

DECENTRALIZED HUMAN WELL-BEING

In this article, Mildred explains how a sense of personal security—and a daily contact with ideals—can come through the decentralist path.

Dr. Ralph Borsodi, American economist-philosopher, dug to the roots of all aspects of living in his 92 years, voicing and acting upon a more life-enhancing point of view. As business man, homesteader, adult educator and author of fifteen books and ten research studies, he challenged, countered, and offered alternatives to America's chief trait: Centralization.

Centralization is the operating of activities, of any kind, in which control is held by fewer and fewer hands. Along with it is the development of larger and larger groups, in which more and more people are involved. Centralization—its philosophy and method—dominates six areas of modern life.

1. Production: Production is centralized in huge factories, mines and farms, on the mistaken assumption that large-scale production of all goods is cheaper, instead of producing goods in homes, small shops, and plants.

2. Ownership: Instead of being owned by myriads of businessmen, operators and farmers, production plants are owned by fewer and fewer persons and corporations (or by thousands of stockholders whose ownership is fiction instead of fact.)

3. Control: Instead of partnerships or cooperatives controlling production and distribution, corporations are controlled by a small group of managers, or by large banks holding the corporations' collateral.

4. Education: When everyone's material and survival needs—food, clothing, shelter, furnishings, equipment—are produced in mass factories, the population must be persuaded to want and to buy the things which mass factories produce. Education is the tool of owners of industry. Teachers, newspapers and television become servants of its visions of history, past and present. They are aided by those efficient "educators"—advertising and salesmen. Education is standardized and centralized to teach children and adults to value the things that factories supply.

5. Population: Without property (from cottage industries or small businesses), land (from farms), or savings, the disenfranchised masses are dependent on "jobs". They congregate near factories. Cities grow; millions crowd into skyscrapers, condominiums, and ghetto tenements. To feed them, farmers turn to giant farms, specializing in one-crop agriculture to ship them wheat, corn, beef or cotton. From a way of life, agriculture has become a commercial business.

6. Government: Conflict develops between the two major groups—the owner-controllers and the non-owning tenants and wage-slaves. In modern America, more and more government (i.e. legalized coercion) is called on first to intervene, then regulate, and finally own the producing-distributing agencies. This evolution, from the years when corporations milk an enterprise dry to the eventual assumption of government control, benefits the owner-controlling group. It provides them with an era of profit, then government rescue. To conduct its new businesses or to wage war, Governments sell the owners bonds or borrow money, upon which they pay the owners unearned interest.

Decentralization, of which Dr. Borsodi was a life-long practitioner and voice, is the opposite of all this. It is the organizing of activities in smaller units, both efficient and voluntary, in which all persons involved develop initiative and responsibility. Dr. Borsodi believe that human beings are flexible organisms which are influenced by their environment. Human beings can influence and shape their environment to facilitate their growth as persons. Each person is creative and innovative. His personal decision-making should be inviolable. It is liberty and liberty is a primary human need.

Human beings respond to and are ennobled by choosing liberty before security, and when warranted, before life itself.

Borsodi strongly believed in the liberty of Patrick Henry, John Locke and Thomas Paine—the freedom from national and international tyrants. As a young man, in business as a counsellor to large New York city firms, he soon discovered his need to be free of owners, bankers, advertisers and educators. He preferred to live simply, close to nature, producing his own survival needs.

In 1921 he and his family moved twenty-five miles out of New York; built their own home of native rock; planted gardens and orchards; produced, harvested and preserved their own food. (Earlier, in 1918; they had discarded white flour, white sugar, liquor and devitalized foods). They wove their own clothes and gathered their own fuel; they installed modern electric tools in kitchen and workshop. This independent, creative lifestyle they found to be consistent with their certainty of human nature. The Borsodis' called their place Dogwood Homestead, and drew inspiration from Gandhi, Thoreau and Borsodi's favorite mentor, Confucius.

Borsodi acted on other universals (certainties) in human experience. Ralph Borsodi called them norms of living. He decided that as parents, they could be as good, or better

There is no one who has contributed more significantly to solution of the major problems of the twentieth century than Ralph Borsodi, and no one as well able to write his definitive biography as Mildred Loomis. She shared his first enthusiasm for the ideas he presented; living them with her farmer husband during his lifetime; then giving herself to full-time interpretation of Borsodi's principles in practical ways. — John C. Weaver.

teachers of their own children as those in centralized schools. With Montessori methods they taught them two hours a day, and the rest of the time the boys participated in the homestead's activities, read many books, played in their woods, swimming pool and recreation room.

