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THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT: A TOCQUEVILLIST PERSPECTIVE

To rethink local self-government in the United States requires, first, an inquiry into basic meaning and purpose. What is local government and what do we want of it? The meaning of local government is at least ambiguous when we consider that a municipality the size of the City of New York is generally thought to be a "local" government.1 When is "local government" no longer local? What are its defining characteristics? The way we choose to define local government is shaped by a sense of purpose. What values do we expect it to serve? To what extent can these values be jointly secured? Alternatively, to what extent are trade-offs required? When we determine the meaning of local government and the values to be served by it, then and only then are we in a position to explore its successes and failures.

Meaning and purpose become especially important when we turn to issues of "strengthening" local government--issues with which ACIR has been much concerned over its history. Numerous recommendations have been advanced by the Commission with this objective. What does it mean for local government to be "strong" or "weak?" These questions can only be answered in terms of some basic conception of the meaning and purpose of local governmental institutions.

When we fail to be explicit about meaning and purpose, the possibility arises that efforts to strengthen local government will instead diminish its values or transform it into something other than what we want it to be. A careful modeling of local government should also reveal its necessary costs--what we must forego in order to gain its benefits. If we seek to avoid paying the price of local government, the consequence could be the destruction of its essential features. On the other hand, perhaps local government is, or is no longer, worth the price; in which case, we have to be prepared to forego its unique advantages in order to reap presumably greater benefits from outside the framework of local institutions.

While trade-offs are always present, it is also important to explore, as fully as we can, the full set of possibilities associated with local government in order to minimize its opportunity-costs. This line of inquiry can benefit from a careful analysis of local government as a set of institutional attributes that can be put together in various ways. When we have an understanding of the meaning and purpose of local government it also becomes possible to consider the organizational mechanisms and policy instruments consistent with that meaning and purpose. Various combinations of organization and policy are always possible. Thus one can work to <u>minimize</u> certain costs while realizing that efforts to <u>eliminate</u> those same costs might be counterproductive.

By tradition, Americans cling to the idea of "strong local government." ACIR is committed to this same tradition. Two sets of values seem to be foremost: (1) the involvement of citizens in decision making and (2) the efficient supply of services to citizens. Throughout much of this century, however, the predominant theory of local government has viewed these two sets of values as in fundamental conflict. At the same time, priority has been given to service provision and the argument advanced that citizen involvement must be carefully constrained if efficient service provision is to occur. Traditions of professionalism, scale economies, and central coordination have been allowed to structure most of the agenda for "strengthening" local government. Too much citizen involvement, it is widely believed, gets in the way of rational decision making. To the extent this theory is correct, citizens do indeed face a hard choice; or, perhaps they face little choice. For if citizenship is largely unproductive, why should it be cultivated? Even if some minimum level of citizen involvement is essential to the preservation of a "republican" form of government, it does not follow that citizens ought to be encouraged in their involvement beyond the sharply confining limits of their potential productivity. By this route of thinking, local government becomes no more than a mechanism for the delivery of services to citizens, and citizens little more than consumers of services.[2] It is then easy to eliminate the development and use of citizenship from the performance criteria applied to local government institutions.

Even those who argue for the encouragement of "citzen participation" are apt to think of the role of citizens largely in terms of "demands," where the term "demand" is used not in the economic sense of willingness and ability to pay but in the "political" sense of seeking benefits, i.e., rents. A popular image of democratic politics is that citizens make demands while governments respond. In this demand-response model, citizens again emerge as essentially unproductive--as rent-seekers. If citizenship amounts to little more than rent-seeking, little wonder that reformers would seek to limit its role in government to a necessary minimum.

Alexis de Tocqueville in Democracy in America provides an alternative theory of local government in the context of an explicit statement of its meaning and purpose.[3] He does not view citizens primarily as rent-seekers, nor citizenship and service efficiency as subject to extensive trade-off. Instead, local government is portrayed as a limited domain within which both set of values can be pursued simultaneously. He provides both a model of local government, which describes the linkage between citizenship and productivity, and a political theory which delineates the boundaries of local authority.

Primary Local Government: Tocqueville's Model

Tocqueville's historical account of the New England township can be used to derive a model of, what might be called, the primary unit of local government. In doing so, one is interested in Tocqueville's discussion more as theory, than as history. The model consists of three parts:

(1) A set of defining characteristics, to answer the question, "What is the meaning of primary local government?"

(2) A set of expected outcomes, including both benefits and costs, to answer the question, "What is the purpose of primary local government?"

(3) A process, or set of intervening variables, to connect meaning with purpose and explain how primary local government is expected to generate the outcomes attributed to it.

