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Is It Possible As A Central Government Policy?

by Jacques Ellul

The subject of devolving state power back to regions, whether as home rule or some increase in local decision-making, evokes widely different responses in Europe. Although taken with utmost seriousness by many regional ethnic groups, it is either repressed or treated with bare indulgence at the national level. Jacques Ellul brings the same critical perspective to decentralism that marked his cold analysis of technology and propaganda. We are grateful to Alan Al Louarn, a Breton activist in Rennes, for clipping this article from the newspaper Ouest France, and assume that Ellul's negativity about the current central government approach to decentralism is taken by some as support for self-generated regional autonomy.

Everyone recognizes the disastrous nature of extreme centralization in our modern states and their administrations: it is worse in France than anywhere else. It would seem that decentralization is desirable, that decision-making powers should pass to regional or local levels, and that power should return to citizens who have become subjects. But desirable as they may be, is it possible to realize these good intentions? We must be clear, and not let ourselves be trapped by rhetoric. We must remember the failure of President de Gaulle with the regionalization referendum in 1969: the "French People" didn't want regionalization. That was a good illustration of what happens to desires for decentralization (including criticism of the central government)—when the opportunity is presented, it is rejected.

I know the ambiguities of this referendum and the unsatisfying character of the bill; nevertheless, its existence was significant. Now we have an incredibly weak bill for the development of the responsibilities of local governments. The text [of the latest proposed bill] doesn't even contain an allusion to a region or regionalization. And the general nature of the bill is one of prohibitive regulation concerning the evolutionary nature of regional reforms affirmed by the vote in 1972. The further we go the more we find that they try to control everything on the local level, and the regional councils are relegated to "national partners." So much so that we must ask ourselves if, in the end, the regional councils won't simply become agencies to legislate taxes to finance decisions taken by the central government. Furthermore, a certain number of resolutions (concerning the police, for example) are interesting, because they actually show an increase in the power of the central government. The content of the [proposed] bill is, in many regards, in disagreement with the intentions inferred in the title. In any case, if there's a reduction of financial controls, the local tax base remains with the central government. And whether we like it or not, whoever pays commands. We've experienced this numerous times in our relationship with government administrations.

It seems to me that, in the current political arena, any declaration of decentralization is a trap and a lie. I see four fundamental obstacles to it. First, and in all cases, it will never be anything but a *conceded* decentralization. This means that the central power, in its magnanimity, will gladly give some power, some sector of decision-making, to the group or institution that it chooses and designates. But it goes without saying that it's the central power which outlines the limits and jurisdiction of power, and which always remains able to revoke it.

In the second place, who gets the power over decentralized decisions? Presumably the local political elite. Local representatives and representatives of the central power (deconcentration of power perhaps but the difference becomes even more fictional). However, in the current situation and in view of new problems (for example, forest management, nuclear plants), it's not at all certain that the leaders, even the local elected ones, represent the real sentiments and opinions of the people. On the other hand, these local leaders often become small potentates as valueless as the central government. One would never consider giving even *one decision-making power to the citizen!* The central government doesn't want to deal with anything but existing institutions.

The third obstacle comes from the explosion of public projects in our society: electrification, telecommunications, the highway system, armaments, etc. Do you imagine that these decisions will be left to local authorities? If a town isn't in agreement with a highway construction plan, will it be listened to? The great technical and economic enterprises, which are the only ones that have any importance in our society, can never be decided by decentralized processes. There is one last unfortunate point. Nothing is more uncertain than the person at the bottom. Are common citizens willing to assume their responsibilities and enter the arena of real decentralized decision-making. It's so much easier to call on the government for everything and still retain it as a scapegoat. Before the revolution which is essential to achieve a true decentralization, regionalization (or at best—autonomy) each of us must first say his "mea culpa."