderly." (Aristotle). While Aristotle recognized that limitations exist on the size at which societies can properly function, in The Breakdown of Nations, Kohr makes the related assertion that the larger the population of a society the more prone it is to tyrannical rule and the more brutal the tyranny will be.

As the population of a society grows, the potential power of its government grows with it. For like a parasite whose growth is checked by the size of the host, the growth of state power is checked by the number of subjects under its control. As populations expand more economic resources are placed at the disposal of those in charge, more bodies can be used as cannon fodder to fight their battles, while an ever greater disconnect emerges between the citizens and government officials. Furthermore, in the attempt to cope with the immense complexities of a populous society, those in government always see the solution as more government control – thus further increasing their power.

If this growth in government power is unchecked a dangerous tipping point is reached whereby those in charge come to believe they are so powerful that their actions are immune from any form of retaliation. This is the point of no return, or what Kohr calls the 'critical magnitude of abuse', as this amount of power corrupts even the most virtuous among us. "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely", Lord Acton famously observed, while Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn echoed this sentiment writing: "Unlimited power in the hands of limited people always leads to cruelty." (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago) The combination of the corrupting influence of power, and the immense social complexities of a large society, makes tyranny inevitable when this power is placed in the hands of fallible beings who try and control multitudes of people.

If this hypothesis of Kohr's is true – that excessive size of the social unit is the primary cause of tyranny due to the growth in government power that it breeds – then it follows that the best way to counteract tyranny is through decentralization. Shrinking the size of the social units – which in the modern world would entail the breakdown of the massive nation-states – would greatly limit the potential power of any one government. But in addition to the limitations on power that arise from smaller populations, decentralization also checks the growth of power by creating competition between social units. If a community becomes too oppressive residents can easily vote with their feet and relocate to one of a multitude of other communities. As people flee oppression,

the people doing the oppressing will soon lose their power and thus their ability to commit social predation. This happens to a degree in the modern world of nation states, but clearly the competition will be far more impactful with a proliferation in the number of sovereign communities.

Decentralization also minimizes the impact that morally corrupt or even psychopathic individuals can have on the world. In Robert Hare's classic book on psychopathy, Without Conscience, he lists the most prominent traits of psychopaths; psychopaths he explains are egocentric individuals who lack feelings of remorse and guilt, lack the ability to empathize and are skilled at deception and manipulation. In other words, psychopaths possess traits very useful to those who desire power. The best way to deal with the threat these people pose is to limit the power they can obtain, and thus the damage they can do – and again, this is best achieved through decentralization. As Kohr explains:

"There is nothing in the constitution of men or states that can prevent the rise of dictators...Power maniacs exist everywhere...The only difference lies in the degree of tyrannical government which, in turn, depends once more on the size and power of the countries falling victim to it." (Leopold Kohr, The Breakdown of Nations)

While decentralization can help check the rise of tyranny it offers additional benefits, such as the minimization of group conflicts. Not all people desire to live in communities organized under the same social institutions. Some people favor free markets, while others believe that socialism is a far more just way to organize a society. Some want to live in communities primarily with people of their own ethnicity, while others favor living with a diverse multitude of ethnicities. In a world of massive nation states these conflicting groups must battle for state power in order to have their views imposed on all. But decentralization offers a far more peaceful option, as Kohr explains:

". . .why should not as many individuals have as many different institutions as they like instead of having all to use a single costume which half of them might consider not to their taste? If freedom of choice is considered an advantage economically, why not also politically? For, with a great multitude of systems prevailing in an area inhabited by hundreds of millions of people, it becomes

mathematically inevitable that far more individuals are able to obtain what their hearts desire than if the same region were to permit only a single system, even as in a restaurant many more people can obtain satisfaction if the menu includes a great variety of dishes rather than a single one which can be made palatable to all only through the propaganda of the cook."(Leopold Kohr, The Breakdown of Nations)

In allowing for a multitude of social systems to emerge, and people to experiment with a variety of institutional arrangements, the objective judge of reality is awakened. Those societies which flourish will be mimicked while those that fail act as warnings for what to avoid. This method of social experimentation is far more stable than the large-scale social experimentation seen today. A radically decentralized world localizes the impact of institutional failure while centralization universalizes it. When a social experiment fails in a radically decentralized world the impact is primarily felt by a relatively small number of people who in most cases, based on their decision to live in that community, desired such conditions. In contrast, when a social experiment fails in today's world of massive nation states the impact is felt by many millions of people who had no real say in the matter.

While decentralization offers great benefits, many still fear it as they believe it will lead to a proliferation of isolated communities. This is a misguided view and the relative lack of hermit kingdoms throughout history supports this assertion. Humans are social beings and great benefits emerge from trade and social cooperation. Thus, in a more decentralized world, most communities will operate in an open and cooperative manner – with isolationist communities being the exception. Decentralization, it must be stressed, does not necessarily mean an increase in barriers preventing the movement of goods and people. Rather it means more boundaries, and as Kohr explains, boundaries help maintain order and promote human flourishing:

"...all our instincts drive us constantly to create boundaries, not to tear them down. We draw them around our gardens in the form of fences, and within our houses in the form of walls separating our rooms...Boundaries are shelters, and for that reason they must be close to us, and narrow. To tear them from human societies would be like tearing away the shell from the body of a tortoise or the

shore from the ocean. But boundaries are not barriers. What we want to keep from the harbor is the storm, not the sea…It is the barriers, then, which are detrimental to human development, not the protecting boundaries whose function is to keep things within healthy limits."(Leopold Kohr, The Breakdown of Nations)

Now, more than ever, the world needs more boundaries, not fewer. Instead of forcing conflicting groups to fight for state power in the hopes that with such power they can impose their views on all – why not let those who disagree live in peace in their own communities? In so doing power will be dispersed among far more people – and the risk of tyranny, greatly diminished. If on the other hand, we continue moving in the direction of more centralization, if we increasingly tear down boundaries, we will not be creating a freer world, rather we will only be permitting the concentration of power in the hands of ever-fewer people and as Kohr wisely noted "to the extent that government is strong, the individual is weak, with the result that even if his title is citizen, his position is that of subject."(Leopold Kohr, The Breakdown of Nations)