Having constructed a model of the primary local unit, we can move on to consider the possibility of secondary units which properly function in relation to primary units.

Defining Characteristics

To begin with, the township is a relatively small unit of government. It is not only the smallest unit actually established within the larger governmental framework, but also the smallest feasible unit of governmental organization in a particular social context. The numerical limits of feasibility might be expected to change from time to time and place to place; but the concept remains the same: "[A population] not so large, on the one hand, that the interests of its inhabitants would be likely to conflict, and not so small, on the other, but that men capable of conducting its affairs may always be found among its citizens." (I,64)4 An optimal size trades off the strength of common interests against the availability of political talent. In New England of 1830, a township averaged about 2,000 inhabitants.

Secondly, the township affords to its citizens many, varied opportunities for participation in collective endeavors. In addition to relyiing upon the famous town meeting, townships also elected nineteen administrative officers. (I,66)

Finally, the township is a relatively autonomous collective body, or as Tocqueville puts it, has both "independence and authority." (I,69) Few external obstacles stand in the way of local collective action. Neither is collective action purely voluntary, dependent upon the willing consent of each participant for each action.

These three characteristics--the smallest feasible unit, widespread opportunities for citizen participation, and relative autonomy--become the defining characteristics of primary local government. Larger units, with fewer opportunities to participate and/or less autonomy, cannot qualify as primary units; but secondary units of local government (of which more is written below) may suitably relax these criteria.

Expected Outcomes

The next question to pose is, so what? Given primary units of local government, what happens of any consequence? Does primary local

government make a difference? What benefits (and costs) can be uniquely traced to it? Tocqueville sees two sets of values, closely related.

The first is an extraordinary level of productivity. "In no country in the world," Tocqueville observes, "do the citizens make such exertions for the common weal." (I,95) The examples he cites--schools, churches, roads--are a product of small-scale local activity. So impressed is Tocqueville with the quality and quantity of local public goods that, given some minimum level of public enlightenment, he argues that "the collective strength of the citizens will always conduce more efficaciously to the public welfare than the authority of the [central] government." (I,93)

The second major benefit is the development of good citizenship.5 Not only are citizens productive in township life--the township produces good citizens. This, says Tocqueville, is the "political" advantage, as distinguished from the "administrative" advantages, of primary local governments. And it was this long-term political effect that he most admired. (I,98) Without good citizenship, individuals are apt to "set too high a value upon their time to spend it on the interests of the community; and they shut themselves up in a narrow selfishness, marked out by four sunk fences and a quickset hedge." (I,260) In contrast, an American "condemned to confine his activity to his own affairs...would be robbed of one half of his existence. . . ." (I,260) Good citizenship is valued in turn for its contribution to the maintenance of a democratic republic and a free society. In Tocqueville's oft-quoted words, it follows that "municipal institutions constitute the strength of free nations." (I,63)

If productive citizenship, then, is the composite value associated with primary local government, the next question to ask is, what values must be foregone to obtain this end? What are the costs of primary government? Tocqueville points mainly to what might be called the absence of regularity. In other words, the provision of local public goods cannot be 'taken for granted.' It requires the conscious attention of ordinary citizens in a process that will often be characterized by fits and starts. "Uniformity or permanence of design, the minute arrangement of details, and the perfection of administrative system must not be sought for in the United States." (I,95) Individuals can expect to exert effort and experience some frustration. A level of unpredictability is the price paid for "the presence of a power which, if it is somewhat wild, is at least robust, and an existence checkered with accidents, indeed, but full of animation and effort." (I,96)

Process

The modeling of local government does not stop with a statement of defining characteristics and expected benefits and costs. Although the partial model developed so far does allow the formulation of hypotheses, even if these hypotheses were found to be true, we would not know why. We want to know how primary local government generates the benefits and costs attributed to it. What process is at work? What intervening variables link the defining characteristics of primary government with productive citizenship?

The key intervening variable is the kind of strategy chosen by individuals in relating to their government. Tocqueville argues that citizen strategies are radically different depending upon whether the "administrative" system is centralized or decentralized.6 In Tocqueville's terminology, centralized administration is the provision of local public goods and services by a central government. Decentralized administration is provision of the same by local governments, and to the extent possible, by primary local governments. To describe the typical strategy chosen by local citizens in dealing with a centralized administration, Tocqueville relies upon his European experience: "There are countries in Europe where the native considers himself as a kind of settler, indifferent to the fate of the spot he inhabits. The greatest changes are effected there without his concurrence, and (unless chance may have apprised him of the event) without his knowledge; nay, more, the condition of his village, the police of his street, the repairs of the church or parsonage, do not concern him; for he looks upon all these things as unconnected with himself and as the property of a powerful stranger whom he calls the government." (I,96) In contrast, Tocqueville found the residents of New England townships investing themselves in their local communities and regarding themselves as equal shareholders in a common wealth.

