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THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY AND THE AGRARIAN IDEAL¹

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[I]t is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do.

- Pius XI, 1931

Throw out the radio and take down the fiddle from the wall.

- Andrew Nelson Lytle, 1930

I. INTRODUCTION



HERE IS A NORMATIVE PRINCIPLE OF SOCIAL ASSOCIATIONS WHICH HAS BEEN articulated in various intellectual and religious traditions, and is implicit in much classical and medieval political thought. According to this principle, smaller, more local, or “lower” human associations have proper social functions which should not be assumed by larger or “higher” associations. For ease of discussion, let us refer to this principle as it has been denominated by modern Catholic social thinkers: “the principle of subsidiarity.”

In discussions about religion, politics, and community, the principle of subsidiarity has been invoked most commonly as a basis for limited government.² However, the principle is even more relevant to such discussions especially with respect to the idea of “community” than merely in terms of its immediate implications for government policies. Insofar as it recommends a pattern of organizing social life in general, and not just that part of social life which touches the state, the principle has implications for the choices of families, neighborhoods, and commercial enterprises; indeed for all social agents, individual and corporate.

One such implication on which I wish to focus in this article is the responsibility of primary, local associations, especially families, to prevent their proper functions from being taken over by other social spheres, particularly by the sphere of the modern technologically-enabled market economy. This implication, I argue, can properly be described as “agrarian,” insofar as the agrarian tradition has highlighted the value of relative self-sufficiency for such primary and local associations as family and community, and insofar as the agrarian tradition has opposed social forces such as capital markets and technological “progress” which can threaten a more “natural” social order.

II. THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY AND LIMITED GOVERNMENT

It is easy to see why the principle of subsidiarity has so far been considered mainly with respect to its

immediate implications for the scope of government. To the extent that the principle has entered public discussions, it finds a natural home in considerations of political theory, where there are established debates about the appropriate degree of government intervention in social and economic matters.

Indeed, historically, the explicit articulation of the principle of subsidiarity has been prompted by a desire to respond to the increasing power of the state and the kinds of regimes that such power makes possible. In Roman Catholic circles, the history of the formulation and articulation of the principle of subsidiarity is usually traced to the first so-called “social encyclical,” *Rerum Novarum*, written by Leo XIII in 1891.³ This encyclical addresses those “new things” which in the modern world were affecting “the condition of the working classes,” and it consists largely of a condemnation and refutation of socialism. Though it does not yet mention by name a “principle of subsidiarity,” it does seem to assume some such principle, especially in passages like the following:

It is not right, as We have said, for either the citizen or the family to be absorbed by the State; it is proper that the individual and the family should be permitted to retain their freedom of action, so far as this is possible without jeopardizing the common good and without injuring anyone. (*Rerum Novarum*, #52)

This passage implies that certain activities are proper to lower associations and should not, at least under normal circumstances (where “the common good” is not “jeopardized”), be taken up by higher ones. But here the specific higher association being considered is the state, and Leo is warning that the state ought not to usurp functions which do not properly belong to it. Thus, the emphasis of *Rerum Novarum* is that states must avoid “unwarranted interference” (#48), and again that societies should “avoid unwarranted government intervention” (#64).

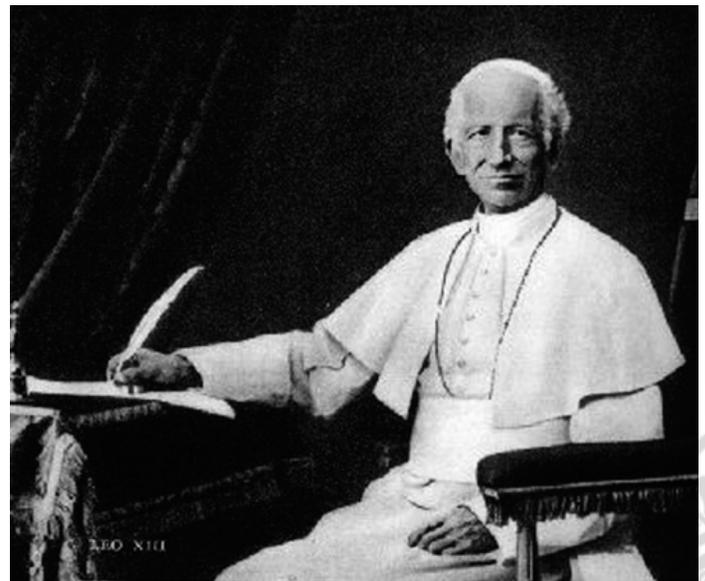
The principle of subsidiarity was more explicitly formulated in a social encyclical written on the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. Pius XI wrote *Quadragesimo Anno*, “on reconstruction of the social order,” not against socialism but against liberal individualism and the more inhumane manifestations of capitalism; nonetheless, as in *Rerum Novarum*, one of the major concerns is the danger of the centralization of power. It is with respect to this concern that the principle of subsidiarity

begins to be formulated. The relevant passage is worth quoting at length:

As history abundantly proves, it is true that on account of changed conditions many things which were done by small associations in former times cannot be done now save by large associations. Still, that most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them. (*Quadragesimo Anno*, #79)

Though formulated more generally here, the focus of this encyclical is again the restraint of the state. Indeed, like *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno* begins with a discussion of the state. The influential German theologian Oswald von Nell-Breuning—who is said to have contributed to the composition of the encyclical—explained the reasoning of Pius XI: “The reason for beginning his discussion with the state is, characteristically enough, not the intention of having the state assume new responsibilities, but, on the contrary, to demand that it refrain from activities into which it has intruded or, in part, been forced”⁴

The principle of subsidiarity was revisited in



Pope Leo XIII

another anniversary social encyclical, John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* of 1991. There, even more than in *Quadragesimo Anno*, the emphasis of the principle is its demand for the restraint of higher associations. The following passage appears in a discussion of the proper relationship of the State to the economic order:

The principle of subsidiarity must be respected: A community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good. (*Centesimus Annus*, #48)

It is this formulation of the principle which could be considered its official Roman Catholic formulation, as it is quoted in full in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994). There again the implications of the principle for government policy are emphasized, as is clear from the context that the *Catechism* gives to the quotation:

Socialization also presents certain dangers. Excessive intervention by the state can threaten personal freedom and initiative. The teaching of the Church has elaborated the principle of subsidiarity, according to which “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order...” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1883)

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The *Catechism* stresses the implication of limited government again, saying: “The principle of subsidiarity is opposed to all forms of collectivism. It sets limits for state intervention” (#1885).

Consistently, then, in the Roman Catholic Church, the principle of subsidiarity has been offered as setting limits on the scope of government. It is perfectly understandable that this is precisely how the principle has been received. In the 1986 pastoral letter “Economic Justice for All,” the U.S. Catholic bishops wrote:

The primary norm for determining the scope and limits of governmental intervention is the “principle of subsidiarity” This principle states that, in order to protect basic justice, government should undertake only those initiatives which exceed the capacities of individuals or private groups acting independently. Government should not replace or destroy smaller communities and individual initiative. (“Economic Justice for All,” #124)



It should be no surprise, then, that to the extent that the principle of subsidiarity has been invoked in discussions of political theory and political policy, it is the implication of government restraint that has been most widely discussed.⁵ As an article by Christopher Wolfe makes clear, the primary relevance of the principle of subsidiarity appears to be as a “ground of limited government”; as he argues, “subsidiarity ... is a more satisfactory foundation for ideas of limited government than what the American tradition of political thought (drawn largely from Locke) offers.”⁶

Because of this (classical) “liberal” or “libertarian” implication, the principle of subsidiarity has found a natural home in “neoconservative” Catholic thought. George Weigel has emphasized the libertarian implication of the principle, explaining that it “tried to set clear boundaries to state power.”⁷ David Bosnich has argued that “the principle is the bulwark of limited government and personal freedom.” According to Bosnich, its consistent application “would entail respect for the mechanisms of the free market and opposition to state intervention.” The principle, he says, “conflicts with the passion for centralization and bureaucracy characteristic of the Welfare State.”⁸ Adolpho Lindenberg, another Catholic interested in defending free markets, has written:

We believe that in order to better understand the limits of government action in the socioeconomic order, we must invoke the principle of subsidiarity. According to this principle, the state should take action and exercise a substitute function only when social sectors or business systems are too weak or are just getting under way, and are not equal to the task at hand. Such supplementary

interventions must be as brief as possible, so as to avoid removing permanently from society and business systems the functions which are properly theirs.⁹

In the same vein, Robert Sirico has written:

The clear meaning of the subsidiarity principle is to limit the powers and responsibilities assumed by the higher orders of society. In nearly every occasion in which the principle has been invoked in the last one hundred years of official Catholic social teaching, it is in the context of limiting the uses of power.¹⁰

Sirico continues, noting:

The principle has found its political expression in the American concept of federalism, and, in Europe, the concept has become a critical part of the debate on the relations between nations and the central authority of the European Community. In these political contexts, the principle has been invoked by the partisans of limited government over centralized management of people, states, and nations.¹¹

Stephen Krason, in a study which offers “an evaluation of contemporary American political ideologies in light of Catholic social teaching,” has the principle of subsidiarity playing a central role in that evaluation, but primarily insofar as it implies restraints on government intervention. “The basic principle limiting the state,” says Krason, “is subsidiarity.”¹²

These representative discussions of the application of the principle of subsidiarity by Catholic social thinkers all make reference to that principle as it was developed explicitly in the recent history of Catholic teaching. The principle of subsidiarity, however, has had some expression in other religious traditions. A parallel to the Catholic formulation of the principle of subsidiarity is the principle of “sphere sovereignty” articulated by the Dutch Reformed theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920).

