

# When Small is Sensible

## Culture, Technology and Subsidiarity

Thomas Storck



The following little story is a fitting way to begin this article, since it illustrates well the principle I am about to discuss:

A Cistercian Abbey, which, according to the general idea of Cistercian life, is rooted in the soil and continues its praise of God in harmony with the woods and fields around it, had for forty years relied upon the weather-sense of its principal lay-brother. He could go out in the morning and sniff the air to discover what sort of tricks the sky was about to play, and so make plans for haying, harvesting and suchlike. He knew the locality thoroughly, and hills, trees, mists all told him the secrets of the future. The day came when a well-intentioned visitor presented the community with a splendid radio. Guests could be entertained by it, but for the monks its only utility was the weather forecast, and to the despair of the old brother and the harm of his farming, the Abbot dispatched a monk every morning to take down the often-inaccurate prognostications of the B.B.C. (Conrad Pepler, O.P., *Riches Despised*, chap. 3)

Most readers of these pages would probably agree that what the abbot did was wrong. But exactly why was he wrong? Aside from the fact that the official weather reports were often erroneous, what, if anything, was wrong with discarding the traditional way of predicting the weather? What, other than our instinctive feeling that something is wrong, can be said about it?

I would suggest that the key to understanding exactly why the abbey should have continued using the services of its lay-brother lies in a principle first enunciated by Pope Pius XI in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* of 1931. Pope Pius wrote:

...it is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable, that one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry. So, too, it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order, to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity functions which can be performed and provided for

by lesser and subordinate bodies. Inasmuch as every social activity should, by its very nature, prove a help to members of the body social, it should never destroy or absorb them. (Section 79)

This principle that larger bodies should not take over the functions best performed by individuals and smaller groups is usually called the principle of subsidiarity. It has a number of obvious applications. For example, since families can raise and care for children satisfactorily, it is wrong for the state to usurp this function. If an entity such as a craft guild is able to regulate a trade effectively, so that quality products are provided to the public at a fair price, with no injustice to workmen or owners, it would be wrong for the central government to insist on regulating the trade instead. Or if joint union/management committees could adequately set industry safety standards and perform factory inspections, why should the state create its own bureaucracy to do this?

Now, these are all good examples of the principle of subsidiarity as applied to socio-economic affairs. Indeed, this is where Pope Pius originally meant that it be applied. He saw central government burdened with the task of regulating economic life: a necessary task, the Pope insisted, but one that could be better carried out by groups intermediate between the individual and the state, such as a modern form of the craft guild or joint union/management organizations. Such groups would, of course, need to be watched over and backed by the authority of the state as a last resort, but ordinarily they would be independent and self-governing.

I think this principle is a very wise one in the economic and social spheres, but can it be applied more widely? Does it have anything to teach us on other subjects? I believe it definitely does. I think it can be applied to at least two other areas, namely the fields of culture and of technology.

Culture is a word with different but related meanings. It can mean the entire way of life of a people or nation, everything from the kinds of music and art they have, to their marriage customs, to the kinds of pots and pans they use. And it can also be used in the narrower sense as referring only to art, music, literature, and the like. In both senses of the word, cultural objects today are mainly mass-produced, and local culture survives mostly as a quaint thing in specialty shops for tourists. Our music and our pots are both centrally produced and distributed in the most up-to-date fashion. But aside from the ill-effects this has on our economy, what does it do to our

cultural life?

If the creation and possession of culture is a distinctly human thing, a thing that allows human groups, from tribes to nations, to establish bonds among themselves and develop a feeling of rootedness in the soil as their own place on the earth, then is it just as satisfactory if people simply receive their culture from others instead of participating in cultural creation themselves? Is it good that localities have lost their own cultures and instead accepted the products of mass culture, usually a sort of vapid amalgam of various dissimilar cultural strands? As I wrote several years ago,

If individual localities can create their own art and music and dance, then it is "a disturbance of right order, to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity" these tasks, such as a radio station beaming its music over wide areas, a record company selling its recorded music throughout entire nations, and so on, for recorded music is surely responsible for the practical disappearance of music-making at the family and neighborhood levels.

People have a natural desire to create cultural objects and will do so unless someone else appropriates the task. If what we call popular music is not available via the electronic media, then people will create their own. This fact seems to me sufficient proof that the principle of subsidiarity applies here, for who will argue that people are better off simply as passive receivers of culture? Why should the once-flourishing local varieties of everything from art to cooking vanish so that inferior and mass-produced items can take their places? If it is better for man to control his political and social institutions at the lowest level possible, then how can it be healthy for his cultural affairs to be handled in a centralized manner? A civilization is not a divided thing, that on the one hand encourages localism and on the other centralization. If political and social control is truly distributed, then it follows that cultural control also will be, for these matters are inter-related. A culture administered from centralized points, such as our own, necessarily fosters the notion that it is better, indeed that it is natural, for all government and society to be centrally managed. Whether that central management is from a heavy-handed government alone, such as in communist China, or from heavy-handed business corporations in addition, as in our own country, matters little. The cult of centralization is promoted all along the line. If we attack this cult at one point, we must attack it at every point. Indeed, centralization is so pervasive that it has shaped even the material side of our culture, our technology and technological products.