Tocqueville explains this choice of strategy with reference to what he calls "self-interest rightly understood." He makes an assumption that individuals, especially in a democratic age, are apt to be self-interested. But it does not necessarily follow that individuals will be unduly narrow and selfish. "It must therefore be expected that personal interest will become more than ever the principal if not the sole spring of men's actions; but it remains to be seen how each man will understand his personal interest." (II-132) Self-interest rightly understood produces a willingness to contribute to the welfare of others in a community, with the calculation that, as others do likewise, one's own personal interests will also be served. This principle is unlikely to produce "great acts of self-sacrifice, but it suggests daily small acts of self-denial." (II-131) To act on this principle, however, one must be able to perceive the effects of one's actions and forbearances, as well as those of others. This proposition links the principle of "self-interest rightly understood" to the defining properties of primary local government. For "the activity of the township is continually perceptible; it is daily manifested in the fulfillment of a duty or the exercise of a right; and a constant though gentle motion is kept up in society, which animates without disturbing it." (I,70) The preceptibility of individual conduct makes it possible to create a shared sense of "mutual dependence," arising out of innumerable opportunities for "acting in concert." (II-110) By "infusing political life" into the local community by means of "local freedom," citizens are led "to value the affection of their neighbors." (II,110-111) Local community is therefore sustained by a pattern of reciprocity7 in which individuals cultivate the goodwill of one another by contributing in limited but recurrent ways to one another's wellbeing.

The three defining characteristics of primary local government--

small size, extensive participation, and relative autonomy--contribute singly and jointly to a process in which individuals choose strategies based upon a principle of self-interest rightly understood. Small size clearly enhances perceptibility. Direct participation increases the sense of individual efficacy and responsibility. Autonomy greatly increases the propensity to cooperate in a joint endeavor, as centralized administration tends to diminish it. "Even while the centralized power, in its despair, invokes the assistance of the citizens, it says to them: 'You shall act just as I please, as much as I please, and in the direction which I please. You are to take charge of the details without aspiring to guide the system....' These are not the conditions on which the alliance of the human will is to be obtained; it must be free in its gait and responsible for its acts, or (such is the constitution of man) the citizen had rather remain a passive spectator than a dependent actor in schemes with which he is unacquainted." (I,94)

Secondary Units

Primary units of local government do not exclude the possibility of secondary units which overlap the primary units. Secondary units need not meet the same criteria as primary units. In Tocqueville's historical model, counties are an example of secondary units. Their purpose was to serve the common administrative interests of townships: "There are certain wants which are felt alike by all the townships of a county; it is therefore natural that they should be satisfied by a central authority." (I,71) Yet Tocqueville notes that the "officers of the county are not elected, and their authority is very limited." (I,69) Constituted differently from primary units of local government, secondary units do not have the same meaning and purpose as primary units. They are not expected to foster productive citizenship, and they do not have to so long as they are not viewed as substitutes for primary units. Still, secondary units may serve important and useful functions in the general system of local government and, thereby, enhance the capabilities of primary units to do what they do best.

The most important point to be made about secondary units, however, is that they tend to make poor substitutes for primary units. (State government might also be viewed as a "primary" unit of a sort, though it is not local.) County government occupies a position midway between primary local government and the state, and serves the interests of each. But counties are inappropriate units--inappropriate by virtue of both size and organization--to do what states or primary local governments do. (I am using a functional concept of county here, not to be confused with whatever may go by that name.) To generalize, the usefulness of a secondary unit is found in its relation to one or more primary units. If that relation is well constituted, the secondary unit can perform well. The internal organization of a secondary unit can often be quite simple compared to a primary unit.

Much of the development of local government systems in the United States since Tocqueville's day has occured through the elaboration and proliferation of secondary units. There is nothing, in principle, wrong with this development. Where American local government may have gone awry is in the confusion of primary and secondary units, and the neglect

of the former. Discussion of the full array of both secondary and primary units which have been developed in the U.S., however, must await fuller explication of Tocqueville's general theory.

