

Moving to More Widely Distributed Leadership and Decision-making

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We are entering a time when the planets are aligned as they were a few years before the Revolutionary War, the Civil War and World War II. It's hard to miss the chaos we are in, or the parallels with Britain, embroiled as it is in Brexit.

We also have some similarities to the period preceding the Reformation. This is good news, in that it offers the potential for something good to emerge. We are not doomed to fight another war.

What these eras have in common (and common sense tells us this about our time even if we aren't swayed by astrological evidence) is they are all times that brought in a new order, economic and social, as well as spiritual. Whether we can avoid the war and fight on a purely theoretical level depends now on individuals, and our state of maturity.



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The most hopeful sign is that women's voices will be heard this time. Women in general represent a huge force on the side of peaceful resolution of conflict. The feminine side naturally seeks healing if there is pain and conflict, not to impose its will on the other. This path requires strength and self-confidence, and sadly has been obscured by the historical decision toward masculine dominance.

What we in the West have accepted as basic truth is coming unraveled, and our political systems are failing to deal with the situation because they are in fact part of the old order. Very simplistically, conservatives want to hold on to the status quo, progressives want to create a new world order, and President Trump and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (a quick learner, to be sure) aid and abet the destruction of the old order by challenging all norms.

Trump and Johnson are hardly alone in their autocratic tendencies, as we see a resurgence of such leaders in many countries. China's Xi, Russia's Putin, Turkey's Erdogan, India's Modi, Israel's Netanyahu, and many others, have likewise sought to eliminate any competition to their leadership, albeit by different methods.

The real problems are not the particular leaders, in fact, but the old order itself. It must be changed because it has been unjust and we are growing beyond it.

In that sense, Trump can be seen as both Christ and anti-Christ, should we wish to interpret things in such a way, because he comes to save those who love him and need a voice to speak for them, but he also comes to disrupt and break down.

People today are more highly educated than ever before, and due largely to the Internet, more aware of what is happening even in far-off corners of the world. Vast numbers of people are certainly as qualified to make decisions as the those elected to represent them. Politics has reached a deadlock, and the U.S. Congress has been unable to make any real progress for decades, due to the pervasive influence of money.

Most people now feel they are not represented, have no voice in their government, and yet this is exactly how America traditionally has defined itself -- government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Today most of these people know their voice has been displaced by the voices of the superrich. We are moving towards becoming an oligarchy.

In other words, if we want to remain who we think we are, we have to find a way to restore the voice of the people into our politics, and maybe not even just on a national level, but, over time, worldwide. This requires rethinking our political, social and economic order on a vast scale. But we had something good, so we have to also preserve what we have as we create the new.

For power to become more distributed, we need to find a way to incorporate decisions made by the people into our government, and that opens us up to the dangers of populism, because the people's voice tends to express resentment, and urge solutions that appear to be to people's benefit, but actually may have all sorts of unintended consequences. California-style propositions, voted on by the people directly, have had varying results. Redistribution of wealth, for instance, may have been the intention, but results have not been very conducive to equality, as evident from the huge number of homeless on the streets of San

Francisco and Los Angeles.

Nathan Gardels and Nicolas Berggruen, in their book *Renovating Democracy*, argue for empowering participation without populism by integrating social networks and direct democracy into the system with new mediating institutions that complement representative government.

They propose establishing an unelected body of highly-qualified individuals who can identify the most important concerns of the people and convert them into something more workable, then present them back to the people in a direct vote, again bypassing the government. The unelected body would be made up of several people appointed by elected county officials, one from each of the institutions of higher education in a state, a few appointed by the governor, and a few appointed by (but independent of) the legislative leadership. The actual make-up could be decided by each state.



Authors Nicolas Berggruen and Nathan Gardels discuss their book, Renovating Democracy, with Berggruen Institute board member Reid Hoffman at the Commonwealth Club of California last May.

The advantage of this independent body is they are not going to come up for reelection every few years, and are not beholden to any political party. They would have eight-year terms, meet perhaps monthly, and a good idea would be to require them to sit out at least a two-year period before they could be reappointed. They would solicit data about the most pressing concerns within the state, and deal with two or three of these in a year, instead of the vast number of bills that are introduced for current legislators.

