

CVI – History Matters

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By Butler Shaffer

I believe in the virtue of small nations. I believe in the virtue of small numbers. The world will be saved by the few.

~ Andr Gide

Students of American history know that had the French not arrived in time to support the colonials in their struggle to secede from the British Empire, modern investors might now be concerned with how the American pound was faring against the Euro. While the French were motivated primarily by the opportunity to have another whack at the British, it is nonetheless true that Americans owed the outcome of the so-called "Revolutionary War" to France's intervention.

There is a more recent indebtedness to France that most Americans lack the decency to acknowledge: the refusal of Chirac's regime to join forces with George W. Bush's unprovoked aggression against Iraq, the first step in a neocon-inspired effort to get the world to prostrate itself at the feet of American emperors. By refusing to join with such lap dogs as Tony Blair — eager to roll over in exchange for any morsel of recognition from the grand emperor — the French became a symbol to other nations of the importance of pursuing a course of principled integrity in dealing with others.

Americans are not the only people indebted to a French obstinacy at being stampeded into a destructive herd frenzy. In voting to reject the constitution of the European Union, France may have dealt a crushing blow to the efforts of the political establishment to create another monolithic state system, a result that will doubtless benefit the people of Europe. Dutch opponents of the EU, perhaps taking heart from the French, amassed a nearly 62% "nee" vote. The German parliament — not the voters — had earlier ratified the EU constitution, a reflection, perhaps, of a continuing desire for centralized power that has characterized that nation since at least 1870.

I have long been of the opinion that vertically-structured power systems — such as that implicit in the nation-state — are bound to collapse, taking with them the civilized societies upon which they feed. I have been amazed, however, at how rapidly this disintegrative process has progressed. The demise of the Soviet Union was the first major victim of the arrogance of centrally-directed authority. I also believe — as the subtitle to this continuing E-book suggests — that the United States will likewise succumb to the fatal virus of coercive bigness. I have had the same confidence that the European Union would be unable to sustain itself, but I did not suspect it would be delivered stillborn.

It is interesting to observe how far removed are the political leaders of countries such as France, the Netherlands, and Great Britain from the people they claim to represent. The chief executives of these countries had campaigned on behalf of the EU, even as public opinion in each opposed the constitution. So much for the myth of "representative government." Were I the Prime Minister of Holland, I would resign in disgrace for having supported a system rejected by over three-fifths of the electorate. But the attraction of power over one's fellows easily seduces even the best-intentioned of men and women.

While it took many decades for the American political system to evolve to the point of micromanaging the daily lives of people, the EU eurocrats were intent on beginning at such a top-down level of organization. British grocers were criminally prosecuted for selling vegetables by the pound rather than by grams; window-washers were prohibited from using ladders in their trade; only straight bananas were allowed to be sold; even the size and content of meatballs were strictly defined by the new EU authorities!

In a world of mixed interests and motivations, it would be foolish to try to explain these voting outcomes in the singular manner by which members of the established media — who have long been challenged by complexity — try to do. Nationalistic sentiments, hostility to immigration, competing economic interests, religious and cultural differences, historical memory, and a fear of extended political power, doubtlessly figured, to one degree or another, into the calculations of how to vote. That Spanish voters had previously ratified the EU constitution should caution any temptation to look for a uniform mindset among Europeans.

My intuitive sense that vertically-structured leviathan systems are fated to collapse does not depend upon any major change in thinking among people. I regard philosophy not so much as a transforming force in the world but as an afterthought; an explanation for processes of change working, in hidden ways, deep within the fabric of society and life itself. This is not to dismiss the significance of ideas, but to recognize them as our mind's efforts to express qualities that are already within us. Philosophy accompanies us more than it leads us. It was not a major paradigm shift in thinking among the erstwhile Soviet citizenry that brought about the collapse of that repressive regime. It was the inconsistency of a rigidified state system with the demands of life processes that eventually led to the Soviet demise.

The top-down, command-and-control machinery of state power has run head-on into the forces of spontaneity and autonomy that are life's processes. Vertical systems of centralized power are being replaced by horizontal patterns of interconnectedness. Coercion is giving way to cooperation; the pyramid is collapsing into networks; Ozymandias' rigid structures are eroding into formless but flexible systems, with names such as "Google," "Yahoo," "WebCrawler" and "Mozilla," that mock the solemnity we once gave to the dying forms.

