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Government Be Gone!

A Review of

No More Mushrooms: Thoughts about Life without Government

by Chellis Glendinning

No More Mushrooms: Thoughts about Life without Government
Kirkpatrick Sale
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You have tried legitimate royalty, manufactured royalty, parliamentary royalty, republics unitary and centralized, and the only thing from which you suffer, the despotism, the dictature of the State, you have scrupulously respected and carefully preserved.

--Arthur Arnould, *The Rebel,* 1896

Upon entering a shop filled with household goods, I was greeted by the elderly proprietor. She took one look at me, and without any visual evidence to guide her thinking regarding my political persuasions, she launched into a lengthy and well-informed rant about how the bygone fourteen-year administration had failed the citizenry of Bolivia and how the current government of the same party was nothing more than a mirror of its predecessor. As she raged on, I felt echoes of my own loss of trust in Lyndon Johnson´s government when, in 1967, nightstick-wielding policemen turned viciously violent at L.A.´s Century Plaza march against the Vietnam War.

These days I have noticed a similar cynicism about government festering in every country of the world; no matter what political party or ideology, it seems to be as

rampant as the Covid-19 virus. But it also remains pre-political. In other words, naysayers usually attach the problem to a particular administration or leader, a stance that gives them the idea that resolution is merely to elect a different collection of officials.

Now into this snowballing of suspicion and scorn enters… Kirkpatrick Sale.

At the ripe old age of 83, the historian has penned yet another book--this one a second in his series of Thomas-Paine-style pamphlet volumes after *The Collapse of 2020*; the fifteenth in a library of book-length writings that meld his chosen field with those of sociology, political theory, economics, and anthropology.

As any reader familiar with his work might expect, *No More Mushrooms* is a radical analysis of how and why the modern nation-state never succeeds at achieving its stated goals of citizen protection, security, and well-being. Or for any other goal of worth, for that matter. Based on his propensity to make systemic excavations of such topics as the corporate economy, technological progress, and the nation-state, it is no surprise that he sees the very entity of government--based as it is on the amassing of power required to manage gigantic, complex societies--is defunct.

Government simply does not work; it never worked. In Sale´s words, "…it is almost self-evident that governments are failing. But I am saying more than that: I am saying governments *always* fail."

Sale´s argument covers not just the unrelenting failures that you and I have read about in history class or witnessed in our lives. His thinking manages to wend its way back to one of the essential themes of his life´s work: *the issue of size*. As the Austrian philosopher Leopold Kohr wrote, "Wherever something is wrong, something is too big." Kirkpatrick Sale is a modern-day exemplar of Kohr, as well as of Thomas Jefferson and Lewis Mumford; he has spent his years exploring the wisdom of face-to-face, human-scale community—and of offshoot matters of which the pursuit of non-State-tendered government is one.

First, Sales takes us through a generalized view of why governments are, at heart, dysfunctional entities. They are based on the Hobbesian precept that they foster the existence of the whole, meaning the State, which in many countries hosts millions and millions of persons. In such constructed bodies the interests of individual, family,

and community are thrust aside, all the while the cohesion of government is valued without limit to its actions--and, needless to say, with the intention of preserving its authority. Hence its right to fashion laws that must be obeyed, to submit the populace to its conception of order, to levy taxes, to maintain armies, to declare war, to apply ever more complex hierarchies for achieving these goals--and basically to control all activities while delegitimizing resistance or rebellion.

In Sale´s view the very motive of government, even when varnished with such mythical niceties as "democracy" and "freedom," becomes the enforcement and expansion of schemes to maintain its privilege. As Sale puts it: "Government is a system of human organization that lessens individual liberty, nullifies family, and emaciates community, invariably working to enlarge its power at the expense of other organizations. It does not matter what kinds of people are running it, what various combinations of checks and balances may be tried, whatever benefits it may be attempting to achieve, it cannot escape its inherent nature."

Scholars have determined that some 400 dynasties over 10,000 years have been attempted. Sale cites an impressive, albeit not complete, list of kingdoms, dynasties, regimes, and administrations that--a la Arnold Toynbee--lived but for 100 or 200 (or less) years. Assyrian, Egyptian, Mongrel, Austrian, Qing, Han, etc. His astute, even comical, conclusion: "They seem to be, looked at in the broad perspective of history, temporary arrangements, insubstantial assortments of power, ever-shifting, growing and shrinking and growing, with nothing very consequential in their wakes but some wind-blown temples and decaying palaces."