The Political and Legal Context of Local Government

From Tocqueville's account of, and commentary upon, life in the New England township, we can glean a general understanding of the meaning and purpose of local government. This understanding is built upon a model of primary local units--relatively autonomous, small-scale, participatory governments which engender both productivity and citizenship. Meaning is linked with purpose, moreover, by a process theory which, though resting upon a self-interest assumption with respect to individual choice, explains how self-interest rightly understood emerges in the context of primary local government; and, further, how self-interest rightly understood is sustained by patterns of reciprocity which, in turn, generate both local productivity and the enduring character of good citizenship. What is foregone in this process--its price--is the regularity which tends to characterize central administration and perhaps some degree of social freedom to 'do one's own thing,' in the modern vernacular, without regard to the interests of others. The latter, which Tocqueville termed "individualism," may of course be greatly prized in a given state of society and therefore inhibit the development of primary local institutions or impel their demise.

Having thus modeled local government, it next becomes necessary to determine the political context necessary to maintain the integrity of primary units. Tocqueville, again, supplies the need. Scattered through Democracy in America are the propositions of a coherent political theory which, if brought systematically together, both describe the necessary conditions of viable local government and clarify the limiting conditions which apply to its productivity. The propositions are considered in logical sequence below.

1. **"...everyone is the best and sole judge of his own private interest...."** (I,67) Tocqueville views this proposition as part of the broad notion of popular sovereignty and suggests that it is "universally admitted in the United States." (I,67) Only to the extent that individuals affect others or others require an individual's help is an individual not considered to be a good judge of what he ought to do or not to do. A democratic society, Tocqueville suggests, is not to be constituted on paternalistic assumptions.

2. **Everyone also "acknowledges the utility of an association with his fellow men and...knows that no such association can exist without a regulating force."** (I,67) This proposition states that individuals are able to recognize both the advantage of association with others and the necessity of surrendering some degree of individual discretion to a "regulating force," such as majority rule or third party determination. Together, propositions one and two imply that self-interested individuals may seek to create political associations, such as primary local governments.

3. A local community is the best judge of its own interests. As Tocqueville comments, "The township, taken as a whole, and in relation to the central government, is only an individual, like any other to whom the theory I have just described [Proposition 1] is applicable." (I,67) Established on the basis of the common interests of the individuals who comprise it, each association is collectively the best judge of "all that concerns themselves alone." (I,68) The twentieth century mind is apt to object that the sphere of local autonomy, thus defined, is an empty set. Externalities abound. The proper rejoinder is that all externalities are not economically or politically relevant. The precise scope of local discretion must of course vary with times and places. From the New England experience of 1830, only the principle is taken, not the actual distribution of authority.

4. Local government owes the fulfillment of "certain social duties" to the larger community of which it is a part. (I,68) Tocqueville offers the following examples: "If the state is in need of money, a town cannot withhold the supplies; if the state projects a road, the township cannot refuse to let it cross its territory; if a police regulation is made by the state, it must be enforced by th town; if a uniform system of public instruction is enacted, every town is bound to establish the schools which the law ordains." (I,68) These illustrations indicate a broad range of possible constraints and obligations that might be placed upon local government. But Tocqueville qualifies the nature of the social obligation in this manner: "Strict as this obligation is, the government of the state imposes it in principle only, and in its performance the township resumes all its independent rights." This is a subtle, but very important point. Again Tocqueville offers examples: "Thus, taxes are voted by the state, but they are levied and collected by the township; the establishment of a school is compulsory, but the township builds, pays for, and superintends it." (I,68) Social duties are directed to the attainment of certain objects--taxes, roads, schools. The larger interest is in the object to be attained, not the method used to attain it. Townships, or local governments, are free to determine their own methods, provided that the object is thereby attained. The central government is not free to regulate the <u>activity</u> of local authorities, only to constrain their activity by requiring that a certain <u>object</u> result. Central government authorities do not thereby acquire a general supervisory control over local governments.

5. The social duties of local governments can only be enforced through courts of law. Tocqueville poses the problem of enforcement as a puzzle. Ordinarily, he argues, one thinks of the enforcement of obligations against 'lower' officials by 'higher' officials as a command relationship, bureaucratic in nature. "The right of directing a civil officer presupposes that of cashiering him if he does not obey order, and of rewarding him by promotion if he fulfills his duties with propriety." (I,76) But local officials are elected locally; they are therefore not subject to bureaucratic constraint or inducement. The solution, as Tocqueville concludes, is the "use of judicial penalities as a means of administration." (I,76) Local governments are then subject to a rule of law, but not to central administration. If state officials are unhappy with a local government or its officers, they must go to court. In this setting, state and local officials appear as equals, each equally subject

to the law. A judge determines what the law requires in the particular case, and all parties are obliged to obey the law. In this manner, the autonomy of local governments can be preserved, while at the same time allowing for the enforcement of "social duties." As a corollary to this proposition, Tocqueville advances in the form of a prescription a much more abstract, and more famous, generalization: "The extension of judicial power in the political world ought therefore to be in the exact ratio of the extension of elective power; if these two institutions do not go hand in hand, the state must fall into anarchy or into servitude." (I,77)

