

LEOPOLD KOHR

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Lister Sinclair

Good evening. I'm Lister Sinclair and this is *Ideas* with a celebration of the life and work of the Austrian philosopher Leopold Kohr, apostle of smallness.

Leopold Kohr

In a small community, everything happens as in a large community, with the difference that there you can grasp it. As in *Gulliver's Travels*: there's a phrase that, in a small circle are just as many degrees as in a large one. But in a large one you get lost, you don't see the others. You become a specialist, alien. In a small one, you see them all. That is the essence of universalism.

Lister Sinclair

For more than half a century, Leopold Kohr has been reflecting on the proper proportions of human communities. Twenty years before Schumacher brought out *Small Is Beautiful* or the Club of Rome called for limits to growth, Kohr published *The Breakdown of Nations*. "Behind all forms of social misery," he wrote in that book, "lies one cause: bigness. Size generates power and power tempts society irresistibly to violence." The solution, Kohr claimed, lies not in improving the moral character of human beings, but in reducing the damage they can do by reducing the scale on which they can do it. During the sixties, this philosophy of limits was taken up by a number of thinkers, notably Ivan Illich and E.F. Schumacher, both of whom called Kohr their teacher. Today, it animates a variety of influential social movements. But Kohr, often unacknowledged, was the grandfather. So tonight on *Ideas* we look into the beginnings and the ends of the thought of Leopold Kohr. The program is written and presented by David Cayley.

David Cayley

In the early 1930s, the British biologist J.B.S. Haldane published an essay called "On Being the Right Size." In this essay, he pointed to the integration of form and function in nature, arguing that every creature has exactly the size and shape it needs to get its living. A horse wouldn't get far on a mouse's legs, nor a mouse on a horse's. The point seems obvious enough once it's been made, but it has profound implications.

Leopold Kohr drew out these implications by developing a philosophy of social size. Societies too have their proper scales, he argued, and they exceed them at their peril. He

first put forward this idea in Toronto in 1939, telling an audience at the University of Toronto that peace would come not through unifying the nations of the world but through breaking them apart. Fifty years later, in the summer of 1989, Leopold Kohr again addressed a meeting at the University of Toronto, this time lecturing to a group of his intellectual descendants at the annual conference of a group which calls itself "The Fourth World." I had the pleasure of meeting Leopold Kohr during that conference and of receiving him as a guest in my home. I found him charming and completely original and would gladly have listened to his stories for much longer than the time we actually had together.

Leopold Kohr is deaf and has been since his years in Toronto during the war but, through the use of a small microphone attached to a hearing aid, he's able to make out what is said to him directly. Before he left Toronto, we were able to record an interview and these recorded reminiscences of an old man returning to a scene of his youth make up tonight's program.

Leopold Kohr was born in Oberndorf, an Austrian village in the vicinity of Salzburg, and the place where the beloved Christmas carol *Silent Night* was composed by the village schoolmaster in the early nineteenth century. Young Leopold got the story wrong and thought that it had been composed by his own schoolmaster. When I asked him to compare himself to other thinkers in his lineage, like Illich and Schumacher, he said that they came from Nazareth, he from Bethlehem, meaning that they were drawn to the philosophy of smallness by its intellectual cogency, while he was actually born into this reality and has it in his bones.

He spent his student years in Salzburg, reflecting on the beauty of that small city state, the northern Rome, with all its glories the handiwork of a population of not more than a hundred and fifty thousand people. He did graduate study in Paris, Vienna, and the London School of Economics, and took a law degree at Innsbruck. Eventually, having no other definite plan for getting a living, he went to Spain as a freelance journalist to cover the Spanish Civil War. But he went there with a curious and original question. It was not the clash of titanic forces which interested him, but the question of how people manage to live in spite of war. He wanted to study what the Spanish philosopher Miguel Unamuno called "peace in war." In Spain, he met other writers also drawn to this pivotal

conflict: Ernest Hemingway, André Malraux and, notably, George Orwell.

