Part 6

Miscellaneous Essays

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“Keep off” is a Good Maxim

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I share with Hans Hoppe his attitude to “creative dissidence.” So let me start this contribution with the fable “The fairly intelligent fly” by the American writer James Thurber (1894–1961). It expresses beautifully the stance of those who are sceptical about centralists in all parties and about those who, with no pun intended, “fly the national flag” whenever possible. The story goes like this:

A large spider in an old house built a beautiful web in which to catch flies. Every time a fly landed on the web and was entangled in it the spider devoured him, so that when another fly came along he would think the web was a safe and quiet place in which to rest. One day a fairly intelligent fly buzzed around above the web so long without landing that the spider appeared and said, “Come on down.” But the fly was too clever for him and said, “I never land where I don’t see other flies and I don’t see any other flies in your house.” So he flew away until he came to a place where there were a great many other flies. He was about to settle down among them when a bee buzzed up and said, “Hold it, stupid, that’s flypaper. All those flies are trapped.” “Don’t be silly,” said the fly, “they’re dancing.” So he settled down and became stuck to the flypaper with all the other flies. Moral: There is no safety in numbers, or in anything else. (Thurber, 1939).

No country is completely independent, but even partial accession to alliances with welfare states linked in a single market with a tendency towards greater centralisation implies a loss of independence. In a memorable referendum in 1992, Switzerland rejected joining the European Economic Area. Since then, Switzerland’s European policy has been determined by this “no” vote. It is based on bilateral treaties, which in future will be merged into an agreement that restricts essential elements of independence. In the event of a rejection, the European Union is threatening to exclude Switzerland from various agreements that also offer advantages for Switzerland. Even before Brexit, the late Lord Harris of High Cross gave Switzerland the following advice (that’s my second quote): “You don’t necessarily have to join a club that doesn’t discriminate against non-members. But you should never join a club that discriminates against non-members.” This is very reminiscent of the saying of the American comedian Groucho Marx: I don’t join a club that accepts me as a member.

For Switzerland, the fundamental question is: what is the essence of the EU? Is it a continental peace project to prevent a repetition of the madness—including the socio-cultural and economic madness—of the two world wars, or a single market with a tendency towards political centralisation that is mutating into a dangerous harbinger of a new geopolitical bloc with a new potential for war? It is to be hoped that the Swiss electorate will once again have the courage to vote no in the next referendum on partial integration.

My third quote has its origin in Austria and struggles with politics and the nation.

Franz Grillparzer (1791–1872) had very good reasons in 1859 to be against Nationalism. He remarked that “human development leads from Humanity via Nationality to Bestiality” (Grillparzer, 1859). Unfortunately, we have observed this rapid progression over the course of the 20th century full of war and growing welfare state.

I am convinced that Europe today needs more than short-term political crisis management. Neither will the flight forwards into a centralized economic, financial and social policy solve the current problems. What is required is a consideration of the conditions and facts that form the secret to the success of our little continent in world history. It is our diversity that enables competition in the broadest sense and mutual learning- that diversity which tenaciously resists the spirit of standardization and harmonization.

Let’s return to the regional integration as a trans-national alternative to the nation state. The terms “region” and “integration” are not easy to define, they are weasel words. The word “region” harkens back to the “rex,” the king. Integration, on the other hand, has the double interpretation of either eliminating or of cultivating differences.

Personally, I am in favour of cultivating diversity. That is, after all, one of the great secrets of the Swiss success. European diversity includes the individual responsibility of EU-member states for their own budges, which requires a consistent no-bail-out policy that expects each member to take on responsibility for its own financing and to bear the consequences of national bankruptcy. This combination of diversity and autonomy is what Eric Jones called “The European Miracle”: “The fundamental trump card of Europe is its diversity” (Jones, 1981).

This is not only the diversity of nations, but above all the internal diversity within a nation state. In the past this internal diversity used to be considered a disadvantage, but in a competitive world of a learning society it is effectively turning into an advantage. At least that is the experience we have made in Switzerland. Diversity makes us all more robust and less vulnerable. It enables mutual transfer of knowledge, one simply copies the successes and avoids the mistakes.

This is, in fact, a form of experimentation. History does not offer us ready-made complete models that we can simply replicate. But it does show us a lot of interesting experiments. I, for example, never call Switzerland a model. It cannot be copied. But it is an (at least partly) successful experiment.

The whole life is an experiment. Technology can be regarded as Nature experimenting with humans. In this light, politics is humans experimenting with humans. Experimental economists are becoming increasingly famous these days, but their experiments are always designed, from above. The experimentation l am talking about is different. There is no central designer, just small groups experimenting with what works and what does not.