After nearly a decade of their new life-style, Borsodi wrote **This Ugly Civilization** (1928), in which he presented modern homesteading as a challenge to modern, monopolized centralization. For the Borsodis, homesteading passed five basic tests of human well-being.

First, the daily choosing and planning activities contributed to their liberty and personal growth.

Second, it resulted in better health.

Third, it offered opportunity for self-support normal to mature persons.

Fourth, it offered creative, responsive work, instead of monotonous, fragmented activity.

Its sum total was a pattern of observable integrity and honesty, an antidote to pretense, alienation and crime. In **This Ugly Civilization**, America has its first full-scale critique of modern industry.

Twenty years later, in 1948, Ralph Borsodi extended his analysis of Centralized America in **Education and Living**. He documented the fact that with factory production, and its allies large-scale farming, super-markets, banks, cities, school and government, decision-making for masses of people was decreasing in proportion to the size of the group.

He recounted the increase of disease and degeneration. While sanitation and medication had reduced infectious diseases, degenerative diseases had increased alarmingly. Incidence of heart failure, muscular dystrophy, diabetes and cancer had risen. One in four people would develop cancer, and one in three would die of it. Milled, commercial, packaged, devitalized and fragmented foods were said to be primary causes of physical-mental degeneration.

Insecurity, loneliness, drunkenness, crime, divorce, boredom—all accompaniments of centralized, urban living—were raising insanity rates. Borsodi quoted Benjamin Malzburg: "In 1950, one out of six persons will spend part of his life in a mental institution. Insanity is twice as high in cities as in rural sections; highest in central cities, where population is densest."

Dependence was on the increase. In 1929, before the Great Depression, 51 millions out of a total of 123 millions, were parasitic, non-productive or dependent on charity or government. With no savings, land or property, millions had no alternative to being employed by others. In a centralized, factory-producing culture—of mail order houses, department store chains and long hauls, most people were sales clerks, office and factory workers, drivers of trucks, and tenants, dependent for their livelihood on others.

Delinquency, exploitation and grants of privilege to landholders and charters to corporations, wastefulness and sexual violence were on the increase. In **Criminals We Deserve**, Henry Rhodds said, "Modern, monopolized industrial society has produced the modern slum.... In the scramble for wealth, the slum remains. Acts of criminals are often a revolt against intolerable conditions." In Chicago crime was highest near the Loop, 25.1%, and decreased in concentric circles, to 3.8% on the edge of the city. Elto Mayo in **Problems of an Industrial Society** said "As people become more industrial and devote themselves to material standards of living, they depend less on home and family, organizing their lives more and more around social and political institutions. Then delinquency naturally increases."

Modern work and art decay. Work is satisfying when a person uses all the aspects of their person. A person makes a chair; he or she uses his or her mind to design it; his or her will in deciding it is for his or her companion's comfort. S-he selects tools and materials; s-he executes it with hands and muscles. Completed, it is his or her chair; s-he is responsible for it, and to be responsible is the essence of being human. No one handed her a pattern saying, "Make it like this." No one gave her pine when s-he preferred oak. No one gave him a rusty saw or a dull chisel. This chair is an expression of his or her full self. Having used her body, mind and will, she glows with self-satisfaction.

Factory work distorts this inherent trait of self-expression in work. Workers are specialists, playing one part—designing, cutting, assembling, managing, administering, supervising, selling, teaching, counselling. Too often workers are but tenders of machines, punchers of buttons. Their 'betters' may be absentee owners, receiving from and living on the earnings of the 'workers'. Rather

Mildred Loomis has for long had a broad outlook which embraces many aspects of living. She has persistently waged a campaign for a decent, fulfilling, humane way of life, both individual and social, and decentralism is viewed in this context. Ralph Borsodi could not have wished for a better disciple. — Robert Clancy, Henry George Institute.

than making "things", all become concerned only with "making money".

Fragmented and unfulfilled by their work, moderns soothe or stimulate jaded nervous systems in leisure "enjoyment"—watching sports, drama, and sometimes in hobby crafts and novelty art, or even watching J. K. Galbraith on T.V.'s "Our Age of Uncertainty."