Leopold Kohr

George Orwell I met in cafés. He stayed away from the official press environment. He had been a soldier, not a journalist, there, and tried to get out of Spain. So I met him in a café where most Spaniards spent all waking hours of the day. I still remember the signs: "The enemy is only 150 kilometres away," so that the idea was, while you are sipping your coffee, remember...well, no one remembered that. They sipped their coffee.

One day a fellow came, gangly, tallish, and asked whether he could sit by my table. Everything was crowded: I had one seat free and, as a matter of fact, there was only room for two and I said, "Of course," and he said, "Well, anyone who introduces himself nowadays uses a false name. At any rate, my name is George Orwell." And of course this was a false name. His real name was Eric Blair. But from that day on, for a week, we always met. I had no idea who he was. But what struck me was our conversations and his attitude towards the emerging age of mass dominance. People said afterwards that he was a prophet anticipating things to come in his *1984*. He didn't anticipate things to come. We talked about what was going on around us, in 1937.

David Cayley

Orwell and Kohr had a very similar sense of what was going on in Spain. Kohr would say later that Orwell's book *1984* and his *The Breakdown of Nations* were like siblings – the very different fruits of a common experience. Orwell, as he records in *Homage to Catalonia*, was already disillusioned with the alphabet soup of ideologies at play in Spain. Both men saw the individual increasingly crushed by the weight of the mass. So Kohr sought out the human face of Spain.

Leopold Kohr

I wanted to see how people can live in the midst of war. At that time there were many demonstrations all over—like anti-nuclear demonstrations now, or Green demonstrations—in Germany or Italy for the Fascists in Spain, and the rest for the Republicans, exposing the repressions. And so I went there and said how can they live if all this is true? When I was in Valencia, Almería was bombed by a German battleship. I still remember André Malraux in the press room, dictating in a sonorous, shaking French voice. When he spoke I never knew whether he was shaken by the beauty of French, which moved him so

much, or by the event he described. Not a single of this glamorous bunch of journalists had the idea of going to Almería and checking.

Well, it could not have been possible but the head of the Spanish government press bureau told me Sir George Young—who had established hospitals in Alicante, Murcia and Almería—wanted a driver as his Oxford student driver had deserted back home. He had the quantity needed for graduation—emotional graduation. So I had this unique chance of driving there. In Murcia there was a party—and by the time we came to Almería: peace, peace, utter peace, sleepiness...people were dozing on the sea walls where two days earlier bombs fell.

This is what interested me: the life in the midst of war. The question what does one do? Here's this terrifying picture of Valencia, which experienced a lot of bombing, or Madrid, but...are they all nervous wrecks? So I went down, we went down into the basement of the highrise buildings and what did I see? Mothers with their babies and there was no one more beautifully groomed than the girls and wives of the soldiers fighting. Because there was war, so they made a special effort to look lovely. And there were the children in their loving hands. The bombs dropped outside. What concerned them was to play with the lips, the eyes, the heads of their babies. So this is the picture that is always withheld and that is what interested me.

David Cayley

What Kohr sought in Spain was what he would seek all his life: the sense of proportion, the saving grace of simple pleasures and a feeling for the good which is aesthetic rather than ideological. The contrast with André Malraux is striking. Malraux, with his sonorous dispatches from the front, appeared to Kohr as a man besotted with history and its heroic dreams. Kohr turned aside from dreams of greatness and gigantic accomplishment. What he saw in Spain was the grinding machinery of the mass age, the convulsive workings of history which blot out the modest proportions of the individual.

Leopold Kohr

The element that we worship, the great collective entities, the mass element, people, government for, of and by the people. People get hot with enthusiasm about that, but the meaning of western democracy is not government of the people, for the people, by the people, it is government of the individual for the individual, against the people because

this massive element can put us under its heel and we have not a chance. So I have always emphasized that the things that make us hot, steamed with enthusiasm, are the most devastating distortions of individual freedom.

Leopold Kohr

Kohr left Spain confirmed in his desire to seek alternatives to the mass society. But he did not despair of anarchism, the philosophy which animated so many of the Spanish republicans. Rather, he sought to give the term a different meaning, claiming for it something of the sense of Gandhi's *swaraj*, or self-rule.

