Political Representation, Human Nature, and the Problem of Scale

Robert C. Koons

University of Texas at Austin

German-American Colloquium 2014

1. The Question of Scale

In Book VI (chapter 1) of the *Politics*, Aristotle wrote:

> But there must also be a norm for the size of a state, just as there is a normal size for everything else -- animals, plants, instruments, and so on. Each of these can only keep the power that belongs to it if it is neither too large nor too small; otherwise its essential nature will be either entirely loss or seriously impaired. Thus a boat a span (a few inches) long will not really be a boat at all, nor one that is two stades (202 yards) long. There is a certain size at which it will become either too large or too small to be navigated well.

Political theorists have largely ignored this simple fact about human life, misled perhaps by the fundamental error of liberalism: the thesis that the political domain is an artificial construction, a matter of convention instead of nature. In particular, we have consistently failed to grasp the profound change that population growth has brought to our political constitutions. Many believe, for example, that the United States is still operating with essentially the same constitution that it adopted in 1789 (or, at the latest, in 1865). This overlooks the fact that it is impossible for the very same set of institutions to

govern both a people numbering 3 million (America in 1790) and a people numbering 315 million (America): an increase of more than a hundredfold.

2. Democratic Representation

In the earliest instances of democracy, the people as a whole made all the decisions in assembly. However, political bodies must be small enough to be deliberative if they are to be both democratic and effective. The Classical Greek experience reveals that when a decision-making body exceeds a few hundred individuals, it ceases to function deliberatively and becomes a mere mob, easily manipulated by skillful orators and demagogues.

This problem can be solved, as it was in some of the Ancient Greek and Latin cities, by means of a representative council, like the Roman Senate, the Spartan Gerousia, or the Athenian Boule.

As a state with an elected body of representatives grows in population, the number of representatives must remain small, if it is to function deliberatively. This means that a larger population must be correlated with a proportionately larger ratio between the number of representatives and the number of constituents.

3. The Impossibility of Representation Above the Natural Limit

Historically this ratio of representation has varied quite widely. For instance, in the cantons of Switzerland, the ratio averages to something like four thousand constituents to a representative. In the first Congress of the United

States (in 1789), each member of the House of Representatives represented on average about 30,000 residents. At the opposite extreme, each of the two Senators of the state of California represents 38 million people, and each member of the House represents about 700,000. Do these varying ratios matter?

a. Aristotle's Argument

Plato proposed, in *The Laws*, that an ideal republic would encompass just over five thousand inhabitants. Aristotle argued that even this number was too high. In a viable representative republic, the citizens must be capable of knowing each other's character, in order that there be a close match between the reputations of candidates and their actual virtues and abilities.

> In order to give decisions on matters of justice, and for the purpose of distributing offices on merit, it is necessary that the citizens should know each other and know what kind of people they are. Where this condition does not exist, both decisions and appointments to office are bound to suffer, because it is not just in either of these matters to proceed haphazardly, which is clearly what does happen where the population is excessive. (*Politics*, Book VI.1)

When the number of constituents exceeds a few thousand, it is impossible for the choice of the electorate to reflect knowledge of the candidates' character.

b. The American Anti-Federalists' Arguments

The Anti-Federalists, Americans who opposed the ratification of the new Constitution in 1789, objected to the mismatch in scale between the proposed

House of Representatives and the contemporary population of the United States (then just over three million).

Robert Yates, writing under the pseudonym of "Brutus":

> Now, in a large extended country, it is impossible to have a representation, possessing the sentiments, and of integrity, to declare the minds of the people, without having it so numerous and unwieldly, as to be subject in great measure to the inconveniency of a democratic government.
>
> The confidence which the people have in their rulers, in a free republic, arises from their knowing them, from their being responsible to them for their conduct, and from the power they have of displacing them when they misbehave: but in a republic of the extent of this continent, the people in general would be *acquainted with very few of their rulers*: the people at large would know little of their proceedings, and it would be extremely difficult to change them... The different parts of so extensive a country *could not possibly be made acquainted with the conduct of their representatives*, nor be informed of the reasons upon which measures were founded. (Letter I, 18 October 1787, emphasis added)

The Federal Farmer, supposed by historians to be either Richard Henry Lee of Virginia or Melancton Smith of New York, focuses on the converse problem: the impossibility of the representatives′ knowing their constituents personally:

> …a small representation can never be well informed as to the circumstances of the people, the members of it must be too far removed from the people, in general, to sympathize with them, and too few to communicate with them: a representation must be extremely imperfect where the representatives are not circumstanced to make the proper communications to their constituents, and where the constituents in turn cannot, with tolerable convenience, make known their wants, circumstances, and opinions, to their representatives; where there is but one representative to 30,000, or 40,000 inhabitants, it appears to me, he can only mix, and be acquainted with a few respectable characters among his constituents, even double the federal representation, and then there must be a very great distance between the representatives and the people in general represented. (Letter 7)

c. Robert Michels' "Iron Law of Oligarchy"

Michels was a German sociologist who studied socialist parties in Germany and elsewhere in the early 20th century. In his classic *Political Parties* (1911), he adumbrated his "Iron Law of Oligarchy": "Who says organization says oligarchy."