Ralph Borsodi dug to the roots of the Centralization of Ownership. He was inspired by Ricardo, Karl Marx and Henry George to help free the land from speculators and profiteers; by Silvio Gesell, Irving Fisher and Louis Brandeis to change the monopoly of money and banking to people's cooperatives. Girded by his commitment to voluntary action, he would change these deeprooted Centralizations, not by government based on coercion, but by education and persuasion.

For that he built in 1936 near his home in Suffern, N.Y. a School of Living, a center for research, demonstration and adult learning in human ownership patterns, in community development, as well as the principles and practices of modern homesteading. The School of Living was an attractive Dutch Colonial building with four acres of gardens, outbuildings and meadow, rounded out by 16 two-acre, family homesteads. All together, this was Bayard Land (intentional) Community. The building, the land-tenure, the financing, (as well as the seminars and discussions) was the School of Living.

A challenging, ethical tenure of land was at the core. Land is a natural resource, a gift of Nature, not a product of human labor. Land is essential to everyone's space to live, and source of everyone's food and clothing. Land is a common heritage and need. Land, like human beings, should be used as a trust—never to be bought and sold. Thus it was treated in the School of Living community. The School procured the land (by purchase, it is true). But then it declared the land **free of purchase price*** to user members of the community. Each family obtained use-rights to its two acres by contracting to pay an annual rental to their Community, from which fund the Community would pay the county land-tax. No one could profit from land sales.

The School of Living developed other communities in the Suffern, N.Y. area on this new land-tenure pattern. Other persons duplicated it near Philadelphia, Seattle, and elsewhere. With it went the persistent teaching that taxation on buildings, improvements and labor products should be eliminated.

In 1966, Ralph Borsodi took a further step in "freeing" the land. Robert Swann was in Georgia trying to prevent violence in racial tension. He saw poverty and helplessness of black people; they needed land and economic independence. With Ralph Borsodi's help, he founded the Community Land Trust, to teach and demonstrate the **community** holding of land in trust for its users. The Community Land-Trust is a legal, non-profit cooperative

*Here was action similar to, and as significant to human rights as Lincoln's proclamation a century earlier that human beings should never be bought and sold.

with impartial trustees from the general community, who secure land (by gift or purchase) to be made available to users for an annual rent to the Trust, without purchase price. Both the contracting users and the Trust agree that the land shall never be sold again, but always be transferred to, and remain in, the hands of trust-users.

Ralph Borsodi likewise experimented with and developed an alternative to the centralized banking and money system. "The essential nature of banking is a profession, not a business conducted for profit. Like every profession banking should render a service to persons whose motivation is service. Their remuneration should be a fee, not a business profit. The banker, like the lawyer and doctor is a recipient of a trust. People trust their health and lives to a doctor; entrust their rights and material interests to lawyers; money and savings to bankers. A banker is a trustee, who is morally obligated not to exploit the funds entrusted to him, just as a doctor does not exploit the sickness of his patients, or a lawyer the difficulties of his clients."

Ralph Borsodi in 1972 formed the International Independence Institute as a mutual association to receive deposits, invest earnings and issue currency as a cooperative. The money was based on and redeemed in a "basket" of staple commodities—wheat, corn, rye, cotton, oil, coal, iron etc. This commodity-currency, called Constants, kept pace with changes in the price of such commodities, and is thus non-inflationary. In October 1977, Ralph Borsodi completed a book **Let's Stop Inflation** a few days prior to his death at his home in Exeter, N.H. He was 92 years old.

Ralph Borsodi, his students and co-workers, would move mountains. They would change a Centralized culture to a De-centralized one, in which creativity, security and liberty are experienced by everyone. Other countries have attempted, and are attempting similar goals. Some like Soviet Russia have used violence; others like Cuba and China have used what is called democratic Socialism. Ralph Borsodi and the de-centralists who learned from him, prefer a School of Living in every community in which adults would test and deal with every activity by "what is small and human."

All of the School of Living program—its six types of de-centralization—constitutes a new kind of revolution. Its program is not Capitalism, though it retains the liberty of the American dream. It is not Communism, though it offers security central in the dream of Karl Marx. It would eliminate the monopoly and exploitation of Capitalism, retaining a true free market; it would eliminate the statism and political control of Soviet Communism. At the School of Living in 1940 a group of students aptly named the School of Living's de-centralism the **Green Revolution**.

For those interested in more information on the life and work of Ralph Borsodi, Vol. 34 No. 10, Dec. 1977 of Green Revolution is a special memorial issue to the great man. Available for \$1 postpaid.