

# Out of Kilter

by

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You know how some days nothing seems to go right. On the personal level a bad day usually rights itself after a good night's sleep. Well, the world is having one of those days except the unpleasantness is stretched out over generations. The first analogy that comes to mind is the heart. When the heart is working properly, it enjoys an endless repetition of the rhythmic, integrated contraction of millions of cardiac muscle cells. However, on occasion some hearts experience fibrillation: the uncoordinated twitching of the muscle fibers of the ventricles. During fibrillation the cardiac fibers participate in a kind of cellular anarchy or hyper-individualism that renders the heart ineffective as a pump. Society is suffering fibrillation. People and institutions are pathologically self-absorbed. Empathy is lost, personal struggle has replaced cooperation. Free speech is vigorously protected only so long as the speaker says what the audience wants to hear. Fear is the common currency that pervades the political process, employment, health, education, family life, religion—in short, every aspect of society.

This is naturally terrifying to confront all at once. If you try tackling each of the seemingly endless catastrophes lurking in all directions, you'll quickly wind-up going mad. But take heart, the righting of the world's bad

day is not as hopeless or overwhelming as you might think. Two popular theories, Chaos and its newer spin-off Complexity, are both powerful ways of looking at how complex change occurs. I don't wish to mislead you into thinking that a new theory is the answer to everyone's prayers. If anything, I'm against advocating any theory being applied to social problems. That would be just another misstep into the trap I'm arguing against. I use Chaos theory merely as a metaphor to aid discussion.

It is still impossible to predict the nature of future transformations, however, the *patterns* of change are understandable and predictable. Furthermore, it's now clear that extremely simple, local events can have profound global consequences of extraordinary complexity. The point I'm trying to make is that the apparently disconnected, disintegrating facets of society are all likely related at the deepest level. I have no idea what has caused the spontaneous decay of the Western World—it's probably not knowable. The encouraging thing is that while simple, imperceptible events can bring about chaos, other seemingly insignificant actions can produce order out of chaos. Again, I haven't a clue what actions will lead to the phoenix-like emergence of order out of the present social confusion. Chaos theory can't tell us either, but it does say that there is likely a simple solution—however unknowable—to the deterioration of our world and ourselves. Chaos theory powerfully affirms that the unique contributions of each person on the planet bear the seeds of healing the world—and unfortunately its destruction. Whatever happens, we're all responsible.

Relying on the current obsession of examining problems out of context and analyzing them to death just pours fuel on the fire. It is fashionable to mimic the so-called scientific method when dealing with non-scientific issues. We separate into discreet units the problems of unemployment, education,

the disintegration of families, teenage suicide and pregnancy, racial problems, health care—you name it. We become experts and authorities in the micro-niches we cut out for ourselves, believing only professionals are competent to understand and address the issues peculiar to our specialties. The majority of us have become so hypnotized and seduced by the authority of experts that we are powerless to act coherently on the problems plaguing society. The belief that others—however well intentioned and loaded with credentials—have the solutions to our difficulties is killing us.

The schools are a good example of how not to fix things. We don't need a new theory of education (everything has been said many times over) or the implementation of the latest techniques and tricks to mollify and subdue students. Children are the best hypocrisy detectors available, yet we persistently ignore them to the peril of our society. Children are the mirrors of the state of health and character of a society. What we see happening to young people is truly horrifying—and rightly so. They reflect an image of our society that is honest and true.

Schools are not automobiles that you can take to the shop for repairs. Trying to fix the schools as if they weren't connected to the rest of society is like spraying deodorant on the garbage instead of tossing it out. Regrettably, changing policy or adding another program is easier than facing the truth: that children are showing us who we are through their fitful struggles against becoming miniatures of their elders' self-delusions. Of course children have much to learn from adults. What is so unsettling is that they learn society's lessons with uncompromising fidelity. We teach children what we've *done*; children show us who we *are*. If we truly want to improve our society we somehow have to muster the courage to listen to the young and learn from them what is right and wrong with ourselves and our society.

I do have specific thoughts on how to revitalize our entire nation in a conspicuous way. As most Americans, I deeply wish for democracy, however, our present system has reached a dead end. This is manifested daily in the public contempt for Congress and politicians in general. Few people believe our system is really democratic; it becomes more alienated from our lives everyday. I propose it's time for another Constitutional Convention. No less a democrat than Thomas Jefferson urged just such a frequent convening of the governed.

The people now in power would fear this prospect more keenly than the reemergence of the Soviet Union. The reason is simple: All hell would break loose. The new Constitution would not remotely resemble our current one. For that matter, the process may fail altogether. But if we truly believe in our ability to govern ourselves, we should be trusted to do it. I propose that we combine the two houses of Congress into one and pick our representatives by lottery. Each citizen would be at risk of being selected only once. The tour of duty, so to speak, would be limited to one term of say six years. There could be a lottery every two years to select a third of the members at a time, just as the Senate is now. Just think: there would be no more campaigning and over 500 million dollars in campaign funds would be freed up for more productive purposes. (Many may miss the sport of a Presidential campaign so an accommodation to this national ritual may have to be worked out.) What a blessing! The evils of running for office would be eliminated in one stroke. We have to face it: either we believe we can govern ourselves or we don't. If not, lets stop being hypocrites, at least. I say it's time to put 200 years of fine rhetoric to the test.