Here again, we find that the emphasis of the principle is on limiting government. Kuyper discusses sphere sovereignty in his lecture on “Calvinism and Politics.” Articulating different social spheres, Kuyper explains that they each have a proper degree of sovereignty, with which the sphere of government must not interfere. “In

all these [social] spheres, the State-government cannot impose its laws, but it must reverence the innate law of life.”¹³

Kuyper’s notion of sphere sovereignty seems to be implicitly present in the political philosophy of another important Protestant political theorist, Johannes Althusius (1557-1638). Althusius structured his great work *Politica* (1603) in order to emphasize the primacy of local, more “natural” associations, beginning with the family.¹⁴ Though his ultimate goal is to describe the commonwealth as a whole, Althusius is very clear that the government of a commonwealth must respect the authority and jurisdiction of the smaller, more local and natural associations out of which it is constituted. It is no surprise, then, that Althusius’s “design for a federal commonwealth” has been presented as an important theory limiting the scope of government.¹⁵

III. THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF LOWER ASSOCIATIONS

We have seen that in its historical articulation and application, the primary implication of the principle of subsidiarity has been what we might call libertarian, or, in the classical sense, liberal: the restraint of the state. But the principle of subsidiarity has broader implications, because the principle concerns all human associations; in all cases, not just in cases involving the state, it presumes the priority of the “lower” or more local association, and the responsibility of the “higher” association not to hinder, but only to help, the lower associations in their functions.

Indeed, the principle can be summarized thus: it is the function of higher associations to help lower associations fulfill their functions. This is why it is called the principle of *subsidiarity*; *subsidium* is Latin for “help” or “assistance.”¹⁶ This central notion of assistance is perhaps most clear in the language of *Quadragesimo Anno*: “every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them” (#79).

It is important to notice, then, that the principle of subsidiarity regulates human associations because it assumes something about the *relations* of the *functions* of different “levels” of associations. The principle assumes that there are different levels of associations, and that each level of association has its proper functions. The

fact that the principle of subsidiarity implies a specific limitation on state intervention only follows from a more general and immediate implication: any higher association must avoid unwarranted interference with the functions of a lower association. It is a weakness of the “libertarian” appropriation of the principle of subsidiarity that it tends to ignore the fact that the principle can be applied to all relations of associations, not just to cases where the state is one of the associations.

But there is a second, related weakness of the libertarian appropriation of the principle of subsidiarity: it tends to place the main burden of responsibility on the higher association in this case, on the state not to interfere with lower associations. However, inseparable from the burden of responsibility on higher associations not to take over the functions proper to lower associations, is the burden of responsibility on lower associations to keep proper functions from being taken over by higher associations. In order to abide by the principle of subsidiarity, not only do higher associations have to avoid usurping the functions of lower ones, but lower associations must avoid abdicating their functions to higher ones.

Indeed, even in an article which argues primarily for curbing government intervention, Sirico notes this burden of responsibility on lower associations. Of the principle of subsidiarity, he says: “Its implications are profound.” After noting a first implication, that “it places limits on the rightful duties of the state,” Sirico continues by saying that the principle “imposes obligations on lower order institutions such as the community, church, family, and individual, and it obliges these lower orders to fulfill certain moral and practical functions essential to the functioning of a well-ordered and free society.”

Sirico insists that the main emphasis of the principle of subsidiarity is to limit the power of higher orders, but then he says: “It is also true, of course, that the lower orders are by no means relieved of their responsibilities.”¹⁸

The mutual responsibility of the relative higher

and lower associations is also clear in the summary of the principle of subsidiarity offered by Joseph Komonchak. Among the elements of the principle Komonchak elucidates are the following two:

The principle of subsidiarity requires positively that all communities not only permit but enable and encourage individuals to exercise their own self-responsibility, and that larger communities do the same for smaller ones.... It requires negatively that communities not deprive individuals and smaller communities of their right to exercise their self-responsibility. Intervention, in other words, is only appropriate as “helping people help themselves.”¹⁹

The burden of responsibility which belongs to the lower order is also implicit in the formulation of the principle of subsidiarity from *Quadragesimo Anno*: “[I]t is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do” (#79). This language equally prohibits higher associations from seizing the functions of the lower, and lower associations from ceding their functions to the higher.

Nell-Breuning makes it clear that the principle is concerned more generally with a natural social order than with the specific right of lower associations to be free from interference. He writes:

As far as the activity of the individual and the smaller community is adequately efficient, it must not be replaced by the activity of higher social units. If, notwithstanding, this is done, a reversal of social order ensues, an offense against nature which, as experience teaches us, will meet with heavy penalties.²⁰

Of course the maintenance of the natural social order is just as much the responsibility of lower as higher associations. The emphasis on a natural order is also implicit in the etymology of “subsidiarity.” As noted, the principle is denominated “subsidiarity” from *subsidium*, or “help”; if higher orders are limited to helping lower orders, it must be assumed that there are proper functions of the lower orders, functions which the higher orders


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may help the lower orders to perform.²¹ If higher associations have a responsibility to “help” lower associations, then presumably the lower associations have a prior responsibility to perform their functions as best they can higher associations cannot help lower associations which do not help themselves.

The emphasis on “help” or “assistance” is seen also in Kuyper’s formulation of the principle of subsidiarity, even though it is not reflected in his title for the principle, “sphere sovereignty.” According to Kuyper, though the state cannot “interfere” with other social spheres, it does have a responsibility to “cooperate” with the social spheres. Beyond what is required for its own maintenance, the state has the “right and duty,” according to Kuyper, to assist the other spheres in the performance of their proper functions. In Kuyper’s words, this involves specifically the right and duty, “whenever different spheres clash, to compel mutual regard for the boundary-lines of each,” and “to defend individuals and the weak ones, in those spheres, against the abuse of power of the rest.”²²

As Kuyper’s articulation of the principle of subsidiarity reflects the responsibility of the state to limit itself to assistance, so too does it reflect the responsibility of lower orders to help themselves. Kuyper states this responsibility directly:

A people therefore which abandons to State Supremacy the rights of the family, or a University which abandons to it the rights of science, is just as guilty before God as a nation which lays its hands upon the rights of the magistrates. And thus the struggle for liberty is not only declared permissible, but is made a duty for each individual in his own sphere.²³

The responsibility of lower associations to help themselves is made more clear once the principle of subsidiarity is understood within the context of the history of Western political philosophy which is supposed to be its home. For though it has been explicitly formulated only recently, the principle of subsidiarity is not supposed to be a new principle. As Sirico has put it, “Subsidiarity is not some new notion . . . ; rather it lies at the core of the Western concept of the free and virtuous order.”²⁴ Another writer, emphasizing the long pedigree of the principle of subsidiarity, has said that it is “neither a theological nor even really a philosophical principle,

but a piece of congealed historical wisdom.”²⁵ John Finnis is among those who have traced its theoretical origins to Plato and Aristotle.” Indeed, we have already seen how the principle of subsidiarity was implicit in Althusius’ approach to politics. The general structure of Althusius’ *Politica*, moving from the primary, most local and natural association—the family—up through different, progressively less local and less natural associations, parallels the structure of the beginning of Aristotle’s *Politics*.

