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Federalism

Rudolf Rocker

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1937

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These are two extracts from *Nationalism and Culture* (Book 2, Chapter 7) dealing with federalism. We find the useful brilliant insights that characterize so many of Rocker's writings.

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from the tyranny of monopoly; every initiative which opposes the state's effective action and aims at the elimination of force from the life of society, is a step nearer to freedom and the coming of a new age. Everything which steers towards the opposite goal - under whatever name - strengthens consciously or unconsciously the forces of that political, social and economic reaction which today raises its head more threateningly than ever before. And with the state will disappear also the nation - which is only the state-folk - in order that the concept of humanity may take on a new meaning. This will reveal itself in its every part, and from it the rich manifoldness of life will for the first time create a whole.

Fourier, Proudhon, Pi y Margall¹ and others believed that the nineteenth century would begin the dissolution of the Great State and prepare the way for an epoch of Federations of Free Leagues and Municipalities which, in their opinion, would open for the people of Europe a new period of their history. They were mistaken as to the time, but their point of view is still correct, for governmental centralization has assumed a scope which must fill even the least suspicious with secret dread of the future in Europe and in the world at large. Only a federalistic social organization, supported by the common interest of all and based on the free agreement of all human groups, can free us from the curse of the political machine which feeds on the sweat and blood of the people.

Federalism is organic collaboration of all social forces towards a common goal on the basis of covenants freely arrived at. Federalism is not disintegration of creative activity, not chaotic running hither and thither; it is the united work and effort of all members for the freedom and welfare of all. It is unity of action, sprung from inner conviction, which finds expression in the vital solidarity of all. It is the voluntary spirit, working from within outward, which does not exhaust itself in mindless imitation of prescribed patterns permitting no personal initiative. Monopoly of power must disappear, together with monopoly of property, that men may be eased of the weight which rests like a mountain on their souls and cripples the wings of the spirit.

Liberation of economics from capitalism! Liberation of society from the state! Under this sign the social struggles of the near future will take place, smoothing the way for a new era of freedom, justice and solidarity. Every movement which strikes capitalism in the core of its being and seeks to free economics

¹ Pi y Margall (1824-1901) libertarian federalist from Catalonia. He translated into Spanish many of Proudhon's writings that shaped his federalist outlook that he tried to implement when he shared some public charges.

The Past/Present

The splendid culture which spread from Italy over most of the cities of Europe and in them also gave the impulse to a reshaping of social life, unfolded at a time when the country was completely split up politically and the idea of national unity had as yet no power over the minds of men. The whole country was covered with a network of self-contained communities which defended their local independence with the same zeal as did the city-republics of ancient Hellas. In the municipality artists and craftsmen in their brotherhoods and guilds cooperated in a common task. The guilds were not merely the directors and administrators of economic life, they constituted also the sole basis for the political structure of the community. There were no political parties nor professional politicians in the modern sense. Each guild elected its representatives to the municipal council, where they carried out the instructions of their organizations and tried by conference with the delegates from other organizations to reach a settlement of all important questions on the basis of free agreement. And since every guild felt itself closely identified with the general interests of the city, things were decided by the vote of the corporations represented. The same procedure held in the federations of cities, the tiniest market town had the same rights as the richest municipality, since it had joined the alliance of its own free choice and had the same interest in its efficiency as all the other communities. At the same time every guild within the city and every city within the federation remained an independent organism which had control of its own finances, its own courts, its own administration, and could make and dissolve treaties with other associations on its own motion. Only the common requirements of the same tasks and the same interests brought the several guilds and municipalities together into corporate bodies of similar type so that they might carry out plans of wider scope.

The great advantage of this system lay in the fact that each member of a guild as well as the representatives of the guild in the corporation could easily keep track of all its functioning. Everyone was dealing with matters which he understood exactly and making decisions about them - matters about which he could speak as expert and connoisseur. If one compares this institution with the legislative and administrative bodies of the modern state, its moral superiority becomes instantly apparent. Neither the voter, today, nor the man who is said to represent him, is in a position that enables him to supervise in any degree (not to say completely) the monstrous mechanism of the central political apparatus. Every delegate is compelled almost every day to decide upon questions of which he has no personal knowledge and about which he must rely on the judgment of others. That such a system must inevitably lead to the worst sort of maladjustment and injustice is indisputable. And since the individual voter is, for the same reason, in no better position to keep track of and to control the acts of his so-called "representatives," the caste of professional politicians, many of whom have in view only their own advantage, is able more easily to profit by the confusion and the gate is opened wide for every kind of moral corruption.

Next to these notorious evils which are today so unambiguously and so glaringly evident in every parliamentary state, the so-called "centralized representation" is the greatest hindrance to any social progress, standing in direct contradiction to all principles of natural development. Experience teaches us that every social innovation first permeates one little circle and only gradually achieves general recognition. For just this reason federalism offers the best security for unrestricted development, since it leaves to every community the possibility of trying out within its own circle any measures which it may think fitted to advance the welfare of its citizens. The community is, therefore, in a position to apply practical tests and so to subject immediately to the proof of positive experience any proposed

innovations. It thus exerts an enlivening and stimulating influence upon neighboring communities, which are thus themselves put in a position to judge of the fitness or unfitness of the innovations. With the central representative bodies of our time such an education in social views is completely excluded. In such a structure, in the very nature of things, the most backward sections of the country have the strongest representation. Instead of the most advanced and intellectually active communities leading the others by their example, we have just the opposite; the most downright mediocrity is always in the saddle and every impulse toward innovation is nipped in the bud; the most backward and intellectually sluggish sections of the country put fetters on the culturally most developed groups and cripple their initiative by their opposition. The best electoral system cannot alter this fact; it often serves only to make the situation harsher and more hopeless; for the reactionary germ lies in the system of central representation and is not at all affected by the varying forms of the suffrage.

If one compares the superlative culture of the great federalistic epoch in Italy with the rubbishy culture of the unified national state which had hovered so long before the eyes of the Italian patriots as the highest goal of their ambition, one comprehends at once the enormous difference between the two organizations. Their cultural outcomes were quite as different as the intellectual assumptions underlying their whole social structure.

The Present/Future

If today there still is a choice, it is not that between fascism and "communism," but the choice between despotism and freedom, between brutal compulsion and free agreement, between the exploitation of human beings and cooperative industry for the benefit of all.