The virtues of Swiss democracy have been often celebrated, and hardly less often reviled. "In the mountains: freedom!" exclaimed Schiller in tribute to the nation whose founding legend Wilhelm Tell he enshrined in verse. "Free, the Swiss?" mocked Goethe in response: "These well-to-doburghers in their closed-in cities? Free, those poor devils on their crags and cliffs? Yes, they once freed themselves from a tyrant... but now they sit behind their walls, imprisoned by their customs and laws, their pettiness and philistinism—and there, up in the mountains, where they also affect to speak of freedom, but are trapped like marmots by six months of snow."

But whether celebrated or reviled, Swiss democracy has too frequently been reduced to cuckoo clocks, perforated cheese and bucolic village assemblies—an alien spectacle of more interest to tourists than social scientists and statesmen. Those in America trying to reconcile decentralization and local participation in government with administrative efficiency and uniform standards, trying to accommodate expertise in decision making with shared responsibility, trying to find ways to save small towns from economic oblivion without sacrificing the smallness and pastoral simplicity that make town life manageable and, for many, attractive, have looked to administration science, to the developing nations and to mathematical models for solutions. But they have not looked to the obvious—to the troubled experience of the Swiss with the impact of modernization and centralization on communal democracy and civic participation.

America and Switzerland

Yet the communes of Switzerland have for decades faced these dilemmas—which have only recently come to afflict small towns in America. And Switzerland, though very unlike America, is also very like America. For, like America, it is very modern (with one of the highest living standards in Europe), exceptionally democratic (the oldest living democracy in the world, dating from 1291) and unusually diversified in religious, cultural and linguistic composition—but in ways quite foreign to American ideas of modernity, democracy and diversity. At the same time,
the Swiss commune shares many of the difficulties of local government in America, often with a vengeance. Hence, although its lesson is oblique, it can be instructive for those grappling with the escalating complexities of American local government.

Switzerland is a federation of 22 cantons (states), each quite distinctive in history, language and religion. Geneva, Vaud and Neuchatel are completely French in language and cultural orientation, while Fribourg, the Valais and Bern are both German and French. Aside from the Ticino, which is Italian, the rest are predominantly Germanic and are, historically speaking, the core of traditional Switzerland. The unusual diversity of Switzerland has informed its institutions and customs with a spirit of regional autonomy unknown elsewhere. The Federal Council (a seven-member collegium with a rotating presidency) and the legislature (bicameral like our own, with one house representing population and the other representing the cantons), while vested by the constitutions of 1848 and 1874 with extensive prerogatives, touch in practice only indirectly on the lives of individuals; for many citizens the decisive element in political life remains cantonal and communal citizenship. Ask a Swiss where he is from, and his initial answer will be “Basel” or “Lucerne” or “Glarus,” rarely “Switzerland.”

Participatory Democracy

The commune, then, is not simply the basic building block of Swiss government outside of the large urban centers (which are themselves, in many cases, still governed as gargantuan communes), but the environment within which most Swiss experience politics. In earlier times travelers carried communal not state passports; and even today national citizenship does not carry with it certain traditional privileges of communal citizenship restricted to those born in the commune. Hence, although communal elections of local public officials are open to all resident Swiss citizens, control and disposition of communal investments (primarily in land), administration of the Relief Fund, usage of common land and other important matters are closed to all but communal citizens. The jealousy with which the communes guard their autonomy was exemplified not so long ago by a commune in Grabunden which, when challenged by the canton on its jurisdiction over waterpower, retorted, “the commune existed long before there was a canton of Grabunden and denies the canton any right whatsoever to decide questions concerning its ultimate existence or justification.”

These unusual vestiges of the Swiss past, while no longer characteristic of much of Switzerland (where they are sometimes even regarded as anachronistic), do nevertheless represent the spirit of autonomy and participatory democracy that has pervaded the country for the past seven centuries. A few cantons (Inner Rhodes in Appenzell, for example) still insist on assembling their entire (male) citizenry once a year to transact their collective legislative business without the intervention of an elected legislature, and almost all communes conduct their affairs wholly within the framework of town meetings.

Local government in Switzerland, then, is characterized by full participation, an active and informed citizen body, relative immunity from federal and even cantonal interference and extensive issue consensus; its spirit is dominated by commonality and autonomy. Many communes control collectively as much as 90 percent of the land and resources within their communal frontiers. A rifle and 50 rounds of ammunition (indeed, with the modernization of the Swiss army, a machine gun) in the home of every male citizen embody and guarantee the ultimate integrity of individual and collective autonomy.

Yet for all their quaint advantages and pastoral benefits, many communes—especially in the depressed mountain regions of the Southeast—are laboring under intolerable burdens which threaten not only the viability of their economic foundations but their very existence. The difficulties appear initially to be mainly economic, but economic problems have catalyzed political problems which have become independent sources of communal decline. Moreover—and this points to the major dilemma of the communal crisis—many of the obvious solutions to Swiss problems appear to endanger those very values that justify the continued preservation of the communes. Like the American army at Ben Tre and Hue, those grappling with the communal crisis may, in order to save the communes, have to destroy them—not physically, in this case, but in terms of their essential political attributes. This becomes clearer in the context of specific problems.

“The economic plight of the poorer communes rests on their inability to find revenues adequate to the demands placed on them by their autonomy. For nearly a century, communities with populations of only a few hundred have had to expend vast sums to develop their roads and schools, to maintain relief funds (the early equivalent of Social Security) and to protect themselves from their hostile environment—a major enterprise in a country permanently endangered by floods, avalanches, rockslides and erosion. Although in recent decades the federal government has taken over a major part of the burden, many communes fell into bankruptcy and with time complete impoverishment in the earlier struggle to pay their spiraling debts. Their problems were compounded by the decentralized character of the Swiss commune. The smallest villages, which were often the poorest, tended by virtue of their altitude and inaccessibility to be the most extensive and thus the most decentralized; decentralization meant more roads, more schools but less administrative efficiency. Communes with fewer than a hundred families are sometimes compelled to maintain two or even more elementary schools. One commune (Avers) with a school population of 22 was compelled just prior to the last war to operate two schools;