

COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITIES OF COMMUNITIES

John B. Cobb, Jr.

My dream is that local communities all around the world flourish. Sadly, European and American colonialism, industrial society, and the globalization of the economy have all worked against the health of local communities. Even more sadly, what we call “education” and “development” have also worked against them. All over the world today, the weakness of local communities expresses itself in social breakdown.

What I mean by social breakdown is the situation in which individuals do not care about the well-being of their neighbors. They see nothing wrong with improving their personal situation at the expense of others. How others manage to survive is none of their concern unless the other’s actions impinge on them.

When society breaks down, individuals have no sense of belonging to any larger grouping. Unless the effect of decisions at the level of the town or city clearly harms or benefits oneself, one takes no interest in public affairs at that level. If one does find that a policy at that level is affecting one significantly, and if one is unhappy about this, one is more likely to join a rioting mob than to organize politically to change the policy. Often those who have no sense of participation in a community view the police as enemies rather than protectors.

Social breakdown makes anything resembling democracy impossible. Coercion takes the place of persuasion. And because no one wants chaos, most accept coercion. If they feel seriously damaged, they are likely to seek out a group that is violently rebelling--and join.

The consequences of social breakdown are multiple. One is widespread cynicism and even nihilism. Another is the frequency of divorce and other expressions of failed marriages. Another is the growth of gangs, shootings in public places, suicides, and emotional disorders. Another is the widespread need to escape reality, resulting in excessive use of drugs and alcohol and obsession with sex, and perhaps also endless absorption in the electronic world in lieu of real personal relations.

The strongest counter to social breakdown is the family. We are genetically programmed to feel responsibility as least for our children, our siblings, and our

parents. Our caring about them tends to incorporate a wider group to some extent.

Each country has a different history of weakening of social bonds. In my view this weakening has not gone far in China. Nevertheless, enough is happening that Chinese should be concerned. A vivid expression of the danger is that so many adults in village families leave children with their grandparents to earn money in a city. These people are not integrated into the city; so, their contribution to the city is limited to its economy. Meanwhile the quality of family life, and of the rural community they leave for work, is reduced. These losses may not be disastrous, but from the point of view of social life, they are real.

I expect that any of you can write more wisely than I about the situation in China. I will share my observations about my country, the United States. American society has not broken down in the extreme sense, but social bonds are increasingly fragile, and the symptoms of breakdown listed above are present and increasing. I will describe the social decline of the past eighty years with examples. I will then discuss the kinds of changes that might initiate a healing process and move toward an ecological civilization. I write as a concerned citizen, not as a sociologist. So please accept the fact that I am relying too much on my own experience and am only expressing the impressions of one citizen.

My childhood was spent mainly in Japan, but when I was in the United States, my home town was a middle-size county-seat town, Newnan, Georgia. The town was made up of three quite distinct sections. There was the Black ghetto that supplied servants and laborers to the White town. There was a white mill-town, occupied by cotton mills and their workers. And there was the City of Newnan where the middle class and the mill owners lived, with boundaries carefully drawn so as to exclude both the Black ghetto and the mill town.

This was the town in which my mother had grown up. She was one of seven children who had survived childhood. Her father owned a hardware-store, and he was a leading citizen. He was very interested in the public schools, and one of the schools is still named for him. His brother was at one time governor of the state. In general, social structures, including families, were strong. Five of my mother's six siblings enjoyed golden wedding anniversaries. In the remaining

case, her sister was married forty-nine years before her husband died. The family gathered from time to time and the children all knew one another.

By far the most important nongovernmental organizations in town were churches. My mother's family were Methodists, and her mother played an important educational role in the church. Despite her large family, she had time to study educational theory and apply it in the Sunday School. Like most middle-class White women, she had a servant to do much of the work at home. This enabled the White women to maintain social relationships. They also educated themselves in the churches about other parts of the world to which they sent missionaries. One of my grandmother's sisters was a missionary in Japan.