The new constitution should restore the sovereignty of the people. The corporations have arrogated for themselves the protections of the Bill of

Rights that were intended to safeguard people against the intrusive weight of government. We need a new Bill of Rights to protect us from the intrusive weight of the corporations. There may even be support for an ecological Bill of Rights for the planet.

I have no illusions that what I am proposing will be the magic elixir to solve all the problems of our decaying democracy. As William Greider argues forcefully in *Who Will Tell The People: The Betrayal of American Democracy*,<sup>1</sup> “Democracy is held captive, not just by money, but by ideas—the ideas that money buys.” No matter how we pick our representatives there will always be the voice of money competing against the voices of the people. If a Constitutional Convention were convened, corporations and other centers of corruption would do all in their power (which is formidable) to commandeer the process and turn it to their advantage. What I propose is a dangerous step that deserves vigilance and passionate commitment—but not taking it could be lethal!

A Constitutional Convention or something like it would focus national attention and lead to mass participation (though far from total, the residue of generations of apathy) in building a future rather than passively watching our inexorable collapse. Along with re-working the political structure of the United States we must de-emphasize several of our prevailing mythologies.

The first is the preeminent importance we give to science. It has been said many times that science is the religion of the modern world—it appears to be true. Neil Postman in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*<sup>2</sup> argues in detail how the uncontrolled growth of technology destroys the vital sources of our humanity. Postman is not opposed to technology, but he is against elevating it above all else. Science envy has plagued institutional thought for over 150 years. No pursuit is considered

legitimate unless the word science is fastened to it: social science, political science, creation science. Psychology, medicine, history and economics are all accepted as science to an appalling degree. The practitioners of these professions crave the precision and apparent certainty of physics. However, science is impotent where choice is involved and is virtually mute when it comes to the important questions of life and society.

The reductionist thinking that pervades the non-science sciences broadly infests the social and institutional psyche of the United States. The most telling example is the obsessive, blind faith in the wisdom and virtue of unbridled capitalism. Money (profits) is the meter stick by which all human activity can be measured. “If public desires and aspirations cannot be easily reduced to definable economic outcomes, then they will be treated as secondary—wishful spectators to the real action.”<sup>1</sup> The supernatural importance attached to the bottom-line stems from the unchallenged belief that to be quantitative is to be scientific and science is the right hand of God.

The unholy alliance between science and war has been obvious for centuries but the disastrous union between science and industry has gone largely unrecognized. Unrestrained technological development is believed to be intrinsically good despite polluting the environment, and the elevation of corporations above people. By 1984 there were over 60,000 brands of drugs and medicines sold in the United States, yet The World Health Organization found that only 220 were considered necessary, well-documented drugs for well-documented disorders—over 99% of all pharmaceuticals sold in the US had no established medical value.<sup>3</sup> The stream of useless drugs spewing out of the pharmaceutical companies is justified by the profits to the stock holders and the employment opportunities provided the stream of scientists churned out by the engines of higher education.

The second myth subverting the democratic foundation of our society is the popular belief that advances in the technology of acquiring and disseminating information has strengthened freedom of speech. A healthy, thriving democracy can only exist in the presence of free and impassioned discourse, argument, and debate. The mass media drug and numb the minds and the imaginations of millions of Americans. The mega-institution of network television and an ever increasing number of newspapers are controlled by a small group of corporations that decide what information to present to the nation and which issues to discuss—but what is more important: what to ignore. An efficient and most sinister way of controlling thought and public discussion is to saturate the electronic and print media with fluff, making little room for “dangerous” and controversial topics. To control people you don’t have to tell them what to think, all you have to do is limit their access to alternative views, explanations, opinions, values, and judgments. People are not so foolish as to believe that everything on television is important and of quality, but the insidious psychology implicit in television is that if something is important it will get aired. Most are aware that the majority of television is truly a wasteland, but they are persuaded there is little value in considering an issue until it becomes a headline or makes prime time. Television and the newspapers, as agents for their advertisers and powerful hidden interests, act as a sieve, selecting from life (or inventing) what is important and suitable for mass consumption.

The first step towards intellectual detoxification is to reverse the trend toward the centralization of information. But even more important than increasing the number of truly independent sources of news and information is making them respectable and worthy of consideration to the average person. Public Television must be purged of commercial support and

influence. The tax dollars needed to support PBS are trivial, especially when compared to the public service provided. Grant and user supported newspapers and radio stations of diverse viewpoints and persuasions would go a long way to counter the pervasive control of advertisers. There will be those who insist that the mass spawning of new voices that I propose will be the death knell of objectivity. Objectivity is also a myth, not supported by experience. The “objectivity” that certain people so fervently protect is really just a defense of the status quo, which happens to coincide with their personal beliefs. A cacophony of ideas and viewpoints will certainly add to the complexity of a democracy (and its enjoyment), but an ever-encroaching dearth of opinions, criticism, and argument will without question lead to its inevitable demise.

None of what I’m saying is new, of course. It just needs to be said and acted on regularly if democracy is to thrive.

## Citations

1. Greider, W., *Who Will Tell The People: The betrayal of American Democracy*, Simon & Schuster, New York (1992).
2. Postman, N., *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York (1992).
3. Lewontin, R. C., Rose, S., and Kamin, L. J., *Not In Our Genes: Biology, Ideology, And Human Nature*, Pantheon Books, New York (1984) pp. 188.