Disunion Now

A Plea for a Society based upon Small Autonomous Units

Leopold Kohr

26 September 1941

Contents

We like to believe that the misery into which the world has come is due to the fact that humanity is split into too many countries. And we like to believe that all the evils of our globe would be eliminated by simply doing away with the variety of states through uniting - the democracies now, the continents later, the world in the end. The usually cited examples for the feasibility of such unions are the United States of America and Switzerland.

As far as the United States is concerned, it is not a model after which Europe could be reshaped because it is not a union of different entities. There is no real differentiation between the peoples, languages, customs and races living in the various states. There is only one people, the American, living in the United States which is plural in its name but not in fact. The United States *are* not a country, it *is* a country. The only lesson which can be drawn from its constitutional picture is that in spite of the uniformity of type it has produced, it was found more practical to subdivide it into 48 states instead of trying to govern the entire continent through delegates from Washington. Thus *differentiations* were artificially created because this proved to be an easier way to achieve union than *unification.*

But more than the United States, it is Switzerland which is regarded as the proof of the feasibility of the unionist dreams even for the continent of Europe, where they have neither a uniform type of continental man, nor a common language, nor a common cultural and historical background. There, in a tiny spot in the Alps, three arch-enemies - Italians, Germans and French - have united for the common purpose of freedom, peace and economic happiness. Switzerland to the unionist, is the eternal example of the practicability of the living together of different nations, and for this reason, he praises her as his holy land.

But in reality, Switzerland, too, proves something quite different from what she is meant to prove. The percentage of her three national groups (not speaking of the Romanche, her fourth nationality) is roughly 70% for the German, 20% for the French and 10% for the Italian speaking population. If these three national groups as such were the basis of her much-famed union, it would inevitably result in the domination of the large German speaking block over the other two nationalities, who would be degraded to the logical status of minorities representing only 30% of the total population. Indeed, the rules of democracy would favor this development, and the reason for the French and Italian speaking communities remaining in a chiefly German enterprise would be gone. No sense could be found in their keeping away from the more logical reunion with their own blood-relatives, who, through their number, have formed the powerful nations of Italy and France. No more sense could there be for the German block to stay outside the Reich.

In fact the basis of the existence of Switzerland and the principle of living together of various national groups is not the federation of her three nationalities but the federation of her 22 states, which represent a *division* of her nationalities and thus create the essential precondition for any democratic federation: the physical balance of the participants, the approximate equality of numbers. The greatness of the Swiss idea, therefore, is the smallness of its cells from which it derives its guaranties. The Swiss from Geneva does not confront the Swiss from Zurich as a German to a French confederate, but as a confederate from the Republic of Geneva to a confederate from the Republic of Zurich. The citizen of the German-speaking Uri is as much a foreigner to the citizen of the German-speaking Unterwalden as he is to citizens of the ltalian-speaking Tessin. Between the canton of St. Gallen and the Swiss federation there is no intermediary organization in the form of "German-speaking cantons." The power delegated to Berne derives from the small member republic and not from the nationality, because Switzerland is a union of states, not of nations. It is important to realize that in Switzerland there live (in rough numbers) 700,000

Bernese, 650,000 Zürichois, 160,000 Genevese, etc., and not 2,500,000 Germans, 1,000,000 French and 500,000 Italians. The great number of proud, democratic and almost sovereign cantons, and the small number of the individual cantonal populations eliminates all possible imperialist ambition on the part of any one canton, because it would always be outnumbered by even a very small combination of the others. If ever, in the course of contemporary simplification and rationalization, an attempt to reorganize Switzerland on the basis of its nationalities should succeed, the 22 "superfluous" states with all their separate parliaments and governments would become three provinces: not of Switzerland, however, but of Germany, Italy and France.

Cantonal Sovereignty

People who argue for a union of nations in Europe because they believe that *this* kind of union has been realized and thus proved its practicability in Switzerland, have never based their wonderful schemes on the principle of cantonal or small-state sovereignty. The *national* idea has so much troubled the minds of the political thinkers that, in contrast, the notion of *state* so much more flexible, adaptable and multipliable than that of *nation*, has most completely gone out of use. For virtue has been seen only in great and greater while smaller entities have been thought and taught to be the source of all mischief and evil. We have been educated in the worship of the bulk, of the universal, of the colossal, and have come away from the minuscule, the completeness and universality on the smallest scale - the individual, which is the protoplasm of all social life. We have learned to praise the unification of France, Britain, Italy and Germany in the belief that they would give birth to a unified humanity. But they created only Great Powers.

If the Swiss experience should be applied to Europe, also the Swiss technique - not merely the appearance of its result - will have to be employed. This consist in the dividing of three or any number of unequal blocks into as many smaller parts as is necessary to eliminate any sizable numerical preponderance. That is to say that one should create 40 or 50 equally small states instead of 4 or 5 unequally large ones. Otherwise even a federated Europe will always contain 80 million Germans, 45 million French, 45 million Italians, etc., which means that any European federation would end up in a German hegemony with just the same inevitability as the German federation, in which 24 small states were linked to the one 40-million power of Prussia ended up in Prussian hegemony.