Indeed, any history of the principle of subsidiarity must place it in the tradition of classical philosophy, with its explicitly teleological approach to government.²⁷ According to Thomas Kohler, “The principle of subsidiarity insists that the state and all other forms of community exist for the individual.”²⁸ As Nell-Breuning wrote, in commenting on *Quadragesimo Anno*, “Let us remember that Leo XIII never tired of repeating that all social life and, therefore, of course, all economy, emanates from the individual.”²⁸ Johannes Messner, writing on the principle of subsidiarity, argued that it cannot be separated from the view that “society must be organized around man, his ends, and the vital tasks of his self-fulfillment.”³⁰ As Benjamin Llamzon put it: “Subsidiarity, of course, stands four-square with the priority of the individual over the state.”³¹

The priority of the individual is a central insistence of classical political philosophy; Llamzon finds it in Aquinas, whom he calls “the foundational thinker for subsidiarity as it appeared in *Quadragesimo Anno*.”³² Althusius quotes Aquinas on the function of government: “To govern is to lead what is governed to its appropriate end.”³³ Dante summarizes this fundamental element of classical thought in his *Monarchia*: “Citizens do not exist for the sake of consuls, nor the people for the sake of the king, but on the contrary the consuls exist for the sake of the citizens and the king for the sake of the people.”³⁴

The priority of the individual must not be confused with a point which is sometimes taken to be its contradiction, namely the priority of the political community. When, for instance, Aristotle (*Politics* I, ii) says that the state is prior to the individual, this does not contradict, but in fact follows from, the fact that the state exists to serve the individual, namely by fulfilling the individual’s greatest social needs; the political community is prior in the sense that the individual is incomplete without it. In other words, that man is a political animal means that he

is intended by nature to be a part of a political whole; the political community is thus prior to the individual in the sense that the whole is prior to the parts, but the individual is prior in the sense that it is his nature, human nature, which determines the need for, and form of, the political community by which that nature is fulfilled, and no political community is good which is not good for individual men.

Indeed, it would be fair to say that the principle of subsidiarity is as much an anthropological principle as a social one.³⁵ Its foundation is a certain view of man, namely of man as an essentially political animal, whose primary political needs are best satisfied by the communities of association closest to him. Thus, the tradition of political philosophy in which the principle resides emphasizes the functions of individuals and the lower orders of association which serve them. Aristotle, for instance, in discussing political organization, first discusses the functions of marriage, and the household broadly speaking, as satisfying the individual's most basic and direct social and economic needs.

Yet despite giving priority to the individual, it should not be inferred that either the principle of subsidiarity or the classical tradition of political philosophy to which it is traced implies a strict individualism which cannot regard social associations as real, natural, and irreducible. The ability of a social association to serve its members in fact depends on that association's being a real social unit with its own proper functions. Not only the individual, but the family and every other relatively local social sphere has real and natural functions which must be respected. Indeed, higher levels of association serve not only individuals but lower levels of association, and for higher spheres to be expected to serve lower ones, those lower ones must respect the reality of their own proper functions and their responsibility to carry them out. It is for this reason that, just as strongly as the principle of subsidiarity forbids higher associations from assuming the functions of lower associations, it also forbids lower associations from surrendering their functions to higher associations.



IV. THE ECONOMIC SPHERE AND THE FAMILY

While historical circumstances make it perfectly understandable why the principle of subsidiarity has been considered primarily in terms of its implications for state intervention, and especially for state intervention in economic matters, it should now be clear that the principle has implications for all levels of social association, and that between any two levels of social association there are reciprocal burdens of responsibility: higher associations should not “interfere” with lower ones, and lower ones have a duty to perform their proper functions without relying on higher ones.

The responsibility of lower associations not to surrender their proper functions to higher associations has been partially obscured by the fact that in the context of established debates it is reasonable and proper to emphasize the libertarian implication of the principle of subsidiarity, namely that governments not interfere in lower associations. This libertarian implication fits rather conveniently with classical liberalism's defense of free markets and praise for the functions of the market economy. The usefulness of the principle of subsidiarity for this agenda is clear, and, of course, a central contention of this agenda must be given serious consideration: advances in technology and the growth of industrial commerce have brought great advantages to individuals and families.³⁶ Nonetheless, material prosperity is not the only social effect of economic and technological advance. It would be irresponsible to ignore the extent to which the lower levels of social order have changed in order to accommodate the scale and institutional forms in which the “advanced” economies of “developed” industrial (or post-industrial) societies manifest themselves.

One of the intended effects of economic and technological advance is the possibility that social functions can be performed with greater ease or efficiency. But such apparent progress often entails that the performance of a particular social function become dependent on forms of technology, or on economic and social institutions, from which they were formerly independent. As a result of technological innovation and economic development, such lower associations as families, neighborhoods and towns can become tempted (and sometimes even required) to rely on higher associations—either particular business organizations, specific industries, or the sphere of commerce generally for what was once provided by, and considered the responsibility and function of, lower and more local associations.

Again, it needs to be reiterated that the market economy and technological progress have brought undeniable material benefits; and of course, the economic sphere can be understood as one of the beneficial “mediating institutions” between the individual and state, acting as a check on the trend toward centralization and consolidation of political power.³⁷ Nonetheless, a social sphere which is capable of “mediating” between higher and lower associations must take care to maintain its proper, subsidiary relation to lower associations. Whatever can act as a “mediating institution” is itself capable of usurping the proper function of lower associations. Specifically, the technologically-enabled market economy is a social “sphere” which historically has been capable of taking over social functions previously reserved for lower associations.

These are facts which have been ignored or downplayed by those who exploit the libertarian implication of the principle of subsidiarity in the context of the defense of free-market capitalism; there, the principle of subsidiarity is invoked to limit state intervention, and any criticism of the market is assumed to be at least implicitly a call for state intervention. But it is certainly not necessarily socialist or statist to notice that a high percentage of the citizens of advanced Western countries today are dependent on large business corporations; after all, much of this dependence is encouraged by government, in the form of subsidies, contracts, tax structure, and other regulations. Even those who use the principle of subsidiarity primarily in defense of a free market economy sometimes admit that “moral, social, and psychological abasement accompanied the technological and economic progress [of industrialization].”³⁸ Such an acknowledgment is an established part of Christian social criticism, including much that has been inspired by the “social encyclicals” discussed previously. Nonetheless, among those who have written about the principle of subsidiarity, Kohler is rare in noticing that the principle is violated by “the strong tendency of modern capitalism to overwhelm and eventually to dissolve the discrete, the local, the particular ... the places where the habits of self-rule are practiced and learned.”³⁹

The most obvious association, or social sphere, which has suffered from this tendency is the family. Yet few writers have discussed the relevance of the principle of subsidiarity to the family or household. Those few writers who have considered the principle of subsidiarity with respect to the family have only treated how the

principle can be applied within the family. Wolfe, for instance, cites as an illustrative “example” of subsidiarity the relationship between parents and children: though parents have greater competence to perform a task, they appropriately allow some tasks to be performed by children, for the sake of the children and the family as a whole.⁴⁰ But the principle of subsidiarity also applies to the relationships between the family and other social associations. This is recognized explicitly in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

The family must be helped and defended by appropriate social measures. Where families cannot fulfill their responsibilities, other social bodies have the duty of helping them and of supporting the institution of the family. Following the principle of subsidiarity, larger communities should take care not to usurp the family’s prerogatives or interfere in its life. (#2209)

One of the “larger communities” which should not “usurp the family’s prerogatives or interfere in its life” is obviously the state; thus, as the *Catechism* discusses, the principle of subsidiarity forbids the state from usurping the functions of the family. But besides the state there is another threatening “larger community.” While it might be difficult to conceive of it as a “community,” we have seen that it can and has been considered a “social sphere,” indeed, as a social sphere with which the government ought not interfere: the sphere of the market economy.

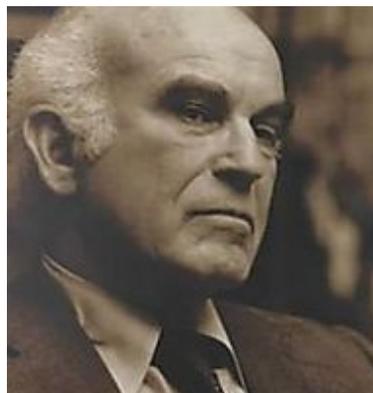
The modern family, as an institution, is marked by its willingness to shift from what was once a dependence on its own resources and those of closely related local associations, to dependence on large industries and distant economic forces. For the performance of many of their basic functions, families are now dependent on very removed social “associations”; they depend for food on a food industry, for health on a health care industry, for entertainment on an entertainment industry; they depend for energy on an energy system, for transportation on a transportation system, and for education on an education system. This constitutes an extreme dependence on distant and higher social associations to perform the functions which traditionally have been considered the responsibility of more primary, local, and natural associations. Indeed, this historically rather recent dependence of households on a (government subsidized) “global economy” constitutes perhaps the most widespread and easily recognizable violation of the principle of subsidiarity today.