Leopold Kohr

To this day I identify myself philosophically as an anarchist, which is always misconstrued. A world without rulers is not necessarily a world without order, but to keep order without the ruler who gives you directions to do this or that, the individual must be so ethically prepared, so considerate, so respectful of everybody else's fear as a co-sovereign that the idea of violence is the worst contradiction of the idea of anarchism. People must realize that anarchism, a world without rule, is something vastly different from anarchy. Anarchy is a mess. And that is why the modern anarchists, when they try to mess things up, are degrading the name of anarchism.

Leopold Kohr

Leopold Kohr left Spain in 1938 and went to Paris where he wrote for a French news agency. His native Austria was already Nazi. And when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, Kohr decided to leave Europe for America. He landed in New York penniless and with only a visitor's visa. To gain more permanent status, he had to apply from outside the country and so he came to Toronto for a day to obtain an immigrant visa.

Leopold Kohr

When I found I could get the visa, I meant to take the next train back, but I had a casual address, a Mrs. Wrong. I rang, as I had four hours to wait for the train back, and she said, "Well, come over for tea." So I arrived for tea, in sandals without socks, and stayed in the house for two and a half years, so beating all the records of the man who came to dinner. He stayed only one year after dinner; I stayed two and a half years. When you can't reach for things, they fall into your lap.

Leopold Kohr

The house where Kohr stayed on Walmer Road was the home of Professor George Wrong. Wrong had founded the department of history at the University of Toronto, where he was surrounded by a brilliant and influential circle of students and colleagues. Kohr became his secretary and participated in this circle.

Leopold Kohr

His faculty made Canada the only country that was ruled by historians: Mackenzie King, Vincent Massey, Hume Wrong—his son, a very distinguished ambassador—and the last of his tribe was Lester Pearson. And when I asked Professor Wrong once, how on earth did you assemble this marvellous faculty of wise historians around you? he said, well, very simple, I had a simple rule: the members of my staff had to be scholars and had to be gentlemen and if they knew something of their subject, all the better. So it was a wonderful experience for me.

David Cayley

Kohr flourished in Toronto. He wrote for *Saturday Night*, *Le Droit* in Ottawa, *The Globe and Mail*, and various other Canadian papers; and he began to work out his philosophy of smallness. The basic idea dawned on him while he was living with the Wrongs.

Leopold Kohr

At one breakfast conversation we talked about Clarence Streit, a famous journalist author of the time, who had brought out a book called *Union Now*. The war had started and Canada was already in it, and he suggested one must plan for the future, so the Atlantic allies should unite into a single community. After the war, Europe should unite with the defeated and then with the world. Union now. It should start now.

As an amusement I suggested maybe the solution is in the opposite direction, so let's investigate or let's follow in our thoughts what would happen if, instead of uniting the small, we dismembered the big. Well, at the end of the breakfast, that new thought had made at least one convert: myself. A growing society, when it reaches a given point, has always exploded, like the supernova in the stars. So the annihilating element awaiting us all is not disunion but growth, overgrowth. Everyone hailed growth. One of my first articles published on the subject of the economic aspect of smallness was published by the University of

London, Ontario, in *Business Quarterly*. It bears the subtitle *The Limits to Growth*. Forty years later, the Club of Rome picked it up.

David Cayley

Kohr's new idea was first expressed, as I mentioned earlier, in a lecture at Hart House. An essay called "Disunion Now," for the American left Catholic magazine *Commonweal*, gave it wider circulation. Then this time of intellectual flowering was marred by a great and unexpected grief. Kohr suddenly lost his hearing, at first partially, and then almost completely. Medical specialists were unable to help.

He decided that a change of climate might do him good and moved to California. There he continued his writing while working as a photographer's apprentice and night watchman at the YMCA. Eventually his good luck reappeared and he was asked by the Carnegie Foundation to make a study of customs unions. The document he prepared became one of the foundations of the Treaty of Rome, which established the European Common Market in 1957.

Leopold Kohr

When that was finished, I came to Rutgers University where I taught for ten years in New Brunswick, New Jersey. That is where I wrote *The Breakdown of Nations* in three weeks, in a snowed-in Christmas period, no one there, everything deep in snow, everyone on holiday. In the morning, there were tracks in the deep snow. In the evening, they were still the only tracks there were and the lamps under their coachman's caps of snow. In this utter, undisturbed peace, I wrote a chapter every day, almost without break. And after three weeks, the day came when I put in, "The End."