The suggestion, therefore, is to split Germany into a number of states of seven to ten million inhabitants. This could be easily done since the former German states (or a number of them) could be reconstructed, and even Prussia could be divided on a natural and historical basis. The splitting up of Germany alone, however, would have no permanent effect. With the natural tendency of all growing things, Germany would reunite unless the whole of Europe were to be cantonized at the same time. France, Italy and Russia must be divided too. Also in their cases their historical backgrounds would make the task easy: we shall again have a Venezia, a Lombardy, a Burgundy, a Savoy, an Estonia, a White Russia, etc. But as with the German states, here also the new (or old) entities would again grow together on racial lines unless they be brought together in *new combinations* making the creation of national states impossible. That is to say, the true meaning of Switzerland or the Austro-Hungarian empire will have to be realized in many new instances: the small states will be federated, but not with their nearest relative, so that the new map of Europe might show a Pomerania-West-Poland, and East-Prussia-Baltica,

an Austro-Hungary-Czechoslovakia, a Baden-Burgundy, a Lombardy-Savoy, etc. Then the Great Powers, which are the womb of all modem wars, because they alone are strong enough to give to war its modern frightfulness, shall have disappeared. But only through splitting up the entire continent of Europe will it be possible to eliminate honorably Germany or any other Great Power without having to inflict on any the odium of a new Versailles. Once Europe is divided into small enough parcels, we shall have the Swiss foundation of a Pan European Union, based not on the collaboration of powerful nations but on the smallness of all the states.

Glorifying the Small

All this is a defense of a much-ridiculed principle which glorifies the sovereignty of the smallest and not of the largest state-entity - *Kleinstaaterei*, as the Germans say. The theorist of our time who seem to be able to see only the large and get emotional over words like "humanity" (no one knows what it really means and why one should *die* for it) call the very idea of creating more instead of fewer states medieval backwardness. They are all out for unionism and colossalism, though unionism is nothing really but another expression for totalitarianism, even if it is thought to be a guarantee for peace. It is the one-party system transplanted into the international field. Against the scorn of our theorists I would like to point out only a very few of the advantages of this "medieval" scheme. The unionist will say that the time when hundreds of states existed was dark and that wars were waged almost continuously. That is true. But what were these wars like? The Duke of Tyrol declared war on the Margrave of Bavaria for a stolen horse. The war lasted two weeks. There was one dead and six wounded. A village was captured and all the wine drunk which was in the cellar of the inn. Peace was made and $35 paid for reparations. The adjoining Duchy of Liechtenstein and the Archbishopric of Salzburg never learned that there had been a war on at all. There was war on some corner of Europe almost every day, but they were wars with little effects. Today we have relatively few wars, and they are for no better reason than a stolen horse. But the effects are tremendous.

Also economically the advantages of the coexistence of many little states were enormous, although the modern synchronizers and economists will not agree with this since they have got accustomed to see the world standing on their heads. Instead of one administration we had twenty, instead of two hundred parliamentarians we had two thousand, and, thus, instead of the ambitions of only a few the ambitions of many could be satisfied. There were no unemployed because there were too many identical professions which competed less because they were exercised in more countries. There was no necessity for socialism (another totalitarian notion), because the economic life of a small country could be supervised from any church tower without the interpretations (brilliant though they be) of a Marx or Schacht. There was the development of the arts in the many capitals which excelled in the creation of universities, theater and in the production of poets, philosophers and architects. And there were no more taxes than we have now, in the age of rationalization, where people and enterprises have been "economized" for economic reasons and the phenomenon of unemployment has come into existence. We have done away with what we thought was the waste of courts and kings and have created thereby the splendor of the dictators' marching millions. We have ridiculed the many little states; now we are terrorized by their few successors.

Not only history but also our own experience has taught us that true democracy in Europe can only be achieved in little states. Only there the individual can retain his place and dignity. And if democracy is a worthwhile idea, we have to create again the conditions for its development, the small state, and give the glory of sovereignty (instead of curtailing an institution from which no one wants to depart) to the smallest community and to as many people as possible. It will be easy to unite *small* states under one continental federal system and thus also satisfy, secondarily, those who want to live on universal terms. Such a Europe is like a fertile inspiration and a grandiose picture, although not a modern one which you paint in one dull line. It will be like a mosaic with fascinating variations and diversity, but also with the harmony of the organic and living whole.

This is a ridiculous scheme, conceived for man as a witty, vivacious and individualistic reality. Unionism, on the other hand, is a deadly serious scheme without humor, meant for men as a collectivity and as social animals of lower order; and it reminds me constantly, in all its earnest elaborateness, of the German professor who submitted to Satan a new plan for organizing Hell. Whereupon Satan answered with rock-shaking laughter: "Organize Hell? My dear Professor, organization, that *is* Hell."

Leopold Kohr
Disunion Now
A Plea for a Society based upon Small Autonomous Units
26 September 1941

http://www.panarchy.org/kohr/1941.eng.html

theanarchistlibrary.org