Efforts to understand the dynamics underlying transformations in our world have produced the studies known as "chaos" and "complexity." Along with earlier theories of quantum mechanics, the mechanistic and reductionist model of society as a "giant clockwork" to be directed by state authorities toward desired and predictable ends, has been dealt a fatal blow. We now have ideas to help us enunciate what we earlier knew intuitively, namely, that a complex world is too unpredictable to become subject to state planning; that social conflict and disorder are the necessary consequences of interfering with spontaneous systems of order.

Decades before "chaos theory" became a popular buzzword, the late Leopold Kohr had an insight into how the increased size of political systems correlated with the expansion of warfare and repression. In his book, *The Breakdown of Nations*, Kohr developed what he called the "size theory of social misery." In his view, "wherever something is wrong, something is too big." It is inevitable, he goes on, for large state systems to "sweep up [a] critical quantity of power" where "the mass becomes so spontaneously vile that . . . it begins to produce a quantum of its own." A reading of both Kohr and Randolph Bourne flesh out the dynamics that led the latter to observe that "war is the health of the state."

Our biological history should have informed us of the allometric principle that the appropriate size of any body is relative to the nature of the organism. A fifty-foot tall woman may make for amusing science fiction, but an eight foot, eleven inch Robert Wadlow was unable to live beyond his twenty-second year. Likewise, the massive size of the dinosaurs did not provide them sufficient resiliency to adapt to the environmental changes brought about, presumably, by the earth's collision with a comet. In Kohr's words, "[o]nly relatively small bodies . . . have stability. Below a certain size, everything fuses, joins, or accumulates. But beyond a certain size, everything collapses or explodes."

A European Union is a futile effort on the part of the established, institutional order to resist the changes that are dismantling its power structures. In much the same way that the Bush administration's empire-motivated "war on terror" is a cover for trying to shore up the collapsing foundations of a centrally-managed society, the EU may be the last hurrah of men and women who are driven by unquenched appetites for power over others.

The European power-graspers were as one in mourning the undoing of their dreamed-of perch of authority. One called the French vote "a disaster," having earlier prophesied that such a vote would mean "the end of Europe." Jean-Luc DeHaene – one of the architects of the EU constitution — declared that the French vote brought Europe "to a kind of standstill . . . in a period of uncertainty." Such views are to be expected from men and women who continue to embrace, in F.A. Hayek's words, a "fear of trusting uncontrolled social forces"; people who still believe that societies must be run from the top, and that they are the ones best suited to run them!

Other political voices reflected a more thoughtful assessment of these results. The president of the Czech Republic observed that the French vote "demonstrated the deep division that exists between the European elite and the citizens of Europe." Roman Prodi, a former president of the European Commission who was disappointed in the outcome, nonetheless found some solace in the rejection of French voters to the EU. "This is still better than a war of secession like the United States once had," he declared.

To most Americans – who still believe that the Civil War was all about ending slavery — Prodi's analogy will make little sense. Having been isolated from the rest of the world by two oceans, Americans also have a sense of history isolated from the experiences of other nations. Prodi seems to understand the essence of this disastrous period in American history far better than most American historians and students of government apparently do.

The French and the Dutch people — though not their political leaders — may well have saved European societies from having fastened around their necks the kind of vertically-structured, repressive, and violent super-state system now in retreat before the quiet forces of chaos and complexity. Leopold Kohr was right: a Europe of independent but cooperative Luxembourgs, Liechtensteins, Switzerlands, and Hollands will be far more productive and peaceful than would be a Europe organized on the models of hegemony that tyrannized and rampaged that continent in the past.

Europeans, like the rest of the world, will learn to organize themselves along horizontal lines of networked relationships, wherein "tops" and "bottoms" no longer have meaning. The vertical power structures will continue to waste away, the shrill voices of their occupants becoming more and more distant from the lives of ordinary people. Their antiquated forms may remain as tourist attractions in much the same way that monarchies or the palace at Versailles have become museum pieces from a past that no longer commands allegiance.

Europe's refusal to resist the currents of change now sweeping the world might even offer lessons to us Americans, provided we can divert our attention from news reports of runaway brides, Michael Jackson, and water-skiing squirrels. Perhaps we can learn from our own history something of which Mr. Prodi was aware: that the best way to avoid the destructive and warlike nature of the leviathan state is to never create such mechanisms of "social misery" in the first place. Having already produced such a monster, the next best solution is to stop feeding it!

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