David Cayley

The Breakdown of Nations is a book of considerable ambition. He is searching, Kohr says at the beginning, for a theory by which all phenomena of the social universe can be reduced to a common denominator. He asks why great efflorescences of civilization, like the European Renaissance, have so often been accompanied by such barbarous cruelty, why great nations so often go to war, quite regardless of their character or professed principles. And he answers that they have crossed a threshold which he calls "critical magnitude," a combination of density, technological power, and sheer numbers. "A nation," he

says, "becomes spontaneously aggressive when its power reaches a critical volume." The same process also functions in reverse: when a nation's power recedes, so does its belligerence. That is why formerly warlike nations like Sweden or Portugal today have a more amicable disposition. Ideology, he believes, is only a secondary cause, functioning as a kind of accelerator of social size.

In *The Breakdown of Nations*, Kohr writes as a social scientist, but often his analysis seems supported by a more theological shrewdness. Sometimes he makes me think of the line in the Lord's Prayer which asks, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," a line which modern translators render as "Let us not be put to the test." Power corrupts, according to Kohr, and we can only avoid the test we inevitably fail by arranging our societies so that we avoid this temptation.

The penultimate chapters of Kohr's book are called "Can It Be Done?" and "Will It Be Done?" "Can It Be Done?" leads him into a lengthy description of how a process of national devolution might work. "Will It Be Done?" is answered with what one reviewer called "the shortest chapter ever written," the single word *no* on an otherwise blank page.

Leopold Kohr

It can of course be done. Nothing would be easier, because these small states still exist to this day. One must just take the veil away from their unifying cover. But size, bigness, one of the devastating things, it overpowers you, it rolls over you. And we all are accessible to this awful temptation. I'm always overwhelmed by London or New York. Like Ulysses, you have to chain yourself to the mast when you pass by the sirens, that your sailors don't follow your command, land there and be destroyed.

But the people are not chained, the statesmen are not chained to the mast. When a community reaches a given size, it is no longer a community of individuals, but individuals are particles of a mass. This century started with nine big powers; now there are two left, and before too long there will be one left and then none. So this is physics. In nature, when things can no longer be restrained, the cells in the body through aging break down their barriers, they begin to fuse, it becomes cancer, and that is the end. And when a star, at a given point, gets growing, well, nature's device of solving this cancerous disturbance in the stellar universe is to help it grow into a supernova and then

explode. Plant specialists inject weeds with growth serum. They don't tear them out, which is very hard. They let them destroy themselves by injecting growth serum, and then they wilt.

Our time it has injected itself first with the League of Nations, now with the United Nations, and we are, as Toynbee has pointed out, at the great cultural unifying point, which has always been the penultimate step to destruction. The united world will disintegrate and start again at the point where it was when the Lord gave his curse on the unified structure of the tower of Babel and forced everyone to speak a different language that they should not understand each other. Because when we do understand each other, we conspire, as Adam Smith said. So not knowing what the other is saying, as in the case of deafness, leads to the most peaceful existence. I don't hear insults, I smile, which embarrasses people who insult me until they begin to talk nicely.

David Cayley

The Breakdown of Nations was written at Rutgers in the early 1950s but didn't see the light until 1957. Publisher after publisher refused the manuscript. Then, once again, a chance encounter changed Kohr's life and luck.

Leopold Kohr

In my life, I never was able to reach for anything. The great things fell into my lap. In Oxford, at a conference, I sat by chance during an intermission at a small table. There was—as in Spain with Orwell—a gentleman sitting next to me, and I had just got another rejection slip for *The Breakdown of Nations*, which reached me in Oxford. So I said, "I'll never submit my book to a publisher again. What I shall do is to transcribe it on medieval parchment with illuminated lettering; then I shall have a rarity, and sell it at an auction." And I said, "The reason is that publishers cannot place me because there hasn't been a legitimate anarchist writer in half a century."

