

GEORGE MONBIOT'S BLOG

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All Together Now

This is how to stop demagogues and extremists: rebuild community.

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Without community, politics is dead. But communities have been scattered like dust in the wind. At work, at home, both practically and imaginatively, we are atomised.

Politics, as a result, is experienced by many people as an external force, dull and irrelevant at best, oppressive and frightening at worst. It is handed down from above rather than developed from below. There are exceptions – the Sanders and Corbyn campaigns for example – but even they seemed shallowly rooted by comparison to the deep foundations of solidarity that movements grew from in the past, and may disperse as quickly as they gather.

It is in the powder of shattered communities that anti-politics swirls, raising towering dust devils of demagoguery and extremism. These tornadoes threaten to tear down whatever social structures still stand.

When people are atomised and afraid, they feel driven to defend their own interests against other people's. In other words, they are pushed away from intrinsic values such as empathy, connectedness and kindness, and **towards extrinsic values** such as power, fame and status. The problem created by the politics of extreme individualism is self-perpetuating.

Conversely, a political model based only on state provision can leave people dependent, isolated and highly vulnerable to cuts. The welfare state remains essential: it has relieved levels of want and squalor that many people now find hard to imagine. But it can also, inadvertently, erode community, sorting people into silos to deliver isolated services, weakening their ties to society.

This is the third in **my occasional series** on **possible solutions** to the many crises we face. It explores the ways in which we could restore political life by restoring community life. This doesn't mean ditching state provision, but complementing it with something that belongs neither to government nor to the market, but exists in a different sphere, a sphere we have neglected.

There are hundreds of colourful examples of how this might begin, such as community shops, **development trusts**, **food assemblies**, community choirs, **free universities**, **time banking**, **Transition**

Towns, potluck lunch clubs, local currencies, men's sheds (in which older men swap skills and make new friends), turning streets into temporary playgrounds (like the *Playing Out* project), secular services (such as *Sunday Assembly*), lantern festivals, fun palaces and technology hubs.

Turning such initiatives into a wider social revival means creating what practitioners call "thick networks": projects that proliferate, spawning further ventures and ideas that weren't envisaged when they started. They then begin to develop a dense participatory culture that becomes attractive and relevant to everyone, rather than mostly to socially active people with time on their hands.

A study commissioned by the London borough of Lambeth sought to identify how these thick networks are most likely to develop. The process typically begins with projects that are "lean and live": they start with very little money, and evolve rapidly through trial and error. They are developed not by community heroes working alone, but by collaborations between local people. These projects create opportunities for "micro-participation": people can dip in and out of them without much commitment.

When enough of such projects have been launched, they catalyse a deeper involvement, generating community businesses, co-operatives and hybrid ventures, which start employing people and generating income. A tipping point is reached when 10 to 15% of local residents are engaging regularly. Community then begins to gel, triggering an explosion of social enterprise and new activities, that starts to draw in the rest of the population. The mutual aid these communities develop functions as a second social safety net.

The process, the study reckons, takes about three years. The result is communities that are vibrant and attractive to live in, that generate employment, that are environmentally sustainable and socially cohesive, in which large numbers of people are involved in decision-making. Which sounds to me like where we need to be.

The exemplary case is Rotterdam, where, in response to the closure of local libraries, in 2011 a group of residents created a reading room out of an old Turkish bathhouse. The project began with a festival of plays, films and discussions, then became permanently embedded. It became a meeting place where people could talk, read and learn new skills, and soon began, with some help from the council, to spawn restaurants, workshops, care cooperatives, green projects, cultural hubs and craft collectives.

These projects inspired other people to start their own. One estimate suggests that there are now 1300 civic projects in the city. Deep cooperation and community building now feels entirely normal there. Both citizens and local government appear to have been transformed.

There are plenty of other schemes with this potential. Walthamstow, in east London, could be on the cusp of a similar transformation, as community cafes, cooking projects, workshops and traffic calming schemes begin to proliferate into a new civic commons. *Incredible Edible*, that began as a guerilla planting scheme in Todmorden, in West Yorkshire, growing fruit and vegetables in public spaces and unused corners, has branched into so many projects that it is widely credited with turning the fortunes of the town around, generating start-ups, jobs and training programmes. A scheme to clean up vacant lots in the Spanish city of Zaragoza soon began creating parks, playgrounds, bowling greens, basketball courts and allotments, generating 110 jobs in 13 months.

The revitalisation of community is not a substitute for the state, but it does reduce its costs. The Lambeth study estimates that supporting a thick participatory culture costs around £400,000 for 50,000 residents: roughly 0.1% of local public spending. It is likely to pay for itself many times over,

by reducing the need for mental health provision and social care and suppressing crime rates, recidivism, alcohol and drug dependency.

Participatory culture stimulates participatory politics. In fact, it is participatory politics. It creates social solidarity while proposing and implementing a vision of a better world. It generates hope where hope seemed absent. It allows people to take back control.

Most importantly, it can appeal to anyone, whatever their prior affiliations might be. It begins to generate a kinder public life, built on intrinsic values. By rebuilding society from the bottom up, it will eventually force parties and governments to fall into line with what people want. We can do this. And we don't need anyone's permission to begin.

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