The story with which I began this article seems to me a perfect example of the perversion of right order by modern civilization. When the weather can be predicted adequately locally and with no technology at all, how in God's name could anyone ever propose that instead a complicated apparatus be used to receive weather reports made miles away by men using even more complicated apparatus? Yet this sort of thing happens every day in our culture and we take no notice of it. God has provided mothers with perfect food for their babies at no cost. What is our common practice? To take other substances, process them in expensive polluting factories, transport them in expensive polluting trucks, and *sell* them to the mothers! And after this the formula they buy is a mere imperfect imitation of what is already there for the taking.

The principle of subsidiarity for technology might be formulated thus: it is evil and a disturbance of right order to use a more complex technological device when the same end can be attained by a simpler device or by no device at all, unless use of the simpler means would cause considerable damage to the social order because of the amount of time or human labor it entails. It is obvious that what I have written is similar to proposals made for what is called appropriate technology. Indeed, E.F. Schumacher actually quotes the definition of subsidiarity from Pius XI, applying it, however, to the theory of organization rather than technology (*Small is Beautiful*, part IV, chapter 2, "Towards a Theory of Large-Scale Organisation"), and without identifying its author. This concept of appropriate technology is important as one means of evaluating technology by more criteria than the narrow question of whether it performs some small task well. It is not enough to ask, for example, whether an electric toothbrush can brush teeth well. Yes, it can do that. What is needed is to ask why there is any need for the use of electricity here, when one can brush teeth just fine using a simple utensil

and the muscles that God gave us. There should always be some evident reason for complicating any device or process. That something more complex can be invented is not sufficient reason, nor is some small savings in time or effort.

The principle of subsidiarity can also be applied to the complexity of organization quite apart from the technology involved. Several years ago, for example, Oklahoma was exporting coal to Wyoming while Wyoming was exporting coal to Oklahoma. Perhaps they are still doing it. Instead of such stupidity, though, we might consider the suggestion that we try to see how *much* can be produced locally, rather than how little. Apart from special cases occasioned by climate or lack of raw materials, is there anything to be gained by all the importing and exporting that we do? Just as it is absurd to import baby formula from the grocery store and factory when God has provided abundant milk in a mother's breasts, is it not nearly as absurd to import food from far away if it can be grown as easily locally? Human needs are everywhere that man lives and so are the means of meeting them: people and their skills, land, rain, sunlight, minerals. Maybe God disposed things that way so we could get the two together, our needs and His provision for them. Maybe we are the ones so stupid as to separate the needs and their remedy, so that we try to import from everywhere to feed ourselves, at the same time desperately shipping our stuff to meet needs halfway around the world.

The environmental implications of what I have written should be clear to everyone, for one of the reasons why we are in the environmental mess that we are is that we habitually and grossly violate the principle of subsidiarity. Moreover, the effect on the environment is one of the things we need to look at in judging whether or not an invention infringes the principle. In addition, some confused thinking on the part of many environmentalists might be clarified if they realized that it is people violating subsidiarity who cause environmental damage, not people *per se*. The mere presence of people generally does not harm the earth. The problem, rather, is the way the people live: their abuse of resources and energy, their pursuit of what seems to them comfort and convenience, even when such pursuit reaches absurd and grotesque lengths and engenders disastrous consequences. If some American environmentalists focus their efforts on reducing the number of people in poor countries instead of reducing the number of gadgets in rich ones, maybe that is because they themselves are unwilling to give up their affluent style of life.

When we think about what a really healthy civilization would look like, or perhaps even take a few tentative steps toward achieving one, there are many principles we need to understand and apply. Subsidiarity is just one of them, but I think that it is one of the most important. Without it we are hampered in seeing why some things are wrong and must rely on instinct and feelings, which are not always safe guides. But if we can learn to examine our society in light of this principle, then we can add one more piece to our building

of the true city, the earthly city that is of both God and man. We know this city, if ever attained, is not destined to last forever, yet while we are pilgrims here its building must be one of our chief strivings.

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### The Wind

I guess I'll go to town

There's more there  
more videos in the video store  
more laughs on the sound track  
more voltage in the nerves  
more music loud as death

Our land is there and richer now  
in the eyes of speculators  
we wave to our neighbors circling for a  
parking place  
our hope is in the mall the heaven of want  
our children the saved are there already  
having become personnel

This is how it is since the wind began  
that blows everything that way  
at night the wind comes up  
in the morning  
something else is gone

What we owned we sold to the town  
what we build is in the image of the town  
the colors are thin and the names are wrong  
sadness takes it  
sadness mocks us  
mocking it we leave for town

Out here there's nothing to listen to  
when the sun goes down there's nothing to see  
my voice is small in the fields  
they take it away to be buried  
in town the lights are on and you live forever

—Maclin Horton