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Thomas Woods on the Decentralist Left

Kevin Carson

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Thomas Woods has some nice things to say about E.F. Schumacher and Kirkpatrick Sale at the Lew Rockwell blog:

When I read today about people in California who are being harassed by the federal government over the medical-marijuana issue, I am sympathetic. Of course they should be able to use medical marijuana. Unfortunately, many of these people are the very same ones who have historically cheered federal supremacy. They're now being forced to sleep in the very bed they themselves have made.

There used to be a tradition of decentralism on the Left. I saw some of it when I spoke at the E.F. Schumacher Society Decentralist Conference at Williams College in 1996. Most of the organizations represented there were on the left. And it couldn't have been more cordial. These were folks who, being decentralists themselves, gave you the courtesy of not automatically as-

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suming that the reason you favored decentralism was so you could oppress people.

At that conference and then at another event several years later I had an opportunity to meet Kirkpatrick Sale, who has been a serious intellectual on the Left for many years. Now I certainly can't agree with everything Sale says by any means. But we got along very well. He agreed with the Jeffersonian idea of state nullification. He believed in local self-government to a degree reminiscent of Jefferson's scheme for ward republics. He even opposed the Fourteenth Amendment, since he understood where it was bound to lead.

I'm currently reading Sale's book *Human Scale*. Again, I have to reject much of it. But I find myself wondering what happened to this tradition on the Left. The Left spends a lot of time criticizing neoconservatives, but the fact is that both sides share the same prejudice against local self-government and in favor of central management of society. The typical left-liberal shares far more of the preconceptions of the typical neoconservative than he is willing to admit.

Woods' contrast between 1996 and today is probably overblown. I'd guess that the decentralist Left is at least as healthy today as it was in 1996. It's not as though decentralists like Schumacher and Sale were any more popular among left-liberals then than they are now. Their tradition was marginalized on the left for most of the 20th century—at least since Saint Woodrow decimated the genuine left in his War Hysteria and Red Scare.

If anything, the Internet has allowed various decentralist traditions to cross-pollinate and reach a mainstream audience to a far larger extent than could have been imagined in the mid-90s. There are many online venues where mutualists, agrarians, dis-

tributists, Georgists, social crediters, Catholic Workers, Rothbardians and Greens compare their views, amiably for the most part, and find out how much they have in common.

The Green Party, quite decentralist in many ways despite some unfortunate statist positions, is considerably more prominent today than ten years ago. And the recent era of good feelings between Libertarian Michael Badnarik and Green David Cobb, in my humble opinion, was the most promising political development since Murray Rothbard's and Karl Hess' attempted alliance with the New Left during and after the "St. Louis Days."

Today, as much as ever, the good guys on the left and right fringe have more in common with each other than with the bad guys in the corporate center. As I've written elsewhere, the gun rights and home-schooling people are the natural allies of people into things like human scale technology and worker self-management. It's the statist neoconservatives of the right-center and the New Republic liberals of the left-center, fighting over control of the corporate state, who are our common enemy.

I'm glad to see Woods' kind words for Kirk Sale. *Human Scale* had more of an effect on the evolution of my economic views, probably, than any other book (although Sale seems to have taken a nosedive into primitivism in recent years). Fifteen years ago, I was a more-or-less Burkean conservative. An article entitled "The Jeffersonian Conservative Tradition," by Clyde Wilson (about whom Woods also has some nice things to say) directed me to a populist/decentralist strand of the right that I found much more attractive than endless gassing about "the cake of custom" and "the wisdom of the unlettered." That led me to the agrarians and distributists, the antifederalists, and the Levellers and Commonwealthmen.

At that point, I stumbled across Kirkpatrick Sale's *Human Scale*. I recall all sorts of odds and ends that impressed me on my first reading of it. For example, his estimated figure for corporate welfare that totalled higher than annual corporate profits. And all sorts of references to interesting work on economy of scale and decentral-

ized economics, that showed peak efficiency being reached in production units of startlingly low size. Reading this book was a sort of Damascus Road experience, really impressing on my mind for the first time that the structure of the corporate economy owed more to government intervention than to the “free market.” Starting with Sale’s voluminous end-notes (themselves worth the effort of combing the used bookstores for your own copy), I went on to work by Barry Stein and Walter Adams showing the extent to which government subsidized the inefficiency costs of economic centralization and made the dinosaurs of the Fortune 500 artificially competitive against small firms producing for local markets.

Not long after, I read David DeLeon’s excellent *The American as Anarchist* and Henry Silverman’s *American Radical Thought: The Libertarian Tradition* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1970), a superb anthology of libertarian writers of left and right which has virtually disappeared. Between the two of them, they led me on to thinkers as diverse as Benjamin Tucker, Murray Rothbard, and Carl Oglesby.