

# Renewing Reason in Our Local Communities

Nothing puts the struggles of one's own life in perspective better than watching your peers succumb to despair.

Until the turn of the twenty-first century, members of Generation X seemed to have grown beyond their characteristic "[latchkey kid](#)" childhoods. Yet today, many of these fellow citizens of ours, now middle-aged, are opioid addicts and victims of what sociologist Émile Durkheim called "anomie" – that sinking feeling of having been abandoned by society.

Many others who are in the "middle" in one way or another seem to be foundering, too. The needs of the middle class are too varied and mundane to compete with the demands of agitated interest groups clamoring for attention. Political elites, unable to solve the country's problems, distract their constituents by promoting the next righteous but marginal cause. Our leaders have overlooked the stagnation of what used to be "normal," average communities in their excitement over globalization, immigration, and a digital economic boom that favors a narrow class of technological elites and financial specialists. The nation celebrates freedom for people of unusual gender identities, but shames women and men for being average, natural, women and men.

In short, many Americans no longer feel at home in America. What happened?

Senator Josh Hawley is right when he says that America needs to renew its attention to "the middle." The quibbling of Democrats' debates, and the historic dysfunction of Congress, show that most of our governing class is simply ignoring the demands that half of the country expressed by electing

President Trump. We have had more than our fill of postmodern chaos and excuses from a governing class that is fleeing from responsibility for average citizens. All generations, not least the hounded Millennials and the forgotten elderly, have heard too much about an “epidemic of loneliness” and “death by despair,” and not enough about reasons to hope.

## **Local Communities Embody Middle America**

The solution to the despair of those “caught in the middle” is to rebuild our local communities – the vital, stable environments where people can comfortably meet others and enjoy their company. For the highly educated elites, globalization provides economic and networking opportunities. Before the advent of President Trump’s more visceral, populist patriotism, acting in the national interest meant eroding economic and cultural diversity in order to enhance competitiveness on the world stage.

But the middle class thrives in local communities. As Friedrich Hayek explained in “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” local governments best provide the services that their constituents need most, because local officials have the best information about those needs. And as [David Brooks wrote](#) one year ago, “Local power is personalistic, relational, affectionate, irregular, and based on a shared history of reciprocity and trust.” Brooks defined “localism” as “the belief that power should be wielded as much as possible at the neighborhood, city and state levels” (and he predicted the coming of a localist revolution).

The poorer classes depend greatly on local communities, too, but they have neither the means nor the time to sustain the institutions on which such communities are based. It is the broad middle class that populates the churches, education boards, small businesses, ballet classes, and Meetup groups that characterize happy and healthy communities.

Social and values-based organizations are crucial to communities. Ferdinand Tönnies, Robert Nisbet, and Max Weber all attribute the decline of any community to the loss of cultural institutions that give the community its structure. At many times in the past, such as during the early modern period, changes in social relations have started at the local level as a challenge to established political structures that were hierarchical and ossified.

Today, however, social change is happening in the other direction: a tyrannical, globalist elite and relativist culture are destroying local American communities. They aggressively undermine any sense of independent identity in communities that might be defined by geography or tradition. Our postmodern culture, communications, and economy sweep away whatever is particular, personal, and self-contained.

### **Tradition: The Social Capital of the People**

While rebuilding a community requires reorganizing power, there is much more to it. It is [not enough](#) simply to urge people to rejoin their church or a baseball league. As Robert Putnam and his colleagues demonstrated in [Making Democracy Work](#), communities are built around shared traditions and norms – the “social capital” of the people. A local community has a character that distinguishes its people and place, one that gives the community an identity that its residents can relate to, negotiate with, and absorb into their own personalities. The social capital of a community is not merely an asset for its current residents: it also affects the welfare of future generations and the community’s attractiveness to newcomers. Public policy must therefore take it into account.

There is always the danger that emphasizing social capital and tradition can quickly lead a community to oppress or unjustly exclude some people. The entire political tradition of the Enlightenment can be seen as a resistance to unthinking,

oppressive traditions that were thought to underlie the Leviathan states that existed before and during early modernity. But the American communities that we are considering are much smaller in geography and population than the nation-state, and therefore the dynamics of interaction are different; as a shared language for face-to-face social engagement and events, knowledge of tradition can be essential to individuals' free participation in dialogue within their community.

Moreover, not all appeals to tradition are sincere. Niccolò Machiavelli urged leaders to pay lip service to traditional themes in their public statements in order to give their progressive policies a more appealing ideological mask. We see the same deception at work today as the dual forces of elite centrism and relativism use the language of family, peace, and religious sincerity as a convenient decoy while they in fact promote a culture of impulsive consumerism. By contrast, the tradition and common sense of America's small communities authentically uphold faith and family as ballasts against the chaos of postmodernity.