The churches represented several Protestant denominations: Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian. They differed on issues that they themselves considered secondary. There was rivalry, but no enmity, among them. All of them, along with the public schools and individual families, brought up children to be good citizens. Many who grew up in Newnan stayed there. The town had strong social cohesion.

I will also note that, while the White women were excluded from formal leadership positions, they exercised a lot of power. The health of the churches depended on their volunteer leadership and work. They were better informed about the world and about their religion than the men. When desegregation came in the fifties, the church women were ready, and they helped to prevent the destructive actions to which the White men were more inclined.

The social order of the Black community was also strong. Obviously, the people were all poor. The schools were poorly funded. Even the teachers had limited formal preparation. Many of the homes were shacks. Much of what children learned was how to fit into a profoundly unjust and exploitative system. But the teachers and ministers who were the leaders of the Black community were certainly not inferior to the teachers and ministers in the White community. Children growing up in these ghettos had excellent role models and leaders, and a sophisticated knowledge of how to survive physically and psychologically as oppressed and exploited people.

Further, relations with the White community were not simply brutal. They were humanized by the fact that many White children were brought up as much

by Black servants as by their White parents. The White employers could be counted on for help in emergencies. Whites insisted they liked Blacks “who knew their place,” meaning, who accepted their subservient and segregated status. Blacks often had some sense of belonging to families they served for decades.

I am depicting, in perhaps too generous a way, two communities, both of which had strong internal bonding and also had some kind of bonding with each other. In both communities, schools and churches were strong and supported this bonding. Families supported the communities and were supported by them.

My topic is both community and community-of communities.” The latter was illustrated in the school system by the organization of sports. Each high school had teams that played in a league with neighboring high schools. The relation was both competitive and cooperative. Also, churches of the same denomination in neighboring towns were organized in districts to work together. Relations were cooperative.

These well bonded communities provided a psychologically healthy context for growing up as a responsible, socially-concerned citizen. Obviously, the segregation and class divisions were profoundly unjust. During the 80 years following the 1930s, there have been many changes. There is no longer political support for segregation and oppression of Blacks. This gain for Blacks as individuals was accompanied by some loss in social cohesion. Perhaps a third of them have been able to take advantage of the new situation to get better paying and sometimes middle-class jobs. These typically moved out of the ghetto, sometimes into predominantly White neighborhoods. Sadly, this has meant that the Blacks who remain in ghettos, and who continue to work as servants and laborers, now lack the quality leadership they used to have. Growing up in a Black ghetto now often leads young men into gangs. Ghettos without socially positive leadership are a major form of social decay.

Newnan, which was a distinct and healthy community in the nineteen-thirties, has become a suburb of Atlanta. A freeway gets one to downtown Atlanta in twenty minutes. This means that many of the people who live there no longer work there. Since the land on all sides of the town has also become Atlanta suburb, there is little consciousness of being a citizen of Newnan. Living in the Atlanta area gives some geographical and even psychological identity, but people now living in Newnan can play no role in making decisions about

Atlanta. In short, suburbanization of a town weakens any sense of civic responsibility. This is a relatively minor form of social decay. But it is occurring all over the world. I now live in Los Angeles County in California, and Greater Los Angeles includes scores of formerly independent towns for which few now feel significant responsibility. But since millions of us in Greater Los Angeles have no vote in the city, we are likely not to be good citizens anywhere.

We should add to the reduction of political responsibility in the transition from independent town to suburb, the reduction of social responsibility from city to metropolitan area or mega-city. I can illustrate this most dramatically with Los Angeles. But I will indicate that the change in Atlanta cuts the same way. In the 1930s Atlanta had several hundred thousand people. Within the city limits were several distinct and manageable sections. The city had two newspapers that kept the public reasonably well informed about city affairs. There were many people who identified with the city and cared about its future. Now the majority of people who depend on its economy and think of themselves as living in Greater Atlanta do not live within the city limits and cannot vote for its leadership. Some live in areas incorporated as towns, but as in the case of Newnan, commitment to the well-being of these towns on the part of their inhabitants is greatly reduced. Local politics has lost its basis in civic commitments.

