P.S. to the NEWS
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NEED FOR "PEOPLE-SIZED" INSTITUTIONS

"Excessive greatness of a town," "multitude of corporations," and too much "ghostly authority" or power of organized religion were listed by the 17th-century British political philosopher Thomas Hobb e infirmities of a commonwealth. He argued that these intermediary institutions between the individual and government eat away at the body politic like "worms in the entrails of a natural man," and that such "diseases" should be nipped in the bud by the sovereign.

Our successful American federal system of decentralized authority, and our healthy, heterogeneous commercial and religious climate, have belied Hobbes' warnings. With a history of much greater pluralism than Hobbes recommended, most Americans would probably consider life in the world of his Leviathan as dreary as his famous description of life during war -- "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

A provocative new book contends, however, that modern society is now evolving in the direction of the supremely powerful Leviathan state, and that public policy must be harnessed to reverse the trend. In "To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy," published by the American Enterprise Institute, sociologist Peter L. Berger and Worldview magazine editor Richard John Neuhaus attack the "megastructures" that are sweeping away smaller associations that formerly acted as a buffer between man and sovereign power.

The megastructures are identified as Big Government, Big Business, Big Labor, Big Communications, and Big Agriculture.

In the tradition of Edmund Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville, the authors point to the basic human craving for small associations which provide the individual with a sense of comnunity. Our national motto, E Pluribus Unum, perfectly expresses the concept of encouraging diversity within union. The purpose of the "unum" according to the authors, "is precisely to sustain the 'plures."

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Berger and Neuhaus stress the need to strengthen four particular mediating structures that have declined in recent years: the neighborhood, the family, the church or synagogue, and the voluntary association. Such institutions, they say, are "people-sized" and are "the principal expressions of the real values and the real needs of people in our society." Many people believe that the enduring greatness of Chicago, in this generation of urban deterioration, is due to its conglomeration of neighborhoods, each with its ethnic or religious identity and pride.

The authors urge the government to respect neighborhood standards of ethnic composition, community cohesion, and consensus on moral and social values: "The urban sophisticate's conformity to the values of individual self-fulfillment and tolerance can be as intolerant of the beliefs and behavior nurtured in the community centered in the St. Stanislaus American Legion branch of Hamtramck ... as the people of Hamtramck are intol.fr.ant of what is called liberation in the Upper West Side."

When it comes to the issue of pornography, the Berger-Neuhaus thesis echoes the U.S. Supreme Court. In upholding the validity of community moral standards over a national common denominator, Chief Justice Warren Burger wrote for the Court in 1973: "It is neither realistic nor constitutionally sound to read the First Amendment as requiring that the people of Maine or Mississippi accept public depiction of conduct found tolerable in Las Vegas or New York City."

The Berger-Neuhaus statements on the value of religious institutions are especially welcome in an age when public places and acts have been stripped of almost all vestiges of our religious heritage: "Nobody has a legal right not to encounter religious symbols in public places and thus to impose his aversion to such symbols on the community that cherishes them."

In some areas, Berger and Neuhaus lapse into a facile majoritarianism. But they make.many cogent arguments for governmental encouragement of community-level organizations. Many issues of public policy involve what game theoreticians call a "zero-sum game": I win implies you lose. Happily, the authors point out, a public commitment to pluralism -- to fostering those mediating structures Hobbes sought to repress would benefit everyone.

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