Because of the importance of passing on tradition, a flourishing community requires active communication among citizens. The members of the community must engage, debate, and cooperate in the social and political processes that govern the community's operations. But that cooperation can happen only if each citizen identifies so closely with his extended neighborhood that that identity expresses itself spontaneously in his action. In other words, true citizenship is a process of dialogue between the individual and the whole, and such citizenship is at the core of what defines any community. As Rudolf Steiner declared: "A healthy social life is found only when, in the mirror of each soul, the whole community finds its reflection, and when, in the whole community, the virtue of each one is living."

That being said, we should add that one kind of community, the

two-parent family, is founded on natural bonds that go deeper than the members' self-identification with the group. Families are the bedrock of well-being for their individual members, both children and adults. They give their members financial security, healthy emotional growth, and the life experience that imparts spiritual and practical wisdom. For children in particular, living a happy family life teaches them that the larger world – of which their family is an image – is good, a lesson that children carry all through their lives. Moreover, families act in the larger social dialogue in ways that individuals do not, through inter-couple relationships, collective parenting networks, and intergenerational support. Flourishing communities are as much defined by the engagement of families as of individuals.

### **Community as Dialogue**

Beyond the family, the interaction between community members on the street, in commerce, and in government fosters a natural, common identity that meets individuals' social and psychological needs.

In his *Politics* and *History of Animals*, Aristotle rebuked his mentor Plato for conceiving of ordinary citizens merely as herd animals that required the government of others who had more technical expertise. Aristotle rather argued that a community requires dialogue among its citizens. Humans are political animals, and even more so than any other animals, because "man is the only animal whom [nature] has endowed with the gift of speech," or reason. By rational speech we negotiate a shared identity and conceptual framework as a community. This is why Aristotle was so concerned that political entities limit the size of their populations so that all citizens could recognize each other, interact in speech, and assume (or negotiate) shared values and concepts.

Today's communities are so dynamic that they are becoming more and more ephemeral. They require constant communication

between citizens in order to maintain a real continuity of identity. They are sustained primarily in the participating individuals themselves, and not in intermediate institutions, like the athletic clubs and church groups of the past.

In some sense not much has changed. After all, individuals are always the ones who bear the identities that ground social entities of any size. Local institutions and organizations are simply small communities with specific memberships, structures, and functions. While the bonds of nature, shared interests, and a hierarchy of power may be crucial to its definition, every community rests on the individual's loyalty to it as a symbolic but very real partner that is in dialogue with the individual.

Conservatives might do well to consider some statements of Jürgen Habermas in this regard. Despite his opposition to individual rights liberalism and his neo-Marxism, Habermas recognizes – like Aristotle – that the practice of speech, and language itself, presume that we can share ideas, concepts, and an approximation of objective truth. Rational communication engages individuals in a community-wide project of discerning truth through dialogue and argument.

Habermas's view contrasts with that of postmodern linguists, who try to deconstruct the written word on the assumption that all words or ideas are radically *different* from one another. Postmodernists have so emphasized the variability and subjectivity of language's meaning that their position has developed into a comprehensive ideology of relativism – now commonly accepted – that denies that there could even be a truth that all might share. Such relativism underlies the insane politics of today. Subjective "truths" of fringe populations are being championed vigorously while the spirit of reasonable compromise for the common good languishes.

Conservatives must advance real, spoken dialogue in local communities, not only to help the psychological, social, and

financial welfare of the American middle, but also to renew our nation's faith in the possibility of arriving at the truth through reason. Contrary to the opinions of progressives – who dislike the messiness of politics and prefer technocratic management – the project of reasoned communication is not based on a stagnant, unthinking tradition. Communication is a process of constantly proposing and evaluating the reasons for ideas and behaviors – reasons that are based in a real, but evolving, common understanding of the truth.

People who get involved in local politics learn the skills of give and take, compromise, and persistence that one hones only by dealing with others face-to-face. Howard Husock and Wendell Cox, in an American Enterprise Institute report titled [\*Localism in America\*](#), point out that giants of American national politics such as Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, and Harry Truman, and many governors like Scott Walker, began their careers in local government. “One can make a case,” they add, “that recent presidents, with no experience in local office, would have benefited from having done so as well.”

## **Hope in Reason**

Sometimes societies can despair to the point of dissolving. “When this ultimate crisis comes,” Émile Durkheim said, “when there is no way out – that is the very moment when we explode from within and the totally other emerges: the sudden surfacing of a strength, a security of unknown origin, welling up from beyond reason, rational expectation, and hope.”

Social collapse is never inevitable. No matter how great one's despair, everyone retains a pre-rational hope that there is good in mankind, and that through reason we can work to improve the lives of all citizens and families. If we want to rebuild our communities, we must marshal this hope in order to rebuild a culture of reasoned discourse.

A family home is a community whose members are tied by bonds

of nature and of reason – the continual, free communication of ideas, desires, and their very selves. When these bonds are integrated well, a home thrives. The larger community of the nation is like a home: it is founded on natural bonds of a common place and history, and on the rational bonds of a common social and political life. Let us hope that we who share America as our land can soon again feel at home there, through the arduous but rewarding effort to seek the truth together.

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