The erosion of household functions was already noticed by Catholic social thinkers in connection with *Quadragesimo Anno*. Nell-Breuning discussed it in his commentary on that encyclical:

Liberal Capitalism did not create the family but Liberal Capitalism did create conditions under which, for increasingly large numbers of people, the family life which human nature and the natural law demand has become almost an impossibility. The transfer to independent organizations of much of the economic production formerly carried on in the family was in large part necessary. This alone would not have endangered and supplanted the family for which enough economic activity remained. Even though the family now as a rule cannot be a productive unit, yet it still remains a consuming unit and, as such, still has ample economic purpose to form a strong bond to secure its unity, especially, if the family have some common fund of goods, or best of all their own homestead. Instead, the family has been allowed to fall to pieces as a consuming unit and indeed, in alarming degree, even as a center for human living.⁴¹

What Nell-Breuning recognized as “the plight of family life,” which was one of “the by-products of industrialism,” has not gone unnoticed by American social and political thinkers. Robert Nisbet famously argued that what precipitated the twentieth century “quest for community” was precisely this transfer of functions from the family to economic and governmental spheres. What has not been as often noticed is that the principle of subsidiarity speaks directly to what Nisbet recognized as the modern “functional irrelevance” of primary associations like the family:⁴² according to the principle, families have a responsibility not to give up their proper functions.

Now it must be admitted that Nisbet spoke as if the loss of the functions of primary associations were a fait accompli, the result of economic and political forces beyond the power of the primary associations;⁴³ at best, it seems, Nisbet hoped that small associations would develop new functions. It is not clear, however, that the loss of function is totally beyond the power of the primary associations; indeed, there could be a responsibility to try to revive some of the old functions. Though economic



Robert Nisbet

incentives sometimes work against them, there is no reason why families today cannot take more seriously the business of taking care of their members: caring for the elderly, educating the young, and growing, making, building, and preparing the various things that family members “consume.” Not only is the family a level of social association at which violations of the principle of subsidiarity are widespread, it is also the level at which it is most obvious how to set about corrective measures: families can take it upon themselves to change their habits and patterns of life.

Of course, the present attempt to apply the principle of subsidiarity to the relationship between the sphere of local, natural associations and the sphere of the modern technologically-enabled market economy may appear somewhat anachronistic in regards to the household, and communities of households, as social units with duties to perform particular functions for themselves. After all, the “economic sphere” which was criticized earlier for taking these functions away from more local associations is most often justified on the very basis of its ability to meet the needs of individuals, families, and local communities with great efficiency and flexibility. If the new social institution, the market economy of the industrial age, fulfills these social needs so well, then it may seem that individuals and families best fulfill their functions precisely by taking full advantage of it. At the extreme, it might seem that if families and communities existed precisely in order to meet the needs of individuals, and if these needs are now met by new, modern social institutions, then the traditional, local associations are neither necessary nor even possible; any attempt, it can and has been argued, to treat households, neighborhoods, and villages as the primary or “natural” loci of various economic and social functions is not just anachronistic but nostalgic.

But the appearance of anachronism here highlights the radical nature of the principle of subsidiarity and its implications of responsibility discussed above. For while the principle of subsidiarity is usually explicated in terms of levels of social functions, if the principle is to have the normative force that it is intended to have, those functions cannot be understood simply in terms of the satisfaction of needs but in terms of the fulfillment of duties. The principle of subsidiarity is not primarily about resources, but social

roles; it is not a matter of the efficient distribution of power, but of the just distribution of authority. John Finnis characterizes the principle of subsidiarity as “a principle of justice”⁴⁴; it could also be described as a principle of jurisdiction.⁴⁵

Moreover, the classical and religious traditions out of which the principle of subsidiarity emerges all insist that there are certain kinds of social associations, most obviously the family, which are natural and primary. The principle of subsidiarity does not require that certain functions be carried out by the lowest level of association, whatever those levels of association may be; rather, it requires that certain functions need to be carried out by particular forms of association. Within some prudential bounds, the principle of subsidiarity must allow for social change; but if the principle is to have any sense, there must also be some limit to the sort of social change it can accommodate—there must be some associations the existence and function of which are non-negotiable. If a new social order threatens to assume functions which had been the rights and duties of those particular “natural” forms of association, then that does not constitute a morally neutral evolution of social forms, but a violation of the rights and duties of particular social associations and a violation of the principle of subsidiarity.

V. THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY AND THE AGRARIAN IDEAL

There are numerous traditions of social thought which share in varying degrees this general ideal of a locally distributed and natural social order, with or without the more specific criticism of economic and technological forces which threaten that ideal. In the United States, the ideal has been expressed partially and vaguely under such names as federalism, republicanism, and civic humanism.⁴⁶ Earlier in this century, it was expressed more explicitly by some Catholic thinkers—including Chesterton, Belloc, and Dorothy Day—under the name distributism (or distributivism).⁴⁷ More commonly in European thought it is represented by some related social theories critical of widespread individualistic capitalism, under such banners as syndicalism, solidarism, and corporatism.⁴⁸ The ideal is even arguably an element in some forms of populism, and, most prominently in contemporary discussions of American political theory, in communitarianism.⁴⁹ A fruitful historical consideration of the principle of subsidiarity could consider each of these traditions as at least partial embodiments of the social

insight which the principle tries to express.⁵⁰ In this final section I want to consider just one tradition which I think yields especially valuable connections to the principle of subsidiarity, namely the tradition of agrarianism.

Richard Hofstadter has given an outline of the “component themes” of the American agrarian ideal as it appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

Its hero was the yeoman farmer, its central conception the notion that he is the ideal man and the ideal citizen. Unstinted praise of the special virtues of the farmer and the special values of rural life was coupled with the assertion that agriculture, as a calling uniquely productive and uniquely important to society, had a special right to the concern and protection of government. The yeoman, who owned a small farm and worked it with the aid of his family, was the incarnation of the simple, honest, independent, healthy happy human being. Because he lived in close communion with the beneficent nature, his life was believed to have a wholesomeness and integrity impossible for the depraved populations of cities. His well-being was not merely physical, it was moral; it was not merely personal, it was the central source of civic virtue; it was not merely secular but religious, for God had made the land and called man to cultivate it. Since the yeoman was believed to be both happy and honest, and since he had a secure propertied stake in society in the form of his own land, he was held to be the best and most reliable sort of citizen.⁵¹

Significantly, Hofstadter describes agrarianism in the past tense; indeed, he refers not to “agrarianism” but rather always to “the agrarian myth” a myth, he insists, created by aristocrats for their political convenience and long ago defeated in the face of developing “commercial realities.” But Hofstadter’s dismissal of agrarianism as a “myth” is a rhetorical evasion of both the descriptive and prescriptive content of agrarian thought; the fact remains that agrarianism constitutes both a reasonable portrayal of the ordering of past societies, and an earnest political philosophy which attempts to account for the justice of that order.

Indeed, the relevant elements of this agrarian philosophy are evident from Hofstadter’s summary. Here it is important to note that the farmer is not so much important for the fact of his producing agricultural crops as for the kinds of virtues and habits thought to be typical

of farming as a way of life—virtues and habits not only of the individual farmer but of all members of the kinds of households and communities in which farming is possible. The farmer thus represents not so much a particular career as a general ethical and political type. This agrarian type is independent, that is, relatively self-sufficient, not subservient to larger political and social forces; to the extent that he depends on anyone or anything, he is dependent on nature and on the members of his household and immediate community. The agrarian type is resourceful; in part because of his relative independence, he must rely on his own talents and his own resources to provide what he needs. The agrarian type is wholesome, living in harmony with nature, both benefiting from and contributing to the health of the land; moreover, he is politically wholesome, as he is tangibly invested in his own freedom and responsibility and the political order which make them possible.

The connection between the principle of subsidiarity and the agrarian type just sketched should be clear: agrarians desire the widespread distribution of power, maintain that essential social and economic functions should take place at the most local and primary levels of association, and regard the consolidation and centralization of power as destructive not only of patterns of life but of political principle.