In the 1930s, in both Newnan and Atlanta, most shops, restaurants, and other businesses were locally owned. The business community typically cared a great deal about what decisions were made at the city level. Businessmen had disproportionate influence on local governments. But they also felt responsibility for the well-being of the town. They did better when the local community flourished. Today, most shops, restaurants, and other businesses are owned by national or international corporations. Distant owners may be interested in local politics when it affects the profitability of the local franchise, but they have little sense of responsibility for what happens in towns and cities. They observe developments, and then shift their franchises accordingly.

Finally, the new situation is one in which even family responsibility is weakened. Many jobs are with corporations who are free to move their employees anywhere in the country or even the world. Proximity to parents or children is not their concern. Some employees remain in a location long enough to "put roots down." Most do not. Increasingly, aging parents move into

professionally operated homes for old people rather than depend on family for care. Occasional visits replace daily care. Some of the inhabitants of these homes become active citizens in their local communities, but most do not.

The decline of local society tends to place more emphasis on national politics. The citizens of nations tend to be people who understand themselves as footloose individuals. Most have had no personal experience in taking responsibility for political decisions. What they know about issues and candidates for national office is learned from corporately controlled media. To get elected depends on the ability to advertise effectively. Money to advertise oneself becomes more important than experience or commitments. Those who control the media and who contribute to political campaigns largely control politics. This outcome of social decay has put an end to authentic democracy in the United States.

It is in this situation of declining social health that we can more deeply appreciate the importance of communities and communities of communities. If we simply continue on the path we have been following, social collapse is highly probable. A crumbling society will become a disaster zone when environmental crises hit. A response to disaster of every person for herself or himself multiplies the horrors. The call is for a profound reversal of much that has seemed inevitable in modernity. But, of course, there is no way to return to the past, and there was much in that past to which we do not want to return. Instead, the task is to envision a postmodern society and find our way forward.

Let us ask what or who can survive when an environmental/political/economic crisis occurs. Clearly those whose livelihood depends on international trade and communications will not survive when the structures of trade and communications collapse. To put matters baldly, the more people are independent, for their livelihood, of decisions made at a distance, the better the chances of surviving global crises.

This means that I am hoping for a revival of “local” communities. I will leave this term only vaguely defined. A community is a society with which people feel identification and take some responsibility for one another. Today some people are parts of communities that communicate only electronically. Some are members of professional societies that function to some degree as communities. Others may find community through sports. Sadly, some find it only in gangs. And

some do not find it at all. In any case, these types of communities will help very little in real crises. The help one needs will be from neighbors.

To renew local communities, we should begin with whatever exists. There may be rural towns of several thousand people that still function as local communities. We can work with them. But community may be found only in much smaller groupings. In cities one may find neighborhoods, sometimes ethnic ones, that are communities or could become communities. These may consist of only a few score of people or of thousands. Where no communities exist, it may be necessary to work with quite small groups, perhaps around a community garden, to begin the process of building community.

Any move that strengthens local communities should be celebrated. But in this paper, I am emphasizing their potential importance for survival of global crises. Since what is most needed for survival is food, and since it is easy to see that the collapse of transportation systems would quickly threaten food supplies in many places, I begin with food. If a local community produces what it needs to eat, its people will not go hungry. Hence a central goal of postmodern society is to produce essential food locally.

If this food production is at the family level, then money will not be an issue, but if the food security is at the level of a town or neighborhood, then exchanges of various kinds will be required. The national currency may have collapsed, or people may not have the money they need buying; so, it is important for communities to know that instruments of exchange can be quickly developed locally.

The electrical grid may collapse, and gas lines may be cut. Local communities need to be able to produce the energy they need. This is becoming increasingly possible as the conversion of sunlight into electricity becomes more efficient. Wind energy can also be produced locally in many places.