6. The abuse of discretion by a public official can take one of three forms: [a] He may execute the law without energy or zeal; [b] He may neglect what the law requires; [c] He may do what the law forbids." (I,79)

7. "Only the last two violations of duty can come before a legal tribunal...." (I,79) **To secure accountability in the first instance, only "arbitrary removal from office" is sufficient.** (I,80) Legal action, in Tocqueville's language, requires "a positive and appreciable fact." It must rest on objective, demonstrable grounds. Lack of enthusiasm in carrying out the duties of office cannot be demonstrated in fact. It can only be judged subjectively, by comparing what an officer is doing with what others might do in his place.

8. For lack of enthusiasm, local officials cannot be held accountable by state officials, but only by local citizens through the elective principle. This holds, of course, because accountability for the performance of social duties proceeds through the courts. In other words, the obligation to perform social duties is restricted to a <u>legal</u> obligation; it does not extend to a general sense of <u>political</u> obligation. The latter is available only within the context of local government. This inevitably weakens somewhat the strength of social obligation to those outside the local community. Tocqueville also points out, however, that there are only two ways to achieve accountability for "zeal and energy." The two modes of "arbitrary removal" are popular election and chain of command. To hold local officials accountable for the enthusiasm with which social duties are fulfilled would require their subjection to an external hierarchy, destroying local autonomy. One must therefore choose: it is possible to have local accountability for "zeal and energy" <u>or</u> state accountability for "zeal and energy," but not both. If the social duties of local officials come to predominate over the performance of their strictly local functions, societies may choose to abandon local government. But those who would make such a choice should be forwarned of the opportunity costs--a decline in both local productivity and the quality of citizenship.

To summarize, viable local government can be maintained as long as one does not demand too much of local communities and officials by way of social duties. Within this constraint, reliance upon a rule of law between state and local officials is sufficient to maintain the autonomy of local government. If, however, social duties extend to include both means and ends (Proposition 4), and the standards of performance are thought to require subjective accountability not available in a proper

legal proceeding grounded in established law (Proposition 8), then the autonomy of local government can be eroded as the requirements imposed by external authorities come to occupy much of the original domain of local discretion.

Tocqueville found the source of local independence in America in history. Townships, he notes, "did not receive their powers from the central authority, but, on the contrary, they gave up a portion of their independence to the state." (I,67) Local independence proceeded from a pattern of development which began locally, then grew steadily more inclusive until the formation of the Federal Union. History in a sense continues to exist in habits and customs. The constraint of history then helps to maintain local independence, i.e., helps to maintain the political context within which viable local government remains feasible. Apart from habit and custom, however, federalism in the United States does little to maintain local autonomy except as local governments are viewed as portions of their respective state polities. For as Tocqueville points out, "In America the legislature of each state is supreme; nothing can impede its authority, neither privileges, nor local immunities, nor personal influence, nor even the empire of reason, since it represents that majority which claims to be the sole organ of reason." (I,91 emphasis added) When the taste for equality characteristic of democratic peoples is joined to legislative supremacy, the result is inimical to the preservation of local autonomy. Centralization, due to its leveling qualities Tocqueville argues, is the natural government of democratic peoples. (II, 306-309) Local independence is maintained only by self-conscious political attention and by the invention of political forms which offer some resistance to the centralizing tendencies of democracy.

Tocqueville has no quarrel with what he calls centralization of "government" as distinguished from centralized "administration." The former refers to the power to direct the general interests of a nation, as opposed to the special interests of its parts. (I,89) Centralization of government in the United States, he argues, is "perfect," in spite of the federal system which divides power between the government of the Union and that of each state. (I,91) Centralization of government can coexist with federalism and decentralized administration.

In order to maintain the advantages of local government in a democratic society, it becomes imperative to develop what Tocqueville called, variously, the "science of association" (II,118) or the "new science of politics...needed for a new world." (I,7) Democratic conditions will require "much intelligence, knowledge, and art to organize and to maintain secondary powers [such as local government]... and to create, amid the independence and individual weakness of the citizens, such free associations as may be able to struggle against tyranny without destroying public order." (II,316-317) In the final analysis, the maintenance of local government depends upon systematic inquiry and the organization of knowledge, joined to thoughtful public deliberation.

