



JUGGERNATIONS

Scale as a limiting factor for Democracy By Jeff Strand

In the doublespeak of nation states the term democracy is thrown around without a concrete definition.. Most often what is meant by politicians is the form of government which is presently found in the US and other western states, which is a far cry from egalitarian rule 'by the people', and is closer to a plutocracy or kleptocracy (certainly when close to 100% of elected officials were the wealthiest of the candidates it could be called nothing less). Surely a capitalistic economic system precludes any hope for equality in the modern way of life. If the chains of capitalism were shrugged off, could a democracy exist in a nation state as large as the US? Egalitarian democracy has existed before, despite the counter revolutionary myths of civilization, and there is no reason that it could not exist again. However, if scale is indeed a limiting factor, then it must be addressed for fear of further democratic impostors such as the (non)representational forms, and tyranny of the majority, that currently exist.

For the vast majority of human history (what is called prehistory) social organization was exclusively tribal. Evolutionary expectations are formed by the successes and failures of our ancestors, and despite the large variety of cultures and ways of life, homo sapiens and our closely related ancestors were social animals, tribal, for millions of years. On the surface our culture and way of life may cause us to think we are extremely different from our foraging, egalitarian, tribal ancestors; however, our genes have not changed, and neither have our evolutionary expectations. Natural selection has molded our species just like any other, therefore it could be said that tribalism and egalitarianism is what comes natural to human beings, it is what worked for millions of years, and has continued to work where civilization has not stamped it out.

It is evident that when humans work in small, familiar groups it is much easier for the group to reach decisions which are agreeable to all the individuals. This intimate interaction can best be called 'direct democracy.' As the size of a group increases, and the familiarity between individuals lessens, it becomes more difficult to voice opinions and empathize with the entire group. When the size of a group exceeds the limits of effective face to face (direct) interaction subgroups can be formed, each with their own representative. The subgroup would retain the intimacy of a small group had, and their desires could be communicated to the rest of the larger group by their representative, thus: 'representational democracy.' Assuming that the spokesperson is truly representative of their group's desires, is held accountable, and an effective representative-to-group size ratio exists, then representational democracy might still be carried out in an egalitarian manner. When the scale is no longer in terms of small communities, but rather thousands, tens of thousands and even millions or billions of people, without an intricate web of representatives, and people to represent groups of representatives, etc., the democratic systems quickly break down. This is what I consider *democracy*, beyond the limits of functional scale.

Of course the question begs, what kind of decision must be made to effect millions or billions of people? Surely nothing that should be decided by a small group of individuals, if at all. In modern society decisions this large are made on a daily basis by nation states, corporations, and international organizations (whether political or economic, if such a distinction can even be made). In our present situation the few people making these lofty decisions cannot be held directly accountable to the people they are supposed to be representing.

Historically, or rather prehistorically, decisions directly effecting millions of people were never made, as they were neither necessary, or possible. In a small scale, decentralized, self-sufficient, egalitarian, foraging tribe, there were few decisions that needed to be made beyond the individual level. Food and tool acquisition was done on an independent basis with culturally inherent gift giving mechanisms to insure the needs and desires of the group were met through effective non-coercive distribution. With the acquisition of all life's basic necessities within the grasp of nearly every individual (the very young, elderly, or sick aside) the ability of one person to coerce another was highly unlikely. The tribal 'economy' was based on supportive social relationships, i.e. gift giving and mutual aid, rather than a system which exploits the majority and allows power to flow into the hands of a few elite. Without forced labor there would be no means to wage large scale warfare or control (exploit) the economic system, which means the two primary reasons that governments assemble to make decision (excluding the direct exploitation and suppression of the people they 'represent') are rendered obsolete.

The introduction of part time agriculture altered the foundations of the egalitarian tribal system, and allowed the possibility of hierarchy to enter into the equation. By looking at a large number of known 'primitive' cultures which use(d) varying degrees of agriculture to supplement their foraging, it becomes clear that the more agriculture a society relies upon the easier it is for hierarchy and coercion to take hold. This is directly related to the diminishment of the individual's ability to acquire food independently of the group, as well as the necessity of a sedentary way of life which ties the individual to the fields. By the time that a culture is almost entirely dependent upon domesticated plants and animals complex hierarchies have usually taken root and exploitation is evident.

Despite the historical record of egalitarian aspects of society being mirrored in their method of food acquisition and nomadic versus sedentary lifestyles, there is no reason that with the cultural flexibility and self awareness of humans that a sustainable, egalitarian, agricultural society could not exist today. Certainly a more small scale, decentralized, self sufficient way of life would help allow communities to become less dependent on the gigantic organizations which currently run countless aspects of our lives. Just because a community is self sufficient and decentralized, does not mean that it must be isolated and vulnerable, for unlike our foraging ancestors, we do have the present disadvantage of dealing with power hungry nation states for neighbors, and the scariest of them all lays claim to our lives and communities while insisting that it is representing us. Mutually beneficial, non-coercive, agreements can be made between communities for defense without a need for centralized authority.