

# The Path to Change: Community

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2021

The movement for social change must be comprehensive and multi-dimensional. There is no simple Solution and no single Best Way to get from here to there.

But there has recently been a shift of sentiment regarding where and how our efforts for social change are most likely to be rewarded. Individuals and families, increasingly atomized within mass society, lack the resources and leverage to have that much of an impact. At the other end of the spectrum, the dominate institutions (corporations, government agencies, large universities, non-profits, etc.) possess institutional inertia to a degree that frustratingly impedes change.

The milieu most conducive to transformative activity may be that intermediate level of human association we refer to as community.

## Two Different Ways of Human Life

Until relatively recently, from the perspective of natural history, the vast majority of humans lived within a communitarian social context—tribes or villages or small towns characterized by familiarity with/interdependence among neighbors, and identity with a particular place-on-earth. Social and territorial domains-of-life were local, bounded, human-scale, and manageable. Under those circumstances accountability and responsibility mostly was immediate, and direct. Poet Gary Snyder refers to this as the Old Ways.

About ten thousand years ago, for reasons debated by historians and anthropologists (though there is consensus that increasing dependence upon a more-intensive form of agriculture was a factor), a radical alteration of lifeways took hold in selected areas of the human diaspora. Aggressive cultures driven to development and expansionism suddenly confronted autonomous tribes and villages as an external, destabilizing force. The indigens tried to resist both the aggressors and the pressure to transform their own ways of living, but the aboriginal communities were almost always, eventually, overwhelmed by the empire builders.

With the spread of this phenomenon, Neolithic culture in general trended toward New Ways—toward a labor-intensive organization of life preoccupied with acquisition and productivity. The rise of the state, patriarchy, and the concept of private property followed in its wake. The seeds of the modern Leviathan can be traced to this momentous transition from one way of life to another.

## Withering of Community Within the Leviathan

During the millennia since the Neolithic Revolution, social resources have increasingly been allocated away from local communities toward urban-centric institutions and state-sponsored development/commerce/militarism.

Philosopher of technology, Lewis Mumford, wrote about how, since antiquity, commercial interests and the state have constituted an interlocking juggernaut ever-promoting the ideology of progress and technological development. We've now arrived at a point where life has become almost totally dominated by the hypertrophied institutions and technologies of mass industrial society.

The mega-states and multinational corporations have become remote, self-aggrandizing power centers. In what are called free market democracies, people are reduced to participating by casting votes for representatives or buying shares of stock, but effective control is wielded by elites who are the beneficiaries of unprecedented concentrations of wealth and power.

Under these circumstances, community has withered. Personal life has become atomized and hyper-individualistic. Families reside in consumption-oriented bedroom communities characterized by high rates of mobility. Material standards of living ratchet up along with competitive pressures. Social capital dwindles while stress on people and the planet increases.

It is imperative to recognize the stark alternatives we are now confronting. One path continues the unsustainable, unsatisfying status quo. Another leads in the direction of reclaiming equilibrium, balance, and social sanity. The latter means scaling down and slowing down, learning to live more lightly. Individuals and families can do their part, but such a major transformation of lifeways requires the aggregated power of social movements and collective efforts.

## **We Need to Make Change Together**

A key aspect of the movement for a new society will be fostering the emergence of intentional communities committed to taking an integrated approach to addressing the problems of ecological degradation and social dysfunction.

People need to make change together, ideally at a scale where they feel empowered and consequential. We all could benefit from having the inspiration and appreciation of valued Others who are simultaneously colleagues, comrades, and neighbors.

We need to have the pleasure of company and co-participation, the motivation of peer appraisal (and praise!), the sense that we are engaged in significant common enterprise and shared goal-achievement. It is in community, through joint action, that we have the best chance to improve our quality of life while making significant strides in the direction of sustainability.

Psychological/characterological health is dependent upon having a place and a status within a comprehensible social world. Disorientation results from trying to negotiate within domains that effectively lack boundaries and from trying to succeed while confronting standards associated with steeply pyramidal status hierarchies.

We're given the impression that we are fortunate to be presented with near-limitless sources of stimulation, choice, and opportunity. But psychologists are discovering that such an operational milieu is confusing, distracting and anxiety-provoking. In our globalized mass-production/ mass-consumption/mass-communication reality, human scale long ago ceased to be a value.

All has gone hyper. Too much, too fast, too far, too big. Too synthetic and overly complex. Ours is now a civilization of disorientation and discontent.

The lesson to be learned is that social pathology invariably results when a society becomes unmoored from a basic grounding in sensibilities of limits and balances. Avoiding a collision course with madness requires more than technological panaceas, corporate constraints, or governmental regime change. We need to restore the human scale in all aspects of life. We need to reconstitute real community.

The eco-communitarian solution to the modern crisis points is locally-oriented, humanly-scaled lifeways characterized by familiarity, stability, interdependence, and relation-to-place. Such is the basis for respect, love, and care for each other and for the earth.

Cohousing and ecovillage communities can serve as models and base camps for the broad global movement working to green our civilization and set it on a path toward sustainability.

We need to find our way Home.

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2021

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Fifth Estate #409, Summer, 2021

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