Competing Traditions

While a strong tradition of local government based upon primary units continues to be felt in the United States, it has been seriously weakened by competition from alternative intellectual traditions and administrative practices. Three such traditions are (1) professionalism, (2) scale economies, and (3) central coordination, which jointly have formed the core of the traditional study of public administration in the United States, at least since the days of Woodrow Wilson. All three are legitimate reform traditions which offer consistent prescriptions for the improvement of human welfare. Yet, primary local governments have often been among their chief enemies.

Although often posing a concerted challenge to primary local institutions, the three traditions can be disentangled and examined separately. It is important to do so, because each poses a somewhat different challenge and, in some cases at least, represents some potential for complementarity with primary local government. Some competing traditions, if redefined as secondary traditions much like the secondary units of government discussed above, can extend the limits of a simpler reliance on a single tradition of thought.

Professionalism

Perhaps the most important and widely influential tradition of public administration to arise in the United States over the last century has been a concern with adherence to standards of professionalism. In every branch of public service--education, police, social welfare--practitioners have sought to define their work as professional. The practice of professionalism entails the development of some core of knowledge, educational programs to impart that knowledge, and evaluation of performance on the basis of objective standards drawn from the knowledge core. The end in view is always improvement of services to citizens. A process theory of professionalism might understand professional pride as analogous to the development of citizenship in a local community.

Logically, professionalism is not contradictory to primary local government. Professionals can properly be engaged to serve any set of legitimate interests. In principle, there is no reason that the superior competence of professionals might not be made available to primary local units. A problem develops, however, when professionals define their work in such a way as to exclude citizens from decisions that directly affect local interests. Operating from what they consider to be superior knowledge, professionals may be inclined to substitute their own preferences for the preferences of citizens. If professionals assume that they know both (1) what citizens "need" and (2) how to deliver it, there may be little to consult with citizens about. The basic Tocquevillist proposition that citizens are the best judge of their own interests, whether individual or collective, then faces a serious challenge.

Nevertheless, a properly constrained view of professionalism is entirely consistent with Tocqueville's theory of local government. As the best judge of their own collective interests, citizens in a primary unit of local government are deemed capable of deciding when their

interests are better tended to by professionals. They know when to yield to the discretion of those better trained; or, when they make a mistake, they bear the consequences of acting on their own, less well informed, state of knowledge. Seeking out professional advice is an option fully consistent with self-interest, both individual and collective. From the professional side, the discretion of primary units to reject the best advice that can be given is a constraint that must be accepted. In a more positive vein, professionals may come to learn that primary units are a repository of time-and-place knowledge needed to apply abtract professional prescriptions and, further, that often they need the cooperation of citizens in the primary unit to meet even their own professional standards.

Professionalism depends critically upon specialization. Primary units of local government, on the other hand, are inherently non-specialized except, of course, in the sense of being specialized to a particular unique community. Professionals necessarily split up among their various professions the essential elements of community. Although an advantage may be gained from doing so, at some point, in order to apply professional knowledge, the various elements must be brought together again. Primary units of local government define an area in which the elements of community reside and act upon one another. Purely professional standards are inadequate to judge the contribution of any one profession to any discrete community. To argue otherwise is to assume that the elements of community combine in uniform ways from one community to another. Because the question is instead always how each element of community combines with others to produce aggregate community outcomes, professional standards addressed to a single element are incomplete criteria for judging the appropriateness of a policy or course of action affecting some community.

When it is nevertheless assumed that professional standards can be uniformly applied across different primary units, the pursuit of professionalism is then damaging to primary local government. The interests of citizens in primary local units are labeled as "parochial" in a perjorative sense (unable to appreciate the rationality of universal standards) and professionals may gain access to authority that can override local preferences. Professional knowledge that might be useful if applied with careful attention to community context then becomes an enemy of community processes.

Scale Economies

A second orientation of sufficient strength and endurance to be considered a tradition in public administraton is a belief in the importance of economies of scale as a determinant of efficiency in public goods provision. The belief in scale economies is largely responsible for the widely held view that numerous small local units of government are inefficient. Consolidation of small primary units is the recommended solution. Loss of citizen productivity is not generally counted among the diseconomies of scale to be accounted for in calculating the optimal size of local government. Indeed, in the recent past, analysis has frequently assumed no upper limit on scale economies: the bigger, the better.