So the gentleman said very gently, "Maybe you'll let me have a look at the manuscript. I too am an anarchist—a gentle anarchist—but I'm also a publisher." So I said with some doubt, "Okay, give me your card. I'll send it to you." So he gave me his card. I could have fallen underneath the table: Sir Herbert Read. I said, there hasn't been a legitimate anarchist writing in half a century and I was sitting next to the most distinguished anarchist, art critic, poet. So,

if that hadn't been, my book would never have been published.

I sent it and he published it and we became close friends. He was the first one who understood what I was arguing, that it was not a defence, nor an attack on policies, but I tried to pull the rug from underneath the feet of the age, which pays homage to the multitudes at the expense of the individual and then passes itself off as the guardian of freedom.

David Cayley

In 1956, Leopold Kohr moved from Rutgers to the University of Puerto Rico in San Juan. There he taught economics and contributed to local papers and magazines, mainly on the subject of cities and city planning. These occasional essays were recently collected and published under the title *The Inner City*. Though many are about planning controversies of thirty years ago, they still display a keen eye, a trenchant wit, and a considerable talent for satire.

At a time when Puerto Rico was undergoing a rapid, destructive, and disorienting modernization, Kohr denounced the ambitions of planners and praised the native sense with which people make their own environments. Comparing the city to a living body, he favoured designs fostering beauty, conviviality, and organic patterns of relatedness. The ugly, the abstract and the mechanistic he damned. When planners defended their practices in terms of the sheer numbers to be accommodated, Kohr disagreed, arguing that numbers are always relative to the actual patterns in which people live.

Leopold Kohr

The size of nations depends not only on the birth rate, it depends on integration. An integrated society is larger than the same number of people not integrated. And velocity, the speed at which a population begins to move, makes a society larger than one which moves more slowly. So what we suffer from today is not a physical overpopulation, though it gets dangerous with five billion alive—but even with these five billion, two-thirds of the world is still empty, like Siberia with its immense emptiness. So what we suffer from is a velocity overpopulation. People, when they are integrated, have so many communications needs and centres to visit, tourist places to call on, that that blows up the numerical population, which might be five billion. The

velocity factor turns it into fifty billion, and it is that which suffocates us. Now the only way of reducing this is not necessarily birth control, but size control of states, to reduce the distances each of us has to cover to perform our daily functions. Not decentralization but centralization writ small, the small community, which slows down the need for fast movements. And when we move slower, the effective population becomes smaller without a single person being killed.

The analogy I give is a theatre manager who says, in the case of fire or emergency, walk, do not run—because running multiplies the effect of a population as if there were ten times as many in the audience. So he has emergency exits to cope not with his numerical audience, but with his velocity audience. When you teach, you always find that one entrance door for students is ample. Reluctantly they filter through at slow pace, but when the bell rings at the end, they get stuck in the doors, because the exit velocity is much faster, and the higher velocity has the effect of increasing the pressure.

That also explains the mystery of traffic congestion. I pointed it out in *The Inner City*. When the New Jersey turnpike was opened, I think in 1949, the first of the great super highways, I was in New Brunswick, New Jersey at the time. The turnpike was half a mile from the centre of New Brunswick. The authorities said when it opened in 1949 that by 1975 an extra lane would be necessary. The predicted 1975 density of traffic happened a week after opening. So the solution of all our urban living is to do away with the need for high-speed communication and the fact that from the suburb you must be in your office about the same time as if you lived a hundred yards away on foot. So the answer is return to the city in dense, elegant, small clusters, where traffic will not jam up because traffic is not needed.

David Cayley

Many of Leopold Kohr's ideas on cities or on transportation patterns were unusual in the 1950s when they were first expressed. By the later 1960s, they were beginning to get a wider hearing. One of the journals through which Kohr found his new audience was called *Resurgence*, a British magazine which still exists. *Resurgence* was launched in May 1966. The main feature of its first edition was an article by Kohr called "The New Radicals." The editor was John Papworth and around him gathered a circle of like-minded thinkers.

Leopold Kohr

John Papworth had a very gracious, still has a most gracious house in London, and he gave the most stimulating parties, not with the idea of being stimulating; he just invited friends he met to come at the same time and there I met all sorts...a small community, no requirement of having a wardrobe lady and so forth. It brought people together at the dinner table—the symposium, Plato's symposium, which means *drinking together*.

