

# The Decentralist Answer

By Mildred Jensen Loomis

**C**ENTRALIZATION is that method of organizing power which concentrates control of human activities in the hands of fewer and fewer individuals. This trend is predominant today. It is justified, generally speaking, on the grounds of efficiency. Modern technology and modern industry, argue the centralizers, demand mass production, specialization and concentration of control and finance. Huge industry and large combines demand large and powerful government units to direct them. Concentrated industry demands large, compact centers of population.

Decentralization is the exact opposite of all this, but it is not merely a negation. It is a positive philosophy which puts the individual person above any institution. It seeks to preserve and to widen his capacity for choice. Decentralization is that method of implementing individual aspirations which gives the individual and his family the greatest possible area of reliance upon themselves. It involves the diffusion and distribution of ownership and controls of all kinds. It discourages institutionalization. It promotes that arrangement of society in which reliance on compulsion—police and military—will be at a minimum. Decentralists believe that by direct personal action, large public as well as small individual problems will be solved.

## *Production in the Home*

As the first step in achieving their objectives, decentralists encourage dispersion of production. They therefore foster the productive home wherein can be produced—with modern, small-scale tools and machines—all or a very large part of the family's basic needs in the way of food, clothing, shelter and recreation. What cannot be produced at home should, as far as possible, be produced in small-scale local shops and processing plants. Most decentralists agree that some heavy items will probably always have to be produced in centralized factories. But their research shows that as much as 60 per cent of what a family ordinarily uses can be produced locally, and that much that is now committed to large-scale mass production could be fabricated otherwise or eliminated.

This basic tenet of home production ties in with the decentralist belief that the family is the primary unit of society, and that the best place to foster and rehabilitate family life is on the land. Decentralists are, for the most part, agrarian in outlook; that is, they believe that agriculture should be the first concern of society.

Since high land prices and heavy mortgage charges make land difficult to obtain in our present society, the decentralist program includes a change in land policy and land ownership. It would grant social values in land to the community, though with private title in the users' hands. It would make fundamental changes which would take control of credit and currency away from government and give it to the people's cooperative banks. Changes of this sort can be accomplished by cooperative and community action in face-to-face groups. Implementing such pro-

grams in community after community would, in the end, eliminate the world problems of monopoly and exploitation and the race for markets, along with the conflicts and wars that result from them.

Just as their chief method is direct action, not legislation, so the decentralists' first tool is education, not government. Adults alone can act on the problems of living; therefore it is to the education of adults that decentralists are directing special effort. While they respect the wisdom of the ages and study it, their first service to adult education is to take it out of the realm of the academic and the abstract by specifically defining the actual problems of living as adults confront them in our society.

## *'Schools of Living'*

A notable contribution to American thought on this subject has been made by Ralph Borsodi, founder of the School of Living at Suffern, New York, who is publishing his findings in three volumes on *Education and Living*. The extension program of the School of Living proposes to set up local schools of living in many small communities in the nation. These schools bring together groups committed to systematic study of and action on the actual problems of living in their communities.

As an example of the type of definition and analysis offered by decentralism, consider its conception of the role of government. Decentralists believe that growth and development take place most effectively through personal action, in which they include family action. Nevertheless they recognize the necessity for group action. Having decided that some goal can best be achieved by group action, an individual must determine whether it should be a voluntary group—cooperative, community, competitive or corporate—or a compulsory group—namely, government.

All groups, except government, are bilateral; that is, an individual may join or remove himself from them at will. But government is unilateral, having complete authority. It is the only group from which we cannot withdraw, and it is the only group to which "we, the people," grant the distinctive authority of coercion. For this reason, decentralists urge that government action be limited to absolute essentials, such as the delivery of mail, maintenance of roads, disaster relief, and a minimum apparatus of legislature, courts and police for the protection of person and property. All other activities should be performed by voluntary group action or by personal family action.