Political parties and other political organizations are both inevitable products of a large-scale representative democracy and the end of any real accountability of those supposedly representative governments to the people.

> In essence, democracy in modern society may be viewed as involving the conflict of organized groups competing for support... What, in fact, is the modern political part? It is the methodical organization of the electoral masses. (pp. 36, 334)
>
> In theory the leader is merely an employee bound by the instruction he receives. He has to carry out the orders of the mass, of which he is no more than the executive organ. But in actual fact, as the organization increases in size, this control becomes purely fictitious. The members have to give up the idea of themselves conducting or even supervising the whole administration, and are compelled to hand these tasks over to trustworthy persons specially nominated for this purpose, to salaried officials. (p. 71)

But doesn't competition between political parties for the support of the masses make those parties accountable to the people and sensitive to the people's wishes through what Alfred Pareto describes as the "circulation of the elites"? In practice, No, because the number of viable party organizations is so small that it is impossible for the people to prevent inter-party collusion. Michels observes: "Very rarely does the struggle between the old leaders and the new end in the complete defeat of the former. The result is not so much a

circulation des élites as a *réunion des élites*, an amalgam, that is to say, of the two elements." (p. 182)

In fact, Michels understates the severity of the evils of organization that his careful analysis revealed. The fundamental problem is not one of oligarchy, the domination of society by a small number of people, but of the domination of society by *organization itself*. In a modern mass democracy, no one and no group of people control the political organizations: it is the organization itself that controls all of its members, including its so-called "leaders".

> By a universally applicable social law, every organ of the collectivity, brought into existence through the division of labor, creates for itself, as soon as it becomes consolidated, *interests peculiar to itself*. (p. 18, emphasis added)
>
> Having, however, become an end in itself, endowed with *aims and interests of its own*, [the party] undergoes detachment, from the teleological point of view, from the class it represents. In a party, it is far from obvious that the interests of the masses which have combined to form the party will coincide with the interests of the bureaucracy in which the party becomes personified. (p. 353, emphasis added)

It is also "far from obvious" that the interests of the political organization with the interests of its leaders or any of its other members. The "teleological detachment" that Michels describes is more radical even than he recognized. Political organizations develop their own ends in a Darwinian struggle for survival and influence that are completely detached from the natural ends of all of their members, and from the natural ends of a truly republican society. The organization is not subordinate to the private ends of its leaders; instead,

both leaders and the rank and file are subordinate to the intrinsic ends of the organization as such.

This subordination of leaders to organization occurs for two reasons. First, any leader is always in danger of being deposed and replace whenever he acts in a way that does not conform to the imperatives of the organization's normal operation. Second, any leader, in the process of becoming a leader, has internalized the organization's aims and practices. He has become what William H. Whyte described as an "organization man." Michels vividly described the corrosive effect of bureaucracy on individual character:

> The bureaucratic spirit corrupts character and engenders moral poverty. In every bureaucracy we may observe place-hunting, a mania for promotion, and obsequiousness towards those upon whom promotion depends; there is arrogance towards inferiors and servility towards superiors. (p. 191)

I object to the English word 'organization' as a label for such political entities, since the word suggests that there is something *organic* about their existence (although the original meaning of the Greek word '*organon*' was that of an artificial instrument or machine). I prefer to refer to these things as political or social *machines*, to emphasize their artificiality and their complete independence from the humanity of their members. The cogs and wheels of social machines are only accidentally human: the humanity of the machine's members is relevant only insofar as it enables them to contribute to the autonomous operation of the machine.

Over the last century, science fiction has often reflected the fear that our machines--computers, robots--might some day take over control of the Earth, enslaving human beings as their servants and tools for their own completely alien purposes. The oldest such story was the play *R. U. R.* by Karel Capek in 1920. The idea has been shown up more frequently in recent popular culture, including an episode of the *Doctor Who* television series in 1966, a 1967 short story "I have no mouth, but I must scream" by Harlen Ellison in *If* magazine, the comic book *Magnus Robot Fighter 4000 A.D.*, published by Gold Key Comics beginning in 1963, and most recently in James Cameron's *Terminator* film series, beginning in 1984. In my view, this dystopian catastrophe has essentially already happened. We have become enslaved by our political machines, which gained dominance through the emergence of mass democracy and through the transformation of capitalism from private to corporate ownership, as described by Berle and Mean's *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (1932) and James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* (1942).

This social mechanization of human life renders impotent human judgment, rationality, and prudence. Organizations develop their own internal norms of reasoning and inference, mechanizing and thereby de-humanizing the pursuit of knowledge. The machineries of information processing have supplanted the practical judgment or *phronesis* of the mature mind. Due to this mechanization of thought, social machines must adopt quantitative rather than qualitative ends. Hence, the endless emphasis on measurable goals and

outcomes. Social machines are also typically short-lived: they resemble cancers or tumors rather than self-sustaining species. Consequently, organizational thinking is endemically oriented to short-term results, at the expense of both the natural environment and the health of human cultures.