Research has indicated, however, that scale economies are quite limited and, in general, are unavailable in most local government services beyond a population of 25,000.8 Even at this level, however, potential scale economies would increase the opportunity costs of a reliance on much smaller primary local units. Local citizens would face a nasty trade-off. Fortunately, however, the scale economies tradition has rested upon a false premise, viz., that the primary local unit--or any governmental unit, for that matter--must produce its own services. To the contrary, primary local units may be used to make provision for local goods and services, arranging finance and procurement, while contracting out for production and delivery.9 Economies of scale characterize production, not provision, and therefore yield no jusitification for the abrogation of primary local units.

The scale economies tradition shares with all efficiency perspectives a tendency to neglect the "productivity" dimension of public sector units. Efficiency is usally defined and studied wth respect to a stipulated set of services. The comparative efficiency of a unit can be examined for given service categories. The productivity of an organization, on the other hand, cannot usefully be evaluated on the basis of stipulated services; for what is at issue is the ability of the organization to generate new services in response to problems and/or opportunties. Productvity in the public sector is the capacity to respond to public problems, or to discern new opportunties for increasing the common wellbeing. This is the sense in which citizenship in primary local units is productive. Citizen productivity is more an attribute of what we call "provisioning" activity than "production" activity, although citizens can also be productive in this sense alongside contract producers.

A naive faith in scale economies, coupled with a failure to discriminate provision and production as well as neglect of the productivity dimension, is very destructive of primary local government. One of the potential uses of secondary units of local government, on the other hand, is to capture some of the limited economies of scale that may exist without having to abandon primary local units. The combination of private contracting with reliance upon secondary units can make the search for economies of scale consistent with the preservation of primary local government.

Central Coordination

The third competing tradition is perhaps the most destructive of primary local government because it is plainly inconsistent with it. If it is believed that the activities of primary local units must be coordinated by some center of authority, the autonomy of primary units cannot be maintained. The case for central coordination rests upon the undeniable premise that primary local units are not islands unto themselves. They are neither self-sufficient nor self-contained. Externalities abound. The interdependencies among primary local units, it is argued, thus require central coordination.

Two points are overlooked in this perspective. One is that coordination can be achieved by a rule of law as well as by command. This is the basis for Tocqueville's argument that courts are the proper instrument for applying central rules to localities. Coordination with reference to a rule of law leaves greater discretion with local units. The other is that coordination need not always be centrally provided at all. Primary units of local government can coordinate laterally with one another on the basis of common interests. Lateral coordination is frequently more effective than vertical coordination because it is incentive-compatible. Instead of seeking to escape coordination, local units embrace it. Likewise, central mandates to coordinate, directed at local units, are generally unproductive.

More fundamental, however, is a question about the appropriate scale for coordination, if the elements requiring coordination are essential elements of community life. Instead of a concern with coordination among local primary units, it may be more appropriate to seek coordination of various professional units which supply essential services to communities. The scale at which this sort of coordination is needed is not the "metropolitan" community, or some other large scale, but the local community as Tocqueville understood it. Instead of "central" coordination from the top down, the need is for local coordination from the bottom up. How much would professional services be improved if professionals serving a community from different professions were constituted as a team? If the object of joint professional efforts were the improvement of certain community-level indicators of well-being? Grass-roots coordination of this sort may depend critically upon primary units of local government.

Professionalism, scale economies, and central coordination jointly present strong competition to a tradition of primary local governments. Unconstrained by a commitment to primary units, these highly congruent traditions have contributed to an erosion of primary local government in America over the past several decades. At the same time, however, that local school districts, townships, and small municipalities were being abandoned or functionally stripped, new primary units in the form of homeowners' associations were multiplying in the thousands. As a result, local government in America is at present a very mixed bag. The advantages of primary local government are very unevenly distributed, both among local populations and between service types. A new tradition of local contracting holds the promise of strengthening primary local units. A tradition of volunteerism also remains strong in many local populations and/or service areas, and complements a concern with preserving primary units. Yet many communities, trapped within the boundaries of gargantuan "local governments," struggle to maintain even a trace of primary units.

"Strengthening local government" cannot be allowed to mean simply strengthening the local professions, or achieving economies of scale, or moving toward area-wide coordination of services. All these are at best secondary objectives, where the primary objective is productive citizenship. If Tocqueville was correct, productive citizenship depends upon primary units of local government.

A Question of Proportion

The study of local government cannot usefully focus upon any single unit of government, or level of government, in isolation from others. Local government is profoundly intergovernmental. The creation and maintenance of primary local units raises issues resolved largely in the context of state government. Locally, primary units depend upon an array of secondary units. The so-called "fragmentation" of authority among numerous primary local units and the proliferation of secondary units, often as special districts, give rise to a variety of multiorganizational arrangements that span separate jurisdictions. The functional effectiveness of local government depends upon an appropriate distribution of authority among numerous units of local government, some of which overlap others.