Indeed, the smaller the group experimenting, the better, because the risks of a failure are contained within a small area or a small group of people. Diversity over an area is then a natural creator of small groups suitable for experimentation.

Historically, the most decisive cultural and political unit is the city (with its suburbs), not the centralized nation state. Political institutions of the future will simply be confederations of cities and local communities. I suggest that an actual path forward is not “let us forget about all regional integration and let us go back to the good old nation state!” Switzerland has never been a typical nation state and this is another of the many secrets of our successes.

But we should add that the mother of all things is the peaceful exchange and mutual learning and adaptation. So let us all together forget the authoritarian over-regulating father, at least in the political sphere! And let us go back to the tolerant mother who shows us how to exchange in peace and how to be creative. Perhaps even how to be a creative dissident, one of my favourite issues. After all, who else should “return to the mother.”

The traditional nation-state wanted to safeguard and imperialistically promote the ideas of State, Nation, Language, Economy and Culture within one “sensibly” and “naturally” constrained territory. But who is to say what the correct political borders are? This collective error led to the First World War, “the great seminal catastrophe of the 20th century—the event which lay at the heart of the failure and decline of this Western civilization” (Kennan, 1981). An event in whose shadows we are still suffering; of course, the Second World War was just a continuation of the First, and the Cold War just a continuation of the Second. The disastrous issue was the vain hope to find “just” borders. But there are no “just” borders. Borders are just borders!

Today, economies and cultures are essentially and increasingly spanning across political or linguistic borders. The EU is not the positive alternative to the collective error of centralised nation states. Instead, the EU is a bureaucratic, corporatist empire, a political cartel in which the economically influential parties keep the smaller or economically weaker parties happy through transfer payments. In return they demand financial and political tributes whilst at the same time cutting off competition among systems as much as possible. The more ambiguous and indistinctive the foundations are, the better for the self-assigned, self-empowering bureaucrats. Eurocrats in Brussels can live quite well in this state of hazily defined responsibilities since bureaucrats are masters at muddling through. You can always present unnecessary restraints as inevitable practical constraints “without alternative.” It is well-known that necessity knows no law.

The EU is trying to prolong this collective error on a continental level by muscling in a form of European pseudo-solidarity and nationality. It wants to be something of a mercantilist Super-nation. If it lacks some loyalty, it wants to buy people off by centrally organized redistribution. But in reality it is perhaps destroying the loyalty more than creating it. Coercion destroys voluntary action and genuine loyalty. Loyalty can be based on free consensus over enlightened self-interest, never on bureaucratic machinery of redistribution.

Most nation states are probably too large rather than too small. Their current size came out of an optimal defence technology in case of war. Large states did not rise through markets but through wars. However, this emphasis on size for military purposes becomes a moot point in our nuclear age.

There are political communities which are collecting money for the common good on the basis of self-administered taxes in the sense of club membership fees. Alternatively, whenever possible, they directly charge for use. Our goal is not the removal of borders and the integration in centralising structures, but a political organization which offers the best possible combination of “voting,” “voting by feet” (exit) and “loyalty.”

I started my remarks with a fable, and I would like to end them with another. It is from Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), and it brings together nicely everything I have tried to explain on these pages:

A company of hedgehogs snuggled up together on a cold winter’s day in order to stop themselves freezing by using their mutual warmth. But they soon found themselves suffering from their own spines and were driven apart. When their need for warmth finally brought them nearer together  
again, the spines drove them apart again—so that they were pushed hither and thither between the two evils until they found an adequate distance from each other in which they could tolerate both of them. Exactly in this way the need for company, which springs from the emptiness and monotony of mankind’s inner life, brings people together—but then their objectionable habits and their unpardonable errors soon drive them apart again. The mean distance from each other at which they finally settle down and where mutual coexistence turns out to be possible is marked by courtesy and good manners. The English have a good expression for those who do not observe this. They say to such people: ‘Keep your distance.’ In this way the need for mutual warmth is only partially filled, but there is also little injury do ne by the spines of the hedgehog. But those who have sufficient inner warmth of their own will do well to keep away from society altogether, for in this way they will give no offence and they will also feel none.

Well, so much for Schopenhauer, the famous pessimist…

I hope that the people in Switzerland and of all countries all over the world have a lot of “inner warmth” of their own. I also hope it will come from the most sustainable energy source—I hope for more “inner warmth” as a result of permanent peaceful frictions in a civil society. And I hope that the most important lesson for preserving freedom will not be forgotten: We must have the courage to say No in the right moment.

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