Transportation will also be a challenge. Bicycles are an excellent means of transportation for most people especially over distances of a few miles. The more a community can meet the needs of its members within bicycling distance, the better it will be prepared to deal with national and global breakdown. People would save money buying in local stores, even if prices are higher. If this enabled

them to give up their automobiles. Obviously this would also contribute to reduced pollution and slowing climate change.

The enemy of local production is “price.” Mass production enables a few people to produce large quantities. Cheap transportation can distribute these goods and still underprice locally produced goods. Most national governments have favored cheap transportation and have in fact paid for many of the costs out of public funds. If motor transportation had to pay the full cost of highways and of gasoline production, and distribution, and the full cost of the damage to the environment, etc., local production would be encouraged. In the case of food, human enjoyment of eating and health would be benefited.

What is required is a profound change in our thinking. We have supposed that industrialization was the magic key. It is a way of producing much more with much less human labor. There is no question but that it enables countries to increase their consumption rapidly.

What we have not considered carefully is the high cost with regard to things that our standard economic models do not count. I have already noted that industrialization has vastly increased the use of fossil fuels. We are now paying an incalculable price for this in climate change, but since climate change forces us to spend money in defense, economists count it all as positive. We need sensible economic measures that do not give all the advantages to centralized production.

Even apart from climate change, the costs to health and enjoyment of large industrial production have been very high. Small-scale local production can continue to substitute some artificial energy for human labor, but in ways that are harmless and require little transportation. This production can continue even when international conflict, financial collapse, exhaustion of key resources, or social chaos lead to breakdowns of delivery systems. This security is worth a lot, even though it is ignored by economists. And meanwhile, any reduction of centralized production that local production makes possible, slows the worsening of the climate.

My assumption is that a focus on the local economy will lead to an increase of the number of people who put down local roots and care about local society. In other words, local production will rebuild healthy local society. A reversal of policies will not take us back to the “dark ages”. Instead we can go forward to the

postmodern communities around which society can be rebuilt. This society will be a community of communities of communities.

Thus far I have emphasized that local communities can survive the collapse of large scale economies if they produce what they strictly need and know how to develop systems of exchange when these are no longer provided by national currency. These communities will evoke the commitment of their members and recover the social health that modernity has taken from us. If we engage in full cost accounting, it is likely to turn out that local production for local consumption will even outdo the centralized production and global distribution systems favored by modern economics.

Postmodern communities of this kind will evoke loyalty from their members. People move easily from “I” to “we.” For hundreds of thousands of years, the “we” was the tribe. Tribalism had great survival strength, but it could also lead to conflict among tribes. Such conflict could be trivial or could end in total destruction. Local communities can, like tribes, intensify the loyalty to themselves by villainizing other communities. This can end in mutual destruction. In reality, to a greater extent than ancient tribes, even the relatively self-sufficient communities I have described need each other. To go beyond mere survival to a better life, they need to cooperate in joint economic activities as well as interacting in friendly competition.

Without sacrificing the ability to survive global catastrophes, local communities can cooperate to produce highly desirable goods and services not essential for mere survival. Where population is dense people benefit greatly from elevators both in apartment houses and in commercial buildings. But it would obviously be foolish for a single town to produce its own elevators. They should be produced at the level of communities of communities or probably better, communities of communities of communities. In case of a catastrophe, the local communities would not be able to buy additional elevators, but they could manage indefinitely without them. That does not mean that they should fail to work with other towns to restore a level of order that allowed them again the luxury of elevators.

The ideal would be to structure the world politically as a community-of-communities-of-communities-of-communities-of-communities. This should complete itself at the global level. Although we want to move toward

relative self-sufficiency at the local level, there are issues that need to be dealt with at the global level. The hope will be that as higher levels derive their authority from lower levels, the decisions at the higher levels will be for the sake of all.