## *Where Governmental Scope Ends*

Above all, say the decentralists, people should be taught that economic activities are not a proper subject for government action. For when government begins to plan or direct any part of the highly interdependent activities of producing and distributing the goods out of which all of us make our living, it ends in controlling all our life by force. Compulsion necessarily increases because it involves an endless number of crises which have to do with the personal

habits—eating, drinking, working, playing—out of which individuals fabricate their freedom.

Education for such an economy includes, of course, techniques of eliminating private as well as government monopoly. It involves the removal of the privileges on which monopoly rests and which require supervision or regulation by a government referee. As people become effective in small communities where the size and area of the problems are manageable, life will be reshaped to fit the human organism. For decentralists hold that our industrial, mechanized, monopolized world twists and thwarts the human being. If the increasing materialism and dehumanization of man are to be checked, a pattern of living must be evolved that is true or normal to the human type.

### *The Village—Focal Point*

The small rural community is the center of decentralized society. Today, instead of being the focal point of a vital culture, the village is merely something that has been pushed aside by the forces creating "the larger society." Because decentralists want to recover that large measure of economic independence and democratic power which obtained in the earlier rural communities, they are sometimes accused of wanting to "turn the clock back." But taking the best customs of the past and shaping them into the best of the present surely constitutes progressive action. Decentralists would combine the values of the oldtime village with the contributions of modern technology.

Decentralists point to the independence and security, the creativity and intelligence of societies a majority of whose people were on the land producing their own milk, butter, cheese, bacon and other foods, and had leather and wool from which to make shoes and clothing as well as timber and stone for building houses. Decentralists sense that this setting made the family spirit powerful and an economy of abundance and neighborliness possible. The farmer, the cobbler, the tailor, the miller, the wheelwright were all integral parts of the community. Mind and body worked in unison. Good workmanship was the ideal of every self-respecting individual and the source of his understanding and his consciousness of his own worth and dignity. Producers knew the needs of each customer and sold their goods at a "just price" mutually agreed on between buyer and seller. The craftsman was not dependent on a higher wage-income for his fundamental satisfactions.

### *Work Must Be Creative*

These people proved that art can and should be a part of daily life, a quality of every useful thing. Their diversions proclaimed that the spirit of man is not a machine. Sharpened mind, strengthened will, stable emotions resulted from integrated and daily use of these human faculties. While there were some social evils, the foundations of life were sound. Work was creative; people lived in families, were close to the land and were sustained by functional social relationships. Everything they did had meaning and significance to them.

But the industrial revolution changed all this. Driven to

urban centers by early enclosure acts and continued land monopoly, the worker became subject to a process of disintegration which now has rendered him incapable of recognizing for what it is the deepening crisis in his affairs, much less dealing with it.

The foundation of a good society is the fully integrated human person. Such persons will develop only when man's daily work requires intelligence and choice, and is characterized by creativity and responsibility. It is an offense against man's nature when the most important function of his life—his work—is abhorrent and spiritually harmful to him. Work is the most potent principle of social cohesion. Whether the personality grows or deteriorates depends on the nature of a man's work. There can be no hope of transforming society until work is free of exploitation, until it is done by persons for persons and its products are exchanged at a just price. Decentralists for the most part are taking those places and tasks where they can feed, clothe and house themselves creatively and cooperatively. They are recovering their lost privilege of working with and beautifying the earth and of satisfying their needs on a basis of neighborliness.

They well know what a weight of effort it will require to move a mass mind which has been taught to think in terms of power, money and mass production. They are aware that the mass man may prefer a totalitarian revolution in return for economic "security." But they cast their vote for another way of life. The slow, basic rehabilitation of human beings through a new pattern of living is the only alternative to the futile conflict of power politics. Satisfaction of the creative instinct, they believe, can subdue the aggressive traits in man.

### *Who Are the Decentralists?*

In the United States this challenge is being voiced by a growing number of writers. Ralph Borsodi phrased it in 1928 in *This Ugly Civilization*, and in frequent books since then. Numerous groups with plans to rebuild from the bottom have associated themselves in the Decentralist Conference which meets annually for sharing and planning. In 1946 twelve distinguished educators and editors compiled the volume *Cities Are Abnormal*, which shows from several angles the need for decentralization. Books and pamphlets are appearing from many quarters. Schools and teaching centers are developing. Periodicals and journals specifically devoted to a decentralist theme include *Free America*, New Canaan, Connecticut; *Community Service News*, Yellow Springs, Ohio; and the *Interpreter*, Brookville, Ohio.

