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IN DEFENCE OF SUBSIDIARITY

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In issue No. 5 (Spring 1993), there were two rather flippant remarks about the concept of subsidiarity. The Philosophy Glossary defined subsidiarity as ‘nobody agrees on what this word means’ (p.32), and John Crosswaite described its meaning as a ‘grey area’, and ‘hand[ed] the question over to the real philosophers’ (p.25).

I don’t know if I count as a ‘real’ philosopher, since I have some unsound views on the theory of meaning. In particular, I believe that the meaning of a word depends as much on its etymology as on its use. We can often gain important philosophical insights through understanding how words have acquired their present meaning.

The abstract noun *subsidiarity* comes from the adjective *subsidiary*, which in turn comes from the concrete noun *subsidy*. The English word *subsidy* is a direct borrowing of the Latin *subsidium*, meaning ‘support’ or ‘assistance’ (though it has subsequently been confined to a financial sense); and the adjective *subsidiary* originally meant ‘providing assistance’ or ‘supportive’; but it gradually changed its meaning, *via* ‘auxiliary’ or ‘tributary’, to ‘subordinate’.

The change in meaning of the word *subsidiary* can cause difficulties for speakers of modern English, since one might expect *subsidiarity* to mean ‘the quality of being subordinate’. This is perhaps why *The Times* of 18.9.82 described ‘the principle of subsidiarity’ as ‘a meaningless or even misleading phrase in English’, since it would seem nonsense to describe a body high in the hierarchy as ‘subsidiary’ to a subordinate body. But the second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary (yes, you will find the word if you look it up) records no use of the word to mean ‘the quality of being subordinate’. Its only meaning is ‘the quality of being subsidiary’, in the original sense of ‘supportive’; and this is broadly the sense in which it is used by Eurocrats. But where did they get it from?

The *Economist* of 9.12.89 was right to trace it to Pope Pius XI. In 1931, Pius published an encyclical on the social order, called ‘On the Fortieth Year’ (since it was issued on the 40th anniversary of Leo XIII’s encyclical ‘Of New Things’). The context is interesting: a treatise on political philosophy written by the head of the Vatican State, which had been set up only two years before in the capital of Fascist Italy.

Pius writes as follows (I paraphrase slightly, since his convoluted Latin doesn’t go easily into English):

§79. It is a fact of historical evolution that many things which could previously be achieved by small social units can now be achieved only by larger ones. However, there remains a fundamental and immutable principle of social philosophy which cannot be affected by historical change. This is that it is quite wrong for things which can be done by individuals through their own efforts to be taken away from them and devolved to the community. It is equally intolerable and unjust for

responsibility for what can be achieved by smaller and subordinate communities to be taken over by larger and higher-level social units. Every agency in society ought to use its special powers to give support [‘subsidy’] to the members of the social body, and never to destroy or absorb them.

§80. So the highest authority in the state should not be distracted by matters of lesser importance, but should leave them to groupings lower down the hierarchy. It will carry out its business more freely, more decisively and more effectively, by limiting itself to what it alone can achieve — providing a sense of direction, exercising vigilance, giving encouragement, and imposing constraints, as circumstances require. Those at the top should bear in mind that the happiness and prosperity of the state depends on the quality of relations between social institutions at different levels, which itself depends on observing the above principle of the ‘subsidiary’ [supportive] role [of the higher-level institution].

In fact Pius himself doesn’t use the noun *subsidiaritas*, though he is sufficiently conscious that he is coining a new sense of the adjective *subsidiarius* to put it in quotes. The noun first appears (as *Subsidiarität*) in a German translation of the encyclical published the same year; similarly with the French *subsidiarité*. The first occurrence of *subsidiarity* in English is in 1936, in a translation by B.W. Dempsey of a German work on political economy, which discussed Pius’s principle.

The OED definition of the principle is:

that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level.

It seems very close to the Maastricht definition in Article 3.b., quoted by John Crosthwaite:

The Community shall act within the limit of the powers conferred upon it by this treaty and of the objectives assigned to it therein. In areas which do not fall within its exclusive competence, the Community shall take action, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States and can therefore, by reason of the scale or effects of the proposed action, be better achieved by the Community. Any action by the Community shall not go beyond what is necessary to achieve the objectives of this Treaty.

However, there is an important difference in emphasis between these two definitions, and Pius’s original conception. For Pius, the sole *raison d’être* of a higher-level or central institution is to support and serve the interests of lower-level institutions. He sees the state as an organic whole (the ‘social body’), in which the whole, as represented by the highest authority, is as concerned for the welfare of the parts, as the parts are expected to be concerned for the welfare of the whole. The principle of subsidiarity is positive and universal.

By contrast, the Maastricht definition is negative and limited in scope. It applies only to areas of potential communal action where sovereignty has not already been surrendered by member states, and it is concerned only with putting some limit on the amount of additional powers which can be usurped by the central authority, and not with how they should be exercised. Again, the approach is atomistic rather than holistic: there are discrete member-states, discrete central institutions, and discrete powers; and the argument is over which bodies should have complete possession of which powers.

Curiously, the Pope's thinking seems much more in line with current management theory, which tends to replace top-down power relationships with structures in which responsibility is devolved to the lowest possible level, and management and central agencies play a supportive role — defining the overall mission of the organisation in relation to the outside world, providing information and advice about threats and opportunities, encouraging good practice, and monitoring performance and taking appropriate action where necessary. In the Pope's own terminology, the only legitimate roles of higher or central agencies are the supportive roles of direction, vigilance, encouragement, and constraint (§80) — to which one should add his recognition in §79 that there are purely executive functions which it is only practicable to delegate to a central agency.

Apart from a deafening silence about the place of democratic debate in defining organisational objectives and good practice, this strikes me as a remarkably good contribution to political philosophy — not least because it broadens the scope of political philosophy to power relations in *any* organisation, and not merely the nation state. You don't have to be a Fascist, a Roman Catholic, or a devotee of Total Quality Management to appreciate that the term 'subsidiarity', as clearly explained by the Pope, enriches our political and managerial vocabulary. The drafters of the Maastricht Treaty may have confused matters by using the term in a more restricted sense than was originally intended; but they have at least fulfilled an important service by bringing it back into the limelight.

There was supposed to be a national and European debate on the meaning of subsidiarity. What has happened to it? At least *Philosophy Now* is beginning to set an example.