Suppose such a body had existed prior to the Brexit vote, then first they could have negotiated with a similar body in Europe to come up with the best possible terms for either staying in the EU or leaving it, then present the realistic proposals with their likely outcomes for a vote. Instead of this, prime minister David Cameron went to Europe's leaders to present Britain's gripes and came back with nothing. The Brexit vote was undertaken in the absence of any well-researched alternatives, or even realistic information, and thus represents only the desire to leave the many disadvantages of EU membership behind on the part of those who have experienced some dissatisfaction.

But a nearly 50/50 split vote cannot lead to national harmony. Young people like the freedom to travel and work in other countries, free and easy trade benefits corporations and everyone, and a wider unity acts as a deterrent to any who would consider attacking Europe.

While such a body offers the potential for inclusion into state and national decisions, and must inevitably result in real change in current political institutions and the party system, it cannot work unless everyone can be heard. The most pressing issue by far in the West and worldwide is economic inequality. The rich have gotten too rich, and their voices have become correspondingly way too loud. It is clear that politicians have focused on short-term profits, on protecting private ownership at the expense of protecting wages. The middle class is being decimated, as people who prior to the 2008 Great Recession had a well-paying job now all too frequently find themselves working several low-paid, often part-time jobs, just to survive. And yet we are told this is full employment, even as we hear yet again that Americans' Social Security benefits may have to be cut.

The system must address the loss of the commons, the attaching of nature by the rich for their own profit. Any system must ensure at least survival level, without the demands of working a soul-destroying job to add to the wealth of an already fabulously wealthy corporate elite.

Renovating Democracy offers a way for all to benefit from digital capitalism, as we enter a machine-

based, post-human-labor world. Similar to a universal basic income, which recognizes the right to a share in the wealth conferred by the use of nature, the profits from digital capitalism can be regarded as having been earned by all to some extent, and therefore to be naturally distributed to some degree to all. Did Bill Gates solely create the computer revolution? Of course not, and yet we passed on billions in profit to him personally because that's what our emphasis on private ownership of corporations had created. The millions of people who contributed by creating a stable democracy, a system of higher education that could pass on knowledge, housing and general welfare were bypassed and considered irrelevant in favor of people like Gates when it came to distributing profit.

Our thinking must be reoriented so as to challenge economic rent-seeking on the part of the ownership class. Rent here refers to income that is not earned, such as the rewards of working as a salesclerk being seized by a large corporation, while the actual laborer must apply for public welfare (like Food Stamps) to meet basic needs. Likewise, the landowner raises rent on housing so as to seize every extra penny the workers have earned, simply because he can. Everyone has to live somewhere, and while the landlord can hold on to land with little tax penalty, he will do so. A Land Value Tax would go far in solving this problem.

Raising wages for the worker will not be enough without ensuring that the extra wages will not be appropriated by the wealthy. The tax system must be revamped to ensure that economic rent is taxed heavily, while income should be taxed only when it gets out of control, not because someone reaches minimum survival level.

None of this can happen while we hold on to a political system that results in any sort of progress only when a president, Republican or Democrat, signs an executive order. Government by executive order fails to address the oligarchy problem, and leads towards an authoritarian presidency. America's present two-party system, which leaves 50% of the population very unhappy at any one time, is unsustainable. That is the path towards internal conflict, a very unsafe path to tread when so many are armed to the teeth. We must find the way to pursue a more equitable distribution, both of power and of economic wealth.

The voices of mothers are the only really loud voice speaking out for the reduction of gun ownership to reasonable levels, despite the regular occurrence of mass shootings. However, this issue is clearly dominated by the influence of those with money, and can only be resolved outside the two-party political arena. Neither Democratic nor Republican leaders have been willing to take on the NRA. For how long are we to turn aside when parents lose their children because guns are in the wrong hands? This will stop as soon as we craft legislation that truly reflects the people's voice, because an overwhelming majority of the population favors at least elementary steps, such as universal background checks.

America cannot continue on a path that leads us to greater suspicion and mistrust of each other. We must learn to work out our differences through the art of mediation and discussion, not automatically turn to punishment and the legal system. This step is happening as more women take on leadership roles, and as more of us recognize the power of the feminine side of our natures. Cooperation in standing up for freedom from sexual harassment and discrimination has empowered women because they have exercised their own strength, the power that comes from unity. As this is expanded into more realms of society, there will be changes that will prove beneficial to all.

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