David Cayley

One of the people with whom Kohr ate and drank at John Papworth's house was E.F. Schumacher, the man who would eventually popularize the philosophy he and Kohr shared through his book *Small Is Beautiful*. Soon they became friends and often lectured together.

Leopold Kohr

When someone has similar ideas, one has really nothing to say. I enjoy controversy, I enjoy people not converted, who are against me. That gives me life. But when everyone has similar ideas, it's more difficult. But in his case, the basis of the mutual enjoyment was a delight both of us shared in illustrating our ideas with lots of nice stories. The philosophy was, of course, not new, but every story he told was a delight. He was a man of religious faith but without losing his humour. I know sometimes the two don't go together. I'm too much of a satirist. Not a cynic—I too believe, but my end is I don't believe that what I think is good will ever happen. His idea was it *could* happen. He did what I never could do: prove his idea by turning it into practical experience.

He decided that on a small scale it was unnecessary to buy bread from the baker's. He could do it too, simply, that's not so complicated, without diminishing his work as the Coal Board's chief statistician. So he decided one Sunday to make the bread for his Biblically large family of eight himself. It took him two hours a week and from then on to the last of his life, he always made the bread.

In Puerto Rico he was asked by a lady, "Yes, okay, but what does your wife say about how you leave the kitchen?" And he said, "Lady, when I leave the kitchen, no one knows that anyone has ever been there." Now, I was very pleased. When he was a guest in my house in the tropics, I couldn't figure out why there was never a trace that he had a shower and yet his fragrance was fresh. But never a dot of water in

the bathtub. Well, after he said this, I realized it was the same as with breadmaking: when he left the kitchen no one knew that anyone had ever been there, and when he left the bathroom, no one knew that anyone had ever been there and taken a shower.

Always he was the most wonderful, loving man. He was not an intellectual at the expense of emotions. So when he left, I told him "Now that you have been my guest for two weeks, we have a few things to settle." So momentarily he was a bit shocked. I put a sheet underneath his hand, and a pen, and asked him, "Now in settlement, would you be kind enough, above your own signature, to write the little verse you told me a few days ago." So this was the bill I submitted and the verse was: "Little children surely/Age you prematurely,/Yet when all be told,/They keep you young when old." This was the unknown, benign Schumacher.

David Cayley

Schumacher and Kohr remained friends until Schumacher's untimely death in 1977. By that time, Kohr had left Puerto Rico and moved to Wales where his ideas had had an enthusiastic reception among Welsh nationalists. The connection with Wales began as yet another happy accident, this time the result of a hostile review of *The Breakdown of Nations* in *The London Observer* by Cambridge philosopher Eric Wolheim.

Leopold Kohr

It said, this is a very important book, everyone should read it, everything the author says is wrong. So a few weeks later I get in Puerto Rico a letter. The signature was Gwynfor Evans, president of the Welsh National Party. It made me feel a bit uncomfortable but then, when I read it, it was a marvellous letter, an Athenian letter, of an Athenian small-state nationalist, strictly a cultural, not a racial concept. And it started out, "I read the review of your book in the *Observer* and I thought, if an English paper gives a book such a panning, there must be something to it. So I bought it. And you will be interested that I am trying to put into practice what you say." So, if it had not been for that bad review, Gwynfor Evans wouldn't have read the book, and I would never have received an invitation to Wales—which, like Professor Wrong's tea invitation, was one of the great things that changed my life.

David Cayley

Kohr moved to Wales in 1973. He became attached to the extramural department of the University College of Wales in Aberystwyth, a department charged with bringing the university to the villages of Wales. His colleagues there found both his ideas and his person so congenial that they exempted him from the requirement imposed on all other faculty of having to be able to speak Welsh. Today, at age eighty-one, Kohr has retired from the university and lives in Gloucester, England. He continues to lecture and write.