The agrarian resistance to consolidation of power has been partially obscured by an unjustified association of agrarianism with particular policies of economic planning. Though, historically, some agrarian political reforms, and agrarian thought in general, have been traced to socialist origins,” the American tradition of agrarian thought has explicitly opposed the consolidation and centralization of political power. The historian Forrest McDonald, who has identified “agrarian republicanism” as one of the important species of American thought to influence the Founding, makes it clear that the agrarian republicans were far from socialists; according to McDonald, they emphasized the political benefits of widespread and distributed ownership and use of land.” Indeed, far from desiring a planned economy, McDonald finds that among those who influenced the Founding, the agrarian republicans were “the one group that came closest to

accepting [Adam] Smith’s doctrines [in *the Wealth of Nations*] in their entirety.”⁵⁴

The agrarian opposition to centralization is well illustrated by Thomas Jefferson, probably the most prominent early American thinker with whom agrarianism can be easily associated.⁵⁵ On several occasions Jefferson spoke of the yeoman farmer as the exemplar of moral integrity and the foundation of political stability.⁵⁶ Jefferson is very clear that his preference for an agrarian population is connected to a conviction that dependence on higher social associations is politically unhealthy. This conviction is well captured in a famous passage from Jefferson’s *Autobiography*:


“Jefferson is very clear that his preference for an agrarian population is connected to a conviction that dependence on higher social associations is politically unhealthy.”


But it is not by the consolidation, or concentration of powers, but by their distribution, that good government is effected. Were not this great country already divided into states, that division must be made, that each might do for itself what concerns itself directly, and what it can so much better do than a distant authority. Every state again is divided into counties, each to take care of what lies within

its local bounds; each county again into townships or wards, to manage minute details; and every ward into farms, to be governed each by its individual proprietor. Were we directed from Washington when to sow, and when to reap, we should soon want bread. It is by this partition of cares, descending in gradation from general to particular, that the mass of human affairs may be best managed for the good and prosperity of all.⁵⁷

This passage, about the maximally local distribution of political power, is particularly apt in illustrating the connection between the principle of subsidiarity and agrarian thought. But it was not only political power of which Jefferson preferred distribution rather than consolidation; he was also concerned with economic power. Jefferson’s opposition to economic centralization is inseparable from his praise of the yeoman farmer, as is clear from his arguments that agriculture is a better basis for an economy than manufacture and commerce because it leaves men more independent and responsible.⁵⁸

Agrarian opposition to the consolidation of economic power is even more evident in the language of late nineteenth and early twentieth century agrarianism, most notably in the writings of the “Southern Agrarians.” In words that reveal the affinity of their position with the principle of subsidiarity, the economist William Campbell has noted that “the Southern Agrarian tradition stressed that functions and responsibilities be lodged in the person and the family first, the broad range of community and voluntary organizations second, and the state last.”⁵⁹ The enemy of these agrarians, indeed, that in opposition to which they tended to define their agrarianism, was “industrialism,” construed as the concentration of economic power in large-scale commercial endeavors.⁶⁰ By identifying its enemy as “industrialism,” the agrarian critic was condemning particular forms of social organization for violating a more natural order, and specifically for resulting in the transfer of functions formerly performed by family and community to more distant social associations. Thus, in the context of agrarianism, the term “industrialism” can be understood as a counterpart to “statism”; just as “statism” is the term for inordinate dependence on the state, the agrarians’ pejorative “industrialism” expresses a judgment of inordinate dependence on the social sphere of commerce and manufacture. In this light, this representative strain of agrarian thought is easily understood as an attempt to articulate social relationships-between families, communities, and larger economic forces-that observe the principle of subsidiarity.



It must be emphasized that only in the context of a judgment about the proper ordering of social functions can traditional agrarian attitudes, otherwise dismissed as the products of mere nostalgia or romanticism, be understood as expressions of coherent political principle. Agrarian critiques of technology and of the market economy, like the critique of “industry,” are all based on the observation that certain social forces often lauded as instruments and signs of “progress” in fact play a role in redistributing political power and social functions away from the household and community. Agrarian use of such terms as “markets,” “technology,” and “industry” may be imprecise, but their intended sense is clear: they are meant to identify those social forces which tend to reduce the independence and self-sufficiency of families and communities, seducing men into greater and greater

economic and social dependence.

Precisely because they constitute a theory of just social order, such agrarian criticisms have long appealed beyond the population of actual farmers, to all those who judge themselves to be, or wish to be, invested in local associations.⁶¹ A general resistance to economic consolidation as much as political consolidation has been evident in a wide variety of loosely agrarian movements. In the last several decades, the agrarian sensibility is easily linked to a variety of movements, recognized by such catch-phrases as “small is beautiful,” “back to the land,” “sustainable living,” and “homesteading.” Of disparate character, and always difficult to categorize as politically “right” or “left,” such movements share an apprehension of the benefits of living in relative self-sufficiency apart from the large-scale institutions of modern commercial society. Thus, at least incidentally, and sometimes by conscious intention, these essentially agrarian movements are alike in advocating the restoration of “natural” functions to individuals and “primary” associations, in particular the functions of the family or household, which have increasingly been absorbed, not so much by the state as by the sphere of “the economy.”⁶²

By emphasizing resistance to the consolidation of economic functions, we do not mean to ignore the significant cultural implications of agrarianism. While in its earlier forms agrarianism emphasized the economic and political threats of industrialism, it should be evident from what has been said that agrarianism has come to encompass a general attitude toward all social goods. Thus, the agrarian argues that the household and community is not only the proper place for “employment” and the production of sustenance, but also for providing education, entertainment, and fellowship; these should not be transferred to the realm of commerce and industry. This interest in broader, cultural self-sufficiency is especially evident, for instance, in the famous slogan from *I'll Take My Stand*: “Throw out the radio and take down the fiddle from the wall,”⁶³ an extreme localist imperative that could be deduced directly from the principle of subsidiarity.

The cultural implications of the agrarian view also help explain why the essays of a more recent agrarian writer, Wendell Berry, have had such broad appeal. Though often explicitly concerned with industrialism and its impact on agriculture and the environment, Berry’s essays make clear that the agrarian opposition to economic consolidation is not just a matter of economic or

environmental health, but also of artistic, physiological, political, and even spiritual health. Though it is a central observation of his that “people have been seduced or forced into dependence on the industrial economy,”⁶⁴ Berry makes it clear that resistance to this consolidation is not a matter of large-scale political policy or economic planning; rather, it is a matter of individuals, families, and small communities having the courage to make responsible choices.

Berry has been influenced by the Amish tradition, which provides an extreme but useful example of what it would mean to consistently apply the principle of subsidiarity to the household and its economic relations. For the Amish, the household is the primary locus of production, not just of consumption; and to the extent that an Amish family is not completely independent and self-sufficient, it relies on neighboring households, joined together in a community, to provide the support that it needs. The Amish resistance to what others consider the staples of modern technology, though it varies in degree, is not based on a belief that technology itself is evil, but on the observation that by limiting their use of technology, men may limit their dependence on the institutions for which they cannot be responsible. As much as possible, the technology that the Amish do use can be built and maintained by themselves. More than any other Westerners, the Amish have succeeded in living a life in which the most basic social needs of the household and local community are supplied by the household and community. For them, the family has experienced no slide into “functional irrelevance.” That the Amish live this way by choice, and not by necessity, is itself evidence that the movement of social functions to higher and higher levels of association is not an inevitable consequence of the putatively inexorable logic of technological development. Not only in “undeveloped” nations, but even in “developed” nations, social functions can be carried out at the local, primary level without being seized by, or ceded to, higher levels.