If the anti-corporate activist Richard Grossman were still among us, he would surely—and passionately--add a cogent detail: the very words penned into the U.S. Constitution protected the rights of a hierarchical class structure and ensured the continuation of inequalities to maintain them. Indeed, Sale goes on to offer the reader a litany of examples of how in its wake government has created fiascos one after another; his case in point is the U.S.A. He delves into a multitude of examples of how the U.S. government has failed at providing doable, effective policies—no matter from what ideological wing it hails, and even when applying the best of intentions.

Said section reads like a season´s Saturday-morning showings of Three Stooges films. Included are the flops produced by well-meaning policies such as the Community

Health Act of 1963 that ended up filling the streets with homeless people and the 1977 founding of the Department of Energy that was initiated to address nuclear dangers when said power plants were closing, but found its forte in dishwashers built to require a greater use of water than the old models. Indeed, Larry, Curly, and Moe found their way to Washington for such "accomplishments." But a clear line of thinking associating concrete policy with systemic failure becomes fuzzy when Sale launches into the abolition of slavery and the effort at reconstruction. His argument begins to resemble a preference for policies put into place by the governments of Great Britain, Denmark, and France that gave aid to both former slave-owners and slaves--or for Lincoln´s own parallel yet unused proposals made in 1862.

But the case for government´s failure is not over. Sale goes on to cite a plethora of anthropological samplings from world cultures that thrived for centuries—even millennia--without centralization, but rather with "no political shape, no permanent bodies, no structured rules." Here he lights up with clarity. Before overrun by imperialist efforts seeking to assimilate their populations or murder them, many human communities lacked complex, top-down systems for organizing themselves. Instead they used not military-style policing, but rather morally-based traditions to guide behavior. In cases of internal disagreements, wisdom was offered by sacred personages such as "spearmasters" whose perspectives honored all sides but was not enforced; while small-scale enactments of conflict with neighboring groups were made using ceremonial "battles," a practice of arrows flung ineffectively by their weakest members; etc. You know: our heritage as human beings, that which was created and lived for over a million years before the lunge toward imperial grandiosity; a legacy, Sale proposes, that may even lay in genetic memory and fuel our relentless protests against injustice, inequality, and militarism.

Perhaps the most illuminating of these is the case of the Dinka. They lived in the savanna country surrounding the swamps of the Nile basin in what is now South Sudan. Its population—at a peak of perhaps 4 million—was divided into small autonomous communities, demonstrating that while equalitarian, sustainable ways may have originated in small-scale groupings, they may not be dependent upon them—as long as those groupings are preserved by fluid ways to break into reduced bands. "Absolutely

fundamental to the stateless tribe, in other words," writes Sale, "is, in both demographic and economic terms, the human scale."

For the Dinka survival sprung from a combination of animal-raising and horticulture. Survival was local, self-reliant, and wholly liberated from the pressures that come into play with relentless accumulation of possessions and participation in an ever-expanding market economy.

They were governed by practices observed because they were perceived as the most harmonious for the individual, the family, the village, and the tribe. A need for said customs to be legislated and policed simply did not exist: they had everyday meaning. As Sale explains, "Such disputes as might arise could be handled through local machinery brought into temporary operation for that single occasion and then disbanded, and warfare was such a rarity that to have kept a standing army would have been egregiously wasteful. Thus, in Dinka eyes, a state would be superfluous: with a system as neat as theirs, what earthly use could there be for lawmakers and kings and sheriffs and soldiers?"

All this was destroyed when war was declared against Sudan in the 1980s. Two civil wars followed. At least 300,000 people were killed, many in brutal massacres; millions were forced to relocate, and a famine rampaged through the region causing, it is believed, a million deaths. What was left of the Dinka tribe was herded into capitalist, urban, State-run society. Thankfully, Sale then presents the reader with contemporary examples of still-functioning indigenous cultures as well as recent efforts to apply values of human scale and decentralization.

In all, *No More Mushrooms* becomes yet another of Kirkpatrick Sale´s ways of perceiving possibility. As with Paine´s writings some 250 years ago, the 100-page booklet is coherent, passionate, persuasive--and has the potential of introducing its readers to wholly unthought-of horizons for the direction of radical thought and action. As John Cage once wrote, "I can't understand why people are frightened of new ideas. I'm frightened of the old ones."