Leopold Kohr has made contributions to a number of intellectual fields ranging over political theory, development studies, city planning, and economics. As an economist, he has called for the practice of what he calls a "meta-economics," an economics that looks beyond its own professional borders for inspiration and insight. He challenges the supposed independence of economics as a discipline by pointing out that economic life is also subject to natural laws. The cycles described by the economist, he says, are no different than other natural cycles.

Leopold Kohr

What animates the waves of water, as Da Vinci said, also explains the waves of wind, of sound and light. So this is a meta-economics, these are physics outside...beyond economics. And then I am at the door of economics, I open it and see another wave: business cycles. And the reason why economists can't grasp this is that this structure of cycles has changed. These are no longer caused by the irregularities of business activities which produces spells; they have entirely different, non-economic, meta-economic, physical origins. What we confront is size cycles. At a given size of integration, things become uncontrollable, not only by capitalist intervention, but by state intervention, by communist intervention. There are cyclical fluctuations and size cycles in the Soviet Union, but without a Marxist theory to explain it, it can't be in a controlled economy. So they shoot the business managers. So this is what I mean. To understand economic phenomena, one must not matematicize or statistify them, but philosophize them, go back to the laws of nature.

David Cayley

But to reason by analogy with natural laws is anathema to the economist.

Leopold Kohr

Yes, it is anathema...not only to economists. In antiquity there were statistikons who accused the analogikons. An analogist is really very theological because he assumes there is only one law. No one used more analogies than Jesus. And that was his impact. Because things we do not understand in one dimension and which we are unfamiliar with in economics, we can understand in another dimension. So, when I suggest that the solution to bigness is break up the big powers, I often use the analogy of an avalanche coming from the Austrian Alps.

The way avalanches are dealt with is the controllers put small barriers of concrete sticks over a field. So when an avalanche begins to develop, just as it begins to enjoy the mass of its weight and power, it runs into these partitioning pillars which turn the awful thing into a harmless spray, without damaging the beauty of the snow. And the thing is that, politically, nothing at all is lost by returning to smaller communities. This is what I mean by meta-economics, these insights we get by stepping beyond economics and then coming back into economics with the conclusion that it's just the same as any other field.

David Cayley

Kohr's thought rests on the idea that nature, including our own human nature, must finally be our guide. The scale on which we can happily live is given by our own embodied being. It is the scale of feet and hands and eyes, the scale of what we can see and touch, and walk towards. It is the scale of beauty, which must always recognizably reflect our own proportions. Beyond this scale, we quite literally take leave of our senses and arrive at something which is ultimately monstrous and inhuman. What we can love, what we can know, what can be beautiful for us, all depend on there being a limit, a certain measure, Kohr says. Smallness is good because it is necessary, and necessary because it is the only scale on which we can actually grasp the world around us.

Leopold Kohr

In a small community, everything happens as in a large community, with the difference that there you can grasp it. As in *Gulliver's Travels*: there is a phrase that in a small circle are just as many degrees as in a large one. But in a large one you get lost, you don't see the others, you become a specialist, alien. In the small one, you see them all. That is the essence of universalism.

In little Athens, Aristotle wouldn't have had the chance of seeing only philosophers. There were not enough. So he had to talk with politicians, with maids, with servants, with shoemakers, with dramatists, with literary people—and out of this came the universalist civilization of our time, which is ninety per cent Greek.

David Cayley

Leopold Kohr insists on smallness, but his thought is always supple and cosmopolitan, never rigid or parochial. Today many of his once heretical ideas receive lip service, but often they are appropriated in a purely utilitarian way. It is Kohr's strength that he resists this easy appropriation. He sees that smallness, applied as a mechanical principle, could result in a world even uglier and more stifling than the one we live in now. It is only through ethical and aesthetic feeling, he says, that we can rediscover the proper scale of things. And because this illusive sense can never be specified, but only lived, Leopold Kohr remains, in both his life and his thought, an invaluable teacher.

Lister Sinclair

Tonight on *Ideas* you've been listening to a profile of Austrian philosopher Leopold Kohr. The program was prepared and presented by David Cayley. Technical production by Lorne Tulk. Production assistants: Gail Brownell and Faye Macpherson. The executive producer of *Ideas* is Bernie Lucht.

Transcription by Hedy Muysson.