The influence of the Amish tradition, and its consonance with the principle of subsidiarity, is evident in the words of another contemporary agrarian, Gene Logsdon, who in several books has promoted “cottage farming.” According to Logsdon, modern technology and consumerism have paved the way for “economic dictatorship,” manifested in man’s enslavement to centralized economic power. In response, Logsdon advocates an agrarian “homebased society,” emphasizing first the

household production of food: “If the economic dictators use technology to gain a monopoly in the food business, as they are absolutely trying to do, then I will use technology to show how a society of garden farmers can start a new home economy that will confound the dictators.” But again, as for most agrarians, Logsdon’s interest in this is not only the production of food, but the balance of power, the just distribution of social functions. It is clearly a sense of political justice that is behind his claim that “to decentralize the marketplace” will make possible a “return to a more democratic and therefore healthful economy.”⁶⁵

This agrarian criticism of modern society evokes precisely the sense of political justice that the principle of subsidiarity is meant to express.⁶⁶ Indeed, both the principle of subsidiarity and agrarianism can be understood as attempts to defend the justice of social functions, “naturally” ordered through traditional human associations, in the face of “artificial” forces which would redistribute those functions to different, or entirely new, social associations. We could as easily say that the agrarian ideal follows from the principle of subsidiarity as we could say that the principle of subsidiarity embodies the theory of just social order which agrarian thought always strives to articulate. According to both, just social order involves the widespread, local distribution of primary social functions; higher associations have a responsibility not to absorb the functions of lower associations, and lower associations have a responsibility not to abdicate their functions to higher associations.

One final connection between agrarianism and the principle of subsidiarity is worth observing. As the example of Hofstadter makes clear, the fact that agrarianism has been historically formulated as a reaction to social and economic change has made it easy for critics to dismiss it as a nostalgic or romantic “myth.” Nonetheless, like the principle of subsidiarity, it makes sense that agrarianism was not articulated explicitly until a social order once thought natural came to be threatened. For most of human history, agrarianism as a way of life was unavoidable; agrarianism as a social philosophy was not necessary, nor even really possible, until the agrarian way of life needed some justification in the face of an alternative. Like the principle of subsidiarity, agrarianism was taken for granted and tacitly understood as a basis of sound social order; we should not be surprised that it was not explicitly formulated except as a response to political and economic changes facilitated by technological

innovations which threatened that order.⁶⁷

VI. CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that the principle of subsidiarity needs to be understood as more than a basis for the limitation of state power. The principle of subsidiarity must be applied consistently to all social associations, and the responsibility of lower social associations to perform their proper functions without abdicating them to higher associations is just as important as the responsibility of higher associations not to interfere with lower ones. In modern society, where higher social spheres, facilitated by technological advance and large-scale commerce, take up functions once recognized as belonging to the household and its immediate community, the principle of subsidiarity can be understood as having implications which are appropriately identified as “agrarian,” insofar as the agrarian tradition has criticized the centralization and consolidation of economic power and held up as a political ideal the relative self-sufficiency and independence of the household. In sum, I have argued that agrarianism and the principle of subsidiarity are expressions of the same normative social principle.

In light of this argument, I hope that the appropriation of the principle of subsidiarity by classical liberals and defenders of free markets is seen to be at the very least incomplete, as it applies the principle only to the state’s relation to lower associations like the economy, and ignores applications of the principle that are far more morally burdensome on individuals, families, and local communities. Furthermore, insofar as the classical liberal appropriation of the principle implies an uncritical attitude towards the power of market forces and technological advance, it is not only incomplete but seriously misleading. While on some level modern liberal institutions, and especially the market economy, both grow out of and contribute to human freedom, it is irresponsible to ignore the extent to which they have changed patterns of living, primarily by arrogating the social functions of more primary and natural levels of association. Unchecked by the resolve of responsible individuals, families, and communities, the modern market economy is not morally neutral; it tends to violate the principle of subsidiarity.

It is important for Catholic social thinkers, and social thinkers generally, to apprehend that the principle of subsidiarity supplements and even criticizes classical

liberalism more than it simply supports it.⁶⁸ However, this does not necessarily mean that the agrarian implication of the principle of subsidiarity is strictly at odds with the more commonly noted libertarian implication. As we have seen, agrarianism does not recommend a restriction of market freedom by statist policies. Historically, agrarians have been opposed to all consolidation of power, including state power. This has been true since the eighteenth-century agrarians’ appreciation of Adam Smith’s economic theories, and the more recent Southern Agrarian position that industrialism, more than agrarianism, depends on the active support of government intervention.⁶⁹ Indeed, an interest in limited government has been a feature of agrarian societies even before the development of modern agrarian theory.⁷⁰

Unfortunately, in the context of current discussions of political and social theory, there are some important theoretical obstacles to a fuller appreciation of agrarianism. One such obstacle is the entrenched prejudice that agrarianism is economically naive. Apparently forgetting the physiocrats and their influence on Adam Smith, some defenders of classical liberalism have charged that agrarianism undervalues human creativity,⁷¹ or that it misunderstands the possibility of increasing wealth.⁷² But the “cultivator of the soil” is necessarily clever and resourceful, and he certainly knows how to produce, or rather help nature to produce, wealth where there was none before. Nobody who has studied agrarian thought, or who grasps the very idea of a yeoman farmer, should claim that agrarianism fails to comprehend the role of human effort and creativity in producing wealth.⁷³

Yet another theoretical obstacle to a fuller appreciation of agrarian thought is the metaphysical anthropology usually assumed by the dominant tradition of social and political thought, classical liberalism. We have seen that the principle of subsidiarity respects the primacy of the individual but also respects the integrity of “natural” social associations, associations which have real unity precisely because they have proper social functions. Classical liberalism, and in particular that version of it which is usually marshaled in the defense of free markets, often takes the form of a strict, atomistic individualism, according to which only individual men are the bearers of moral status. This reductionism is plainly incompatible with the principle of subsidiarity, which assigns a moral status, complete with duties, responsibilities, and rights, to every level of social association. The agrarian Richard Weaver wrote of “two types of American individual-

ism”: the more familiar, atomistic type Weaver associated with the industrial North and Henry David Thoreau; a second type he called “‘social bond’ individualism,” which for Weaver was exemplified by the agrarian South and Randolph of Roanoke. Describing Randolph, Weaver wrote: “As a defender of the dignity and autonomy of the smaller unit, he was constantly fighting the battle for local rights.”⁷⁴ It is this “social bond” individualism that is required both by agrarianism and by the principle of subsidiarity.

But surely the most important obstacle to an appreciation of the agrarian implications of the principle of subsidiarity is not theoretical but practical. In today’s world, what can it mean to insist that a normative principle of social association has agrarian implications? Have not “commercial realities” superseded agrarian social arrangements? Is not any call for a revival of agrarianism a call to “unmake history?”⁷⁵ Are we suggesting that the only way to observe the principle of subsidiarity that principle of just social order is for the majority of families to start farming plots of land?

It must be admitted that if justice required that we all be farmers, then justice would be beyond our immediate grasp. But political justice depends not only on

on abstract principles, but on prudential application of those principles to particular circumstances. In present circumstances, it is not practical to recommend that all people become farmers. This does not mean, however, that the agrarian ideal cannot be pursued in some degree. Pursuing the agrarian ideal by degree would not only, nor even primarily, entail altering the legal structure to provide incentives for different, more agrarian patterns of life, or disincentives for participation in large-scale industry. Without any government prompting, individuals and families can take steps to decrease their dependence on the technologically-enabled market economy. While such steps are burdensome ones which we tend to consider matters of “personal” and “private” choice, we have seen that they follow from a consistent application of the principle of subsidiarity, and as such they are the province of political theory. Alternatively used to bolster faith in government and faith in the market economy, in our time it is certainly appropriate for political theory to help inspire the kind of courage necessary for people to make difficult choices for the health of their families and local communities, by articulating the virtues of what have long been held up as the stronghold of a free society: productive and independent households.⁷⁶



NOTES

1A version of this essay will appear in the forthcoming work, *Faith, Morality, and Civil Society*, ed. Dale McConey and Peter Augustine Lawler (Lexington Books, 2003).

2See, for instance, Christopher Wolfe, “Subsidiarity: The ‘Other’ Ground of Limited Government,” in *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism: The Catholic Intellectual Tradition and the Moral Foundations of Democracy*, ed. Kenneth L. Grasso, Gerard V. Bradley, and Robert P. Hunt (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

3European theologians, especially in Germany, had already theorized about the principle of subsidiarity; for a summary of this intellectual history and references see Thomas C. Kohler, “In Praise of Little Platoons,” in *Building the Free Society: Democracy, Capitalism, and Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. George Weigel and Robert Royal (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 35; cf. Michael Novak, *Catholic Social Thought and Liberal Institutions (Freedom With Justice)*, 2d ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 110ff.

4Oswald von Nell-Breuning, *Reorganization of Social Economy: The Social Encyclical Developed and Explained* (New York: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1936), 201.