To be fair, bureaucracies and other social machines are not inherently evil. They make good servants but bad masters. So long as they are accountable to human beings, acting either individually or in small, face-to-face (or "facial") communities, social machines can bring great advantages by exploiting economies of scale. However, in a mass democracy, political organizations are accountable only to other political and social organizations, creating a closed system from which independent human judgment and choice is completely excluded. Similarly, in the economic sphere we have created a system in which corporations are mostly owned by other social organizations, once again created a closed, autonomous ecosystem to which both individual human beings and facial human communities are irrelevant. I propose that we call this new system by a new name. The danger is not a return to the *oligarchy* of ancient or medieval times but rather the creation of a wholly new evil, the *autonomarchy*, the rule of autonomous social machines.

d. The Historical Record

I have argued that a true republic cannot exceed the limit of a population of about 250,000. This limit is the product of two factors: the natural limit to the ratio of political representation (three or four thousand inhabitants per

representative), and the natural limit to the size of a deliberative body (fifty or sixty members). Donald Livingstone has pointed out that for over two thousand years (in the ancient, medieval, and early modern eras), no republic exceeded a population of 200,000 (Livingston 2012, pp. 126-7).

4. The Federal Solution

A free society can grow beyond the limit of 250,000 citizens only by means of federation.

Three things are essential to the existence of a true federation. First, the federation must be governed, at least in part, by representatives of the *governments* of the constituent states. The direct election of federal "representatives" destroys the human scale that makes the rule of people rather than machines possible. The German Bundesrat preserves this crucial element. Unfortunately, the 17th amendment to the Constitution of the United States deprived the States of their power of representation in the Senate, enabling the subsequent dominance of organized parties and interest groups.

David Hume, in his essay "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," proposed an ideal solution to the problem of checking federal power. Hume proposed that the federal council or senate should consist entirely of representatives selected by the assemblies of the constituent states. In addition, Hume's senate would be limited to drafting and proposing legislation. In order to become law, a bill would have to be ratified by a majority of the state assemblies. In fact, Hume allows for a minority of senators (as few as one-fifth) to have the power to

send a proposed bill to the states for ratification. Hume's model ensures the people's representatives, at the state level, retain control of federal legislation.

The second crucial element of a federation is that of the delegation of specific and limited powers to the federation, reserving the *general police power* of state sovereignty to the constituent states.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the constituent states of a true federation must have the right to secede whenever they judge that the federal authority has exceeded its delegated authority.

5. The Problem of Scale for Federations

There is a natural limit to how many constituent republics can form a federation. There is a need for a deliberative body to act on behalf of the whole confederacy. There must be at least one representative for each constituent state, and the resulting body must be small enough for real deliberation. Consequently, no confederation can comprise more than a few hundred states: ideally, a much smaller number.

There is only one way to increase the size of a free society beyond this limit of 25 million: by means of compound or iterated federation. In other words, a large country must be a *federation of federations*. Such a meta-federation could potentially encompass as many as two billion people without destroying the politics of scale that make genuine self-government possible.

One of the political geniuses of the eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson, proposed just such a solution. Jefferson proposed dividing his own state of Virginia, a member state of the federal union with a population of just over 700,000, into a hundred "ward republics," each of which would be "a republic within itself." (Jefferson, p. 1492) These ward republics would be modeled upon the cantons of Switzerland. Sadly, this proposal gained no traction at the time.

Reformers in both America and Germany today face a twofold task: returning real political power to the States and Länder, and transforming the States and Länder themselves into federations of still smaller republics. The first of these tasks has attracted both attention and support in the United States, beginning with the New Federalism of Ronald Reagan and continuing as the Tenth Amendment movement championed by Sen. Ted Cruz and others in recent years. However, even if this first task is completed, humane government will not be restored so long as the constituent states remain both large and politically consolidated. The process of federating government must be repeated until we reach ultimate units of sovereignty with no more than 250,000 inhabitants, and representatives with no more than 5000 constituents (like modern-day Iceland or the Swiss cantons).

Bibliography

Berle, Adolf and Means, Gardiner, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, New York: Macmillan, 1932.

Burnham, James, *The Managerial Revolution: What is Happening in the World*, New York: John Day Co., 1942.

Hume, David, "Idea of a perfect commonwealth," in *Political Essays*, Knud Haakonssen (ed.), New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 221-234.

Jefferson, Thomas, *Letters 1743-1826* (Charlottesville: Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia), 1492.

Livingston, Donald (ed.), *Rethinking the American Union for the Twenty-First Century*, Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing 2012.

Michels, Robert, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democra*cy, Eden and Cedar Paul (trans.), with introduction by Seymour Martin Lipset, New York: The Free Press. 1962 (original 1911).

Storing, Herbert J. and Dry, Murray (eds.), *The Anti-Federalist: An Abridgment, Chicago: University of Chicago Press*, 1985.

Whyte, William H., *The Organization Man*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956.