In England numerous societies with a similar concern have arisen. Pax in Terra is a Catholic group which stems from the famous distributists, Hilaire Belloc and Eric Gill. The Community Farming Society is headed by Wilfred Wellock, former Labor member of Parliament, who recently visited the United States under the auspices of the American Friends Service Committee. In Switzerland the movement is headed by Dr. Wilhelm Ropke of the Institut Universitaire, Geneva, whose trilogy, *The Crisis of Modern Society*, is published by the University of Chicago Press. In France, the names of Hyacinthe Dubreuil and Gustave Thibon are associated with the movement to check

the trend toward mechanization. Dubreuil's *Robots and Men* has been published by Harpers, and Thibon's *Diagnostics* is also to be published in English.

In his recent book, *Science, Liberty and Peace*, Aldous Huxley develops the thesis that decentralism is the answer to the dilemma of the individual in the modern world. He says: "Democratic institutions are likely to work best at times and in places where at least a good part of the citizens have access to enough land and possess sufficient tools and professional skill to be able to provide for their subsistence without recourse to financially potent private capitalists or to the government. . . . My own view, which is essentially that of the decentralists, is that, so long as the results of pure science are applied for the purpose of making our system of mass-producing and mass-distributing industry more expensively elaborate and more highly specialized, there can be nothing but ever greater centralization of power in ever fewer hands. . . . It is not impossible that the decentralist leaven may end by leavening the whole huge lump of society." From "Christian Century," April 30, 1947. Reprinted by permission.

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The DECENTRALIST CONFERENCE is an informal association for promoting national and regional meetings of individuals and groups interested in decentralization.

Its first national conference, initiated by M. J. Loomis, editor of The Interpreter, Willis Nutting and Father Leo R. Ward of the faculty of Notre Dame University, was held at Notre Dame on September 21-23, 1945 to consider the statement of policy by the Land-Grant Colleges on Post-war Agriculture. An enlarged committee sponsored the second conference at East Bay Camp, Bloomington, Illinois, to begin integration of Decentralist groups and to evaluate the work of The Daily Pantagraph in revitalizing nearby communities, on September 11-14, 1946. On May 8-10, 1947, a regional conference was held at Oklahoma City under the auspices of The Chamber of Commerce of that city and the University of Oklahoma in cooperation with the national Decentralist Conference committee, to plan steps for balancing local raw materials with increased manufacturing outlets in that area.

The 1947-48 national Decentralist Conference Committee consists of: Ralph Borsodi, School of Living, Suffern, N. Y.; John P. Chamberlain, former editor, Free America; Roy Hamon, farmer and engineer, Choctaw, Oklahoma; George Hellick, merchant, Easton, Penn.; Robert West Howard, Lyme Foundation, Hartford, Conn.; Mildred Jensen Loomis, Lane's End Homestead, Brookville, Ohio, Secretary; Willis Nutting, University of Notre Dame, Rte. 5, South Bend, Indiana, chairman; Tom E. Shearer, vice-chairman, Parson's College, Fairfield, Iowa.

Attendants at these Decentralist Conferences have been members of the following groups: Agricultural and farming associations, Catholic Rural Life Conference, Community Service, Inc.; Cooperatives, Craft Guilds, Credit Unions, Farm Bureaus, Federation of Small Business Men, Friends of The Land, Gesell School of Money, Henry George School of Social Science, Homesteading Associations, Lyme Foundation, Ministers, Protestant Rural Life Associations, Rural Youth of America, School of Living, Southern Agrarians, and others.

Individuals and groups working for the independence and responsibility of the individual through the wide distribution of ownership of productive property, and for the strengthening of the family and the small community, are encouraged to participate in the Decentralist Conference. For information regarding future activities, write to

Parsons College, Fairfield, Iowa

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