5This is more true in America than in Europe. In Europe, the discussions of “federalism” also emphasize another dimension of the principle of subsidiarity, namely that according to it the exercise of higher, centralized power is permissible in those circumstances where lower associations could not perform a desired function. So while in America the principle of subsidiarity is more likely to be invoked by conservatives and classical liberals, in Europe the principle of subsidiarity has been useful, in Thomas C. Kohler’s words as a “cloak” for the “*libido dominandi*” of

bureaucrats.” Thomas C. Kohler, “Lessons from the Social Charter: State, Corporation, and the Meaning of Subsidiarity,” *University of Toronto Law Journal* 43 (1993): 627.

6Wolfe, “Subsidiarity,” 81.

7George Weigel, *Soul of the World: Notes on the Future of Public Catholicism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Ethics and Public Policy Center/William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 110.

8David Bosnich, “The Principle of Subsidiarity,” *Religion and Liberty* 6, no. 4 (July/August 1996): 9-10.

9Adolpho Lindenberg, *The Free Market in a Christian Society*, trans. Donna H. Sandin (Montreal: St. Antoninus Institute for Catholic Education in Business, 1999), 165-66.

10Robert A. Sirico, “Subsidiarity, Society, and Entitlements: Understanding and Application,” *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics and Public Policy* 11 [issue 2, Symposium on Entitlements] (1997): 557.

11Ibid., 549.

12Stephen M. Krason, *Liberalism, Conservatism, and Catholicism: An Evaluation of Contemporary American Political Ideologies in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Catholic Central Verein of America, 1994), 44. Examples of the principle of subsidiarity invoked as a principle of limited government could be multiplied, and are by no means only to be found within the past decade; cf. the description of the principle of subsidiarity in Benjamin S. Llamzon, “Subsidiarity: The Term, Its Metaphysics and Use,” *Aquinas* 21 (1978): 44: “the ethicopolitical principle that the state should not take over and do what its smaller communities can do by themselves.”

13Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone Foundation Lectures* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943), 96. The lectures were originally delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898, and first published as *Lectures on Calvinism* (Amsterdam: Hoocker and Wormser Ltd., 1898); they provide a distillation of Kuyper’s *Ons Programme* (“Our Program”), 1878.

14The connection between Althusius and the principle of subsidiarity has been noted by Donald W. Livingston, “The Founding and the Enlightenment: Two Theories of Sovereignty,” in *Vital Remnants: America’s Founding and the Western Tradition*, ed. Gary L. Gregg II (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), 248.

15Daniel J. Elazar, “Althusius’ Grand Design for a Federal Commonwealth,” in Johannes Althusius, *Politica*, trans. Frederick S. Carney (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995), xxxv-xlvi.

16In this context, “subsidiarity” does not necessarily have connotations of “secondariness” or “subordination,” except insofar as what is ordained to help another is secondary or subordinate to that which it is ordained to help.

17Sirico, “Subsidiarity,” 549.

18 Ibid., 557.

19Quoted in Kohler, “In Praise of Little Platoons,” 36.

20Nell-Breuning, *Reorganization of Social Economy*, 208.

21Cf. John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 146: The principle of subsidiarity “affirms that the proper function of association is to help the participants of the association to help themselves.”

22Kuyper, “Calvinism,” 97.

23Ibid., 98-99.

24Sirico, “Subsidiarity,” 549

25John Coleman, “Development of Church Social Teaching,” in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 5: Official Catholic Social Teaching*, 183, quoted in Kohler, “In Praise of Little Platoons,” 35.

26 Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, 144-46. Cf. Johannes Messner, “Freedom as a Principle of Social Order: An Essay in the Substance of Subsidiary Function,” *The Modern Schoolman* 28 (1951): 108.

27 “Every state is a community of some kind, and every community is established with a view to some good.” Aristotle, *Politics* I, i.

28Kohler, “Lessons from the Social Charter,” 615.

29Nell-Breuning, *Reorganization of Social Economy*, 206.

30Messner, “Freedom as a Principle,” 106.

31Llamzon, “Subsidiarity,” 49.

32 Ibid., 45.

33 Thomas Aquinas, *On Princely Government*, I, 13 & 14; quoted by Althusius, *Politica* I, §13.

34 “*Non enim cives propter consules nec gens propter regem, sed e converso consules propter cives et rex propter gentem.*” Dante, *Monarchia*, I, xii. Cf. Joseph Komonchak, who lists as the first element of the principle of subsidiarity “the priority of the person as the origin and purpose of society: *civitas propter cives, non cives propter civitatem*,” quoted in Kohler, “In Praise of Little Platoons,” 36.

35 Kohler, “In Praise of Little Platoons,” 42; Kohler, “Lessons from the Social Charter,” 615ff.; Nell-Breuning, *Reorganization of Social Economy*, 206 ff.

36 *Centesimus Annus* grants the benefits of free economy and connects it to subsidiarity (summarizing *Rerum Novarum*): “The State must contribute to the achievement of [social] goals ... indirectly and according to the principle of subsidiarity, by creating favorable conditions for the free exercise of economic activity, which will lead to abundant opportunities for employment and sources of wealth” (#15).

37 Cf. Weigel, *Soul of the World*, 110; Lindenberg, *The Free Market*, 198.

38 Lindenberg, *The Free Market*, 97.

39 Kohler, “Lessons from the Social Charter,” 627.

40 Wolfe, “Subsidiarity,” 91-92. Gregory Beabout also discusses relationships of freedom and authority between parents and children, in “The Principle of Subsidiarity and Freedom in the Family, Church, Market, and Government,” *Journal of Markets and Morality* 1(1998): 130-41.

41 Nell-Breuning, *Reorganization of Social Economy*, 326-27.

42 Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community: A Study in the Ethics of Order and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), 49.

43 Indeed, this attitude of resignation appears to be expressed in words already quoted from two important sources: *Quadragesimo Anno*, #79 (“As history abundantly proves, it is true that on account of changed conditions many things which were done by small associations in former times cannot be done now save by large associations”); and Nell Breuning, *Reorganization of Social Economy*, 326. (“The transfer to independent organizations of much of the economic production formerly carried on in the family was in large part necessary.”)

44 Finnis, *Natural Law*, 144,

45 Cf. Messner, “Freedom as a Principle,” 107: “As often as the limitations of the powers and rights of social authority or the fundamental claims and rights of the human person were discussed it was in substance always the principle of subsidiarity function that was in question.”

46 For example, George W. Carey treats American federalism as an expression of the principle of subsidiarity in his “The Constitution and Community,” in *Community and Tradition: Conservative Perspectives on the American Experience*, ed. George W. Carey and Bruce Frohnen (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 63-84, esp. 73-75.

47 The connection between distributism and the principle of subsidiarity has been explored by John C. Medaille, “‘Power to the People’ Can Only Mean Property to the People,” *New Oxford Review* (January 2000): 27-34. See also Dermot Quinn, “Defending Distributism,” a letter to the editor, *First Things* 55 (August/September 1995): 2, to which compare Richard John Neuhaus, “Chesterton and the Thereness of It,” *First Things* 97 (November 1999): 87: “The impulse of distributism, one might suggest, is to work out more fully the economic implications of the doctrine of subsidiarity.”

48 Solidarism and corporatism are discussed in Kohler, “In Praise of Little Platoons,” 37-39. Solidarism deserves a more serious treatment than is offered by Michael Novak, who dismisses it for its “conservative” belief in the value of “traditional” and “natural” associations (Novak, *Catholic Social Thought*, 118-20). Says Novak, “Although solidarism praises mediating structures, associations, and the principle of subsidiarity (according to which no larger social body ought to do what a smaller body can do for itself), it fails to grasp the indispensable role of liberal institutions in limiting the power of the state” (121). We might respond that while Novak praises mediating structures, associations, and the principle of subsidiarity, he fails to grasp the role of liberal institutions in taking over the functions of more natural and local associations.

