

# Power and Scale from Tribal Societies to Mass Societies

Book Review by Laura Killian

## The Scale of Power

A Global History Approach

John H. Dodley

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The relationship between the size of a society and the degree to which power is concentrated in the hands of a few members of that society is the broad subject of John Bodley's important and stimulating book *The Scale of Power* published by M.E. Sharpe. As with Bodley's earlier works *Anthropology and Contemporary Human Problems (1985)* and *Victims of Progress* (4<sup>th</sup> Edition 1999) the Washington State University's Edward R. Meyer Distinguished Professor of Anthropology applies careful scholarship, an acute understanding of contemporary affairs and an intimate knowledge of Fourth World peoples to draw a dark picture of social power in society while offering a hopeful prospect for the future of generous and creative societies learning from the experience of Fourth World nations.

Bodley looks through the lens of history, sociology, cultural anthropology, archaeology and bio-cultural evolutionary theory at the evolution of human societies and their tendency to accumulate power and wealth in the hands a few to help explain why environmental and social problems arise. He points out that most of the "current problems faced by humanity today, war, poverty, human rights abuses and environmental deterioration are all problems of scale and power." Bodley shows how individuals, not social classes, have been the agents of social change. He uses "simple mathematical power laws and log graphs to demonstrate that societal growth disproportionately concentrates social power as scale increases". The scale of a society directly correlates to the tendency to concentrate power and wealth and this is examined by looking at three major cultural transformations from tribal societies to kingdoms, or imperial societies, and kingdoms to commercial states with a measure he calls the 'imperia.' Scale determines how big empires (or as Bodley applies the plural form *imperia*) can become, or how much absolute power is available to the top ranks. The scale theory offers an evaluation about why extreme poverty exists alongside extreme amounts of concentrated wealth.

In a small scale Fourth World or tribal society, problems of inequalities are balanced out at the household level, using kin-based redistribution practices. Communities are small enough for everyone to know each other, with those who lead directly in touch with all who follow them. If a leader in a tribal society is out of line and starts to show signs of corruption, explains Bodley, people in the tribe simply stop listening to that person. They look for new leaders who support the functioning and survival of each other, the society and of the culture. These societies are generally organized around the "law of generosity" as Nuu-cha nulth Professor, Richard Atleo, affirms in his book, *Tsawalk* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press. 2004), and leaders exhibit generosity or they do not lead. Modern tribal societies exhibit the law of generosity, but more populous societies lose this important quality. As populations over the last two thousand years changed, grew and people began to create kingdoms, city-states, states, empires and the modern state system life for the individual homestead changed dramatically. This resulted according to Bodley when "population growth changes the face-to-face domestic community into an impersonal society, because people cannot effectively remember and relate personally to more than 500 individuals."

The cultural transformation Bodley calls the imperial society added new dimensions. Royal families began controlling the majority of the population, and day-to-day life changed dramatically for everyone living in these settlements as Bodley suggests.

From the perspective of scale theory it is significant that even as rulers expanded their imperia, the absolute number in the top leadership remained relatively constant. There was always one emperor at the very top who also headed a personal dynasty, and there were seldom more than 500 noblemen...the 50 million people in the Roman Empire were governed by the emperor and a few hundred senators and top bureaucrats.

A crucial point in achieving this power, explains Bodley, is the ability of the imperia to gain even further scale effects by creating dynasties that transmit and accumulate power *transgenerationally*. Royal families were able to concentrate social power by “co-opting the humanization process” by developing political institutions,” taxation, militarization and urbanization. Here can be seen the difference between a domestic-scale and a political-scale culture, or as Ferdinand Tonnies put it, the concepts of *Gemeinschaft*, a community composed of a real, organic, face-to-face community integrated by shared sentiments of personal familiarity and kinship and *Gesellschaft*, a society that is artificial, imaginary, impersonal, public society and too large to sustain the interpersonal human qualities.

Bodley discusses the development of commercial power as an important cultural transformation in the world. Here he describes a global scale culture of industrialization, commodification, capitalism, externalization, corporatization, elitization, supralocalization, and financialization resulting in polarized societies where corporations, the military and political elites have formed institutions for the creation of public policy. These elites “were able to implement two massive cultural reorganizations in rapid succession that produced a truly global commercial system within a few decades, progressivist and neoliberal.” Popular thought leaders suggested that these systems would benefit all of humanity, however, they were unable to deal with unforeseen consequences of such systems. By concentrating social power, Bodley suggests, the humanization and politicization processes had been set up to produce and maintain for-profit business enterprises; a stark contrast to tribal societies where processes were set up to produce and maintain the culture through sharing and no interpersonal exploitation.

Bodley’s narrative turns to the modern context when he writes that when the scale of human society increases to the point at which the US (300 million) is at currently, at least five things are likely to happen: Per capita economic productivity and consumption increases but the product becomes more inequitably distributed. This is painfully apparent with new economic studies in the United States revealing that less than 1 percent of the US population controls more than 45% of the countries wealth. Democracy declines because decision-making becomes more cumbersome, more concentrated and institutions and technologies become more specialized, more complex, more costly, and more vulnerable. The pace of change and instability increases while all types of social power become more concentrated.

One of Bodley’s most important insights is that this current system did not happen due to a natural, evolving process by rather “it did so because a few individual designers were successfully able to impose their will on billions of other people. The modern world system was created by a relative handful of individuals (who succeeded) because utopian capitalists were able to command overwhelmingly persuasive personal imperia.” As a result of this success, growth occurred, scale increased and social power became even more concentrated in states all over the world.

Looking at a community versus a society, Bodley is able to show how this illusion of progress is being pushed by the few who would benefit. No longer does the society exist to support the people, but to support the expanding, economic and political growth of a small amount of wealthy families and corporations. Bodley shows the risk that “further increasing the scale of global commerce to further maximize economic growth will merely continue the power-concentrating trends of the past and is unlikely to solve the human problems of poverty, social disorder, and environmental deterioration” (Bodley, 262). Not all people, however, see global, economic progress as worth the expenses. There has emerged a counter imperia movement where it is understood that bigger is not better, where a more human, smaller scale society is a realistic alternative to infinite growth. Bodley notes that there is an optimal scale for humans to live at and when societies “grow beyond the social optimum, the society begins to experience negative problems of vulnerability, or criticality, when sudden collapse might occur” (Bodley, 238).

The Power of Scale is an important book to students of the Fourth World and for those who want to understand contemporary geopolitical conflicts involving states and Fourth World nations. Bodley’s book shows an historical perspective on why with an increase in the scale of a population, there will be a concentration of wealth and power among a very small portion of the total population and such concentrations do not bode well for human society. Bodley’s book offers a quality analysis for anyone wishing to learn how wealth and power inequalities have become what they are today and offers practical options of where we can go from here through various paradigm shifts that move away from continued, global, economic growth towards sustainable forms at the local, human level.