The multiorganizational setting of local government has increasingly become an intellectual battleground. Fragmentation and overlap attract both opponents and proponents. The key issues, however, are not well defined as a choice of more or less fragmentation, or overlap. A wide array of secondary units without good primary units may exhibit a high degree of fragmentation and overlap, but without good results. The key issues concern the proportioning of authority and responsibility among different units. Inquiry should focus on how best to proportion the capabilities and limitations of various units, both primary and secondary. Equally fragmented systems may perform quite differently. The degree to which authority is distributed among separate units is less important than the way it is distributed.

Given a commitment to primary local units, the pertinent issue is not whether to distribute local authority, but how. Poorly fragmented systems, in which authority is not well apportioned among a variety of units, should not be taken as evidence that "fragmentation" is bad. A wide distribution of authority is neither good nor bad apart from the particular way both authority and responsibility are apportioned among various primary and secondary units. If we understand "fragmentation" as lateral distribution of authority among similar units and "overlap" as vertical distribution of authority among dissimilar units, it may be important that fragmentation and overlap develop concurrently. This enables more inclusive secondary units to offset the disadvantages of multiple primary units, and vice versa.

Research therefore should focus on the proportioning of authority and responsibility among various units of local government. The mere presence of fragmentation and overlap cannot be presumed to be bad, or good. Initial attention should be given to the effectiveness of primary local units. This provides a base for subsequent examination of secondary units in relation to primary units. Institutional weakness can occur in the design of either primary or secondary units, or in multiorganizational arrangements which link different units. Too much authority here, too little there, the wrong set of boundaries elsewhere--this is the stuff of institutional weakness and suboptimal performance, not wholesale maladies such as "fragmentation."

The foundation of local government, from the Tocquevillist perspective, is the primary unit. Without that foundation, local government cannot fulfill its purpose: to develop and sustain productive citizenship. In its absence, secondary units may work mightily to compensate; but their best efforts will be high cost, to little effect. Overextended secondary units become the object of taxpayer revolts. At the same time, community-level problems grow more serious and both citizens and officials, more cynical. In the presence of a complex system that is not working well the overwhelming urge is to simplify, as when Robert Wood found 1400 governments serving citizens in the New York City area. A dominant impulse of reform has been to recreate the primary local unit on a larger scale: metropolitan government. The impossibility of doing so leaves us with the need to understand and work with complexity. The relatively simple analytic distinction between primary and secondary units of local government may better enable us to understand complex systems of local governance and explain both successes and failures.

1. Robert A. Dahl remarks that if New York City were to become a state, its citizens would immediately demand local government. Dahl, After the Revolution? Authority in a Good Society (New Haven and London: Yale Univernity Press, 1970), pp. 157-158. The language we use to discuss local government often obscures as much as it clarifies. New language is the only remedy.

2. See the discussion by Daniel J. Elazar, "Is Federalism Compatible with Prefectoral Administration?" and Ronald J. Oakerson, "Reciprocity, Consumerism, and Collective Action," Publius v. 11, n. 2 (1981), pp. 3-22 and 47-53.

3. Tocqueville can also be interpreted much more broadly, yet consistent with the argument advanced here, as providing a theory of "democratic administration" alternative to Weberian bureaucracy. See the argument posed by Vincent Ostrom, The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration, rev ed. (Unversity, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1974), especially Chapter IV.

4. References are to the two volume Vintage Books edition of Democracy in America (1945). The numbers in parentheses refer to volume and page.

5. Compare to Aaron Wildavsky's model of citizenship, consisting of three parts: (1) autonomy, "the ability to undertake independent action;" (2) reciprocity, "the willingness to share;" and (3) learning, "the ability to test and alter preferences." Wildavsky, Speaking Truth to Power: The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1979), p. 255.

6. Tocqueville's use of the language of centralization and decentralization is well explained by Martin Diamond, "The Ends of Federalism," Publius v.3, n.2 (1973), pp. 129-152.

7. The concept of reciprocity is more fully developed in Ronald J. Oakerson, "Reciprocity, Its General Relevance to Politics," (1985) Unpublished.

8. ACIR, Size Can Make a Difference: A Closer Look, 1970, p. 2.

9. See the distinction between provision and production suggested in Vincent Ostrom and Elinor Ostrom, "Public Goods and Public Choices," in E. S. Savas, ed., Alternatives for Delivering Public Services: Toward Improved Performance (Boulder: Westview Press, 1978), pp. 7-49.

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