49 Jean Bethke Elshtain has found the principle of subsidiarity valuable as pointing toward a more or less communitarian “third way”: “subsidiarity is a theory of and for civil society that refuses stark alternatives between individualism and collectivism.” Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Catholic Social Thought, the City, and Liberal America,” in *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism*, ed. Grasso et al., 106. Thomas Kohler has also noticed connections

connections between the principle of subsidiarity and communitarianism: “The subsidiarity principle obviously has much to say to many who would identify themselves as communitarians, and much of the communitarian platform itself appears to draw from the social magisterium and the insights that the subsidiarity principle offers.” However, Kohler identifies a limitation of the communitarian appropriation of the principle. “The understanding of the human person that grounds, orients, and illuminates this principle, however, is its most significant insight.... If the communitarian project is to prosper, it will have to confront unflinchingly and adequately the [metaphysical] question of our personhood. Failure to do so would make the movement’s prescriptions irrelevant or worse.” Kohler, “In Praise of Little Platoons,” 45. In fact, while supposedly favoring the local, the communitarian position tends to invoke the principle of subsidiarity in favor of state programs and other government intervention; cf. Robert N. Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 262-63. Thus Bruce Frohnen can criticize communitarians for ignoring the principle of subsidiarity in advocating “civic virtue” and dedication to national, as opposed to local, goals; Bruce Frohnen, *The New Communitarians and the Crisis of Modern Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), see esp. 215-18. A further criticism worth noting is that, though the communitarian invocation of the principle of subsidiarity contradicts the classical liberal interest in limited government, it does essentially reinforce the unwarranted tendency to talk about the principle solely in terms of its implications for the state.

50Such a consideration of the principle of subsidiarity could also consider two individuals whose thought has obvious affinity with the principle: Alexis de Tocqueville and Edmund Burke. The connection to Tocqueville has already been made explicitly in Wolfe, “Subsidiarity,” 89-9. Though it does not mention the principle of subsidiarity by name, a relevant treatment of Tocqueville is Darcy Wudel, “Tocqueville on Associations and Association,” in *Tocqueville’s Defense of Human Liberty: Current Essays*, ed. Peter Augustine Lawler and Joseph Alulis (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993). As indicated by its title, the connection of Burke to the principle of subsidiarity is suggested in Kohler, “In Praise of Little Platoons,” 43.

51Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 24-25.

52Thomas P. Govan, “Agrarian and Agrarianism: A Study in the Use and Abuse of Words,” *The Journal of Southern History* 30 (1964): 3547; Arthur E. Bestor Jr., “The Evolution of the Socialist Vocabulary,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 9 (1948): 259-302.

53Forrest McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins of the Constitution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 70-77.

54McDonald, *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, 128.

55For a description of, and more references to, early American agrarianism, see Bruce S. Thornton, “Founders as Farmers: The Greek Georgic Tradition and the Founders,” in Gregg, ed., *Vital Remnants*, 33-69.

56E.g.: “Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests, by the most lasting bonds.” Letter to John Jay, August 23, 1785, in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: The Modern Library, 1944), 377.

57*The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson*, in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 84-85.

58E.g.: “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.... Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark of those who, not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition. This, the natural progress and consequence of the arts, has sometimes perhaps been retarded by accidental circumstances; but, generally speaking, the proportion which the aggregate of the other classes of citizens bears in any State to that of its husbandmen, is the proportion of its unsound to its healthy parts.... The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body. It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigor. A degeneracy in these is a canker which soon eats to the heart of its laws and constitution.” *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query 19, in *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 280-81.

59William Campbell, “Introduction,” in *Wilhelm Roepke, The Social Crisis of Our Time* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1992), xvi.

60The most obvious example is the agrarian manifesto of the “Twelve Southerners,” *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1930). In this volume, the essential opposition between agrarianism and industrialism is ubiquitous but is spelled out in the initial pages, “Introduction: A Statement of Principles.” The sequel volume—Herbert Agar and Allen Tate, eds., *Who Owns America?: A New Declaration of Independence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1936) which includes essays by two British distributists, makes it even more clear that the main interest of these agrarians was not sectionalism or pride in Southern culture, but political and economic principle: specifically, it was a call for the decentralization of power, for widespread small proprietorship as an antidote to plutocracy and collectivism.

61As Christopher Lasch has written, “Instead of regarding populism itself as a purely agrarian impulse, we now have to regard the agrarian version of populism as part of a broader movement that appealed to small producers of all kinds. Artisans and even many shopkeepers shared with farmers the fear that the new order threatened their working conditions, their communities, their ability to pass on both their technical skills and their moral economy to their offspring. In the nineteenth century, ‘agrarianism’ served as a generic term for popular radicalism, and this usage reminds us that opposition to monopolists, middlemen, public creditors, mechanization, and the erosion of craftsmanship by the division of labor was by no means confined to those who worked the soil.” Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1991), 217.

62Two recent works treat twentieth century and recent “new” agrarian thought: Allan Carlson, *The New Agrarian Mind: The Movement Toward Decentralist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), and Eric T. Freyfogle, ed., *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life* (Washington: Island Press, 2001).

63Andrew Nelson Lytle, “The Hind Tit,” in *I’ll Take My Stand*, 244.

64Wendell Berry, “Out of your Car, Off your Horse,” in Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 22.

65Gene Logsdon, “Seeking Personal Freedom in a Money Dictatorship: An Address to the Second Luddite Congress,” in *The Plain Reader*, ed. Scott Savage (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1998), 6-9.

66 The influence of Logsdon, Berry, and the Amish tradition are all evident in a recent agrarian movement advocating “plain living,” according to which relative independence from the modern industrial economy is a matter not only of environmental, psychological, and bodily health, but of economic and political justice; the *Center for Plain Living* (60805 Pidgeon Pt., Barnesville, Ohio, 43713) published a now defunct quarterly journal, *Plain: The Magazine of Life, Land and Spirit*. *The Plain Reader*, cited above, is an anthology drawn from this magazine.

67“What is at once striking is that this principle of natural law emerged so late: Why did so basic a principle not need to be formulated sooner? This can be understood if we accept the view that its formulation is a reaction against the characteristic developments of modern society, that is, that the idea of subsidiarity is not problematic in traditional societies,” in Franz-Xavier Kaufmann, “The Principle of Subsidiarity Viewed by the Sociology of Organizations,” *The Jurist* 48 (1988): 279. Cf. Donald Davidson and Theresa Sherrer Davidson, “Regionalism,” *Modern Age* 37 (1995): 104. “Historically considered, regionalism does not emerge as a theory of culture and government until the modern nation-state, using economics as a tool of power, achieves the capability to enforce upon all citizens, regardless of their inclinations, whatever degree of cultural uniformity is deemed necessary for the national welfare.”

68Cf. Kenneth Grasso, “Beyond Liberalism: Human Dignity, the Free Society, and the Second Vatican Council,” in *Catholicism, Liberalism, and Communitarianism*, 27-58. For a sophisticated theological criticism of the neoconservative appropriation of the principle of subsidiarity and the social teaching of *Centesimus Annus*, see David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), especially ch. 2, “Neoconservative Economics and the Church’s ‘Authentic Theology of Integral Human Liberation,’” 114-42.

69 Frank Lawrence Owsley, “The Irrepressible Conflict,” in *I’ll Take My Stand*, 74-75, 86, 88.

70Victor Davis Hanson has argued that the rise of the Greek polis, which is usually credited as the foundation of Western political ideals, is merely an “epiphenomenon” of a widespread, agrarian way of life, which is itself responsible for our inherited conceptions of democracy, private property, constitutional government, liberty, and equality. Victor Davis Hanson, *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

71Michael Novak has asserted that “agrarian habits of thought ... undervalue the creativity of managers, inventors, and persons of commerce [and] undervalue the creativity of the individual.” Novak, *Catholic Social Thought*, 121.

72Gregory Gronbacher, speaking of distributism, says that it advocates an “agrarian” society, charging that its “primary error ... lay in its understanding of the economy as a zero-sum game, where wealth was seen as a static, non-reproducible entity.... [This] hindered the emergence of an adequate understanding of human capital and productivity.” Gregory M.A. Gronbacher, “The Need for Economic Personalism,” *The Journal of Markets and Morality* 1(1998): 17. (This article was reprinted as “Economic Personalism: A New Paradigm for a Humane Economy,” in *Centesimus Annus: Assessment and Perspectives for the Future of Catholic Social Doctrine*, ed. John-Peter Pham [Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1998].)

73An important economist who has appreciated agrarian thought is Wilhelm Roepke. See especially Roepke, *The Moral Foundations of Civil Society* (London: William Hodge and Co., 1948).

74Richard M. Weaver, “Two Types of American Individualism,” in *The Southern Essays of Richard M. Weaver*, ed. George M. Curtis III and James J. Thompson Jr. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Press, 1987), 82. (Reprinted from *Modern Age* 7 [1963]: 119-34).

75Speaking of the Southern Agrarians, Clinton Rossiter raised the questions: “How sincerely do these men believe in the embattled cause of Southern Agrarianism? What are they actually prepared to do in behalf of the way of life they cherish so deeply? Do they want to unmake history, and do they think they can?” Clinton Rossiter, *Conservatism in America* (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1955), 206.

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