

Role of Government in Promoting Cultural Bio-Conservatism and an Ecologically Sustainable Future

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Given the results of the recent election, and the conflicting efforts to push governmental policies even further to the right, it is imperative that we become clearer about which of the many crises we need to be kept in focus as leading to more catastrophic consequences than the others. The election was won by extreme rhetoric that focused on immigration, the loss of jobs due to the supposed failure of wrongly conceived trade agreements and environmental policies, and the Affordable Care Act supposedly imposed on the backs of workers and small businesses by left leaning elites. Notably absent from the heated charges and counter charges was a discussion of the complexity of local and regional contexts, whether it was the economic and environmental forces that led to the decline in coal mining or the health needs in different regions of the country. The anger and counter charges were all framed in the abstract language the media, computers, and printed texts have conditioned people to accept without questioning. Even the political labels went unquestioned, with few recognizing the need to clarify what values, ideas, and assumptions separates conservatism from liberalism. Indeed, the different audiences never challenged what was being called conservatism or considered how the politicians who wrapped themselves with this flag shared the core value as the libertarians and market liberals. Nor was there any awareness that what needs to be conserved such a habitats and species, as well as the cultural commons that includes the social justice traditions as well as the intergenerational knowledge and skills that continue to be carried forward in the different communities that have not entirely become dependent upon a consumer dependent lifestyle.

The two crises not mentioned in the debates included how the digital revolution will continue to replace the need for workers with robots and algorithms, and the range of environmental impacts resulting from climate change. The former is especially important as digital technologies are driven by an ideology that is now changing how we think, communicate, solve problems, create greater efficiencies in the work place by replacing humans with machines, and bringing all human behaviors under constant surveillance that is transformed into data for governmental agencies and commercial uses. This ideology is deeply rooted in the core ideas of the Enlightenment that equated progress with overturning traditions by relying on the scientific method and the critical inquiry of individuals. The drive to overturn traditions simply replaced one set of misconceptions with another, which was to ignore that all forms of life, including humans, live in the emergent, relational, and co-dependent world of natural and cultural ecologies. These ecologies, in turn, are sustained by complex and ongoing inter- and intra-species communication networks. The traditions now threatened by the continued spread of the Enlightenment's emancipatory form of consciousness includes the whole range of human achievements in the areas of social justice, the arts, craft knowledge and skills, and the intergenerational knowledge of how to nurture both the natural and cultural commons that still exist in every community on the margins of the mainstream industrial/consumer culture.

The tragic irony is that the certainties that drove the heated presidential debates were uninformed by how the acidification of the world's oceans and changing water temperature that are accelerating in ways rapidly reducing fish stocks. Nor did the ideologically driven certainties about draining the governmental swamp take account of water shortages now faced by billions of people—including vast areas of the United States, the widespread droughts threatening agriculture and forests (the impact of the drought in California has killed 102 million trees), and the global loss of topsoil now estimated at one percent per year (simple math points to the shortage of food that lies only decades ahead). Environmentalists and the military, for profoundly different reasons, understand that climate change, in a world where the demands of a world population over seven and half billion people now exceeds sustainable limits, has already put the world on the pathway to social chaos.

The cultural changes resulting from the digital revolution involve the increasingly widespread use of digitally driven machines and artificial intelligence systems to further automate the workplace, and to bring all relationships and activities under the control of the elites who will manage the connected world of the Internet of Everything until they are themselves replaced by even more powerful computer systems. What the alienated and angry workers wanting to “Make America Great Again” were not told is that jobs will continue to disappear. While a few corporations might be pressured to keep their production facilities in their current locations, the reality is that the Internet, the historical drive to automate the work process and replace craft skills, and the market liberal ideology (misrepresented by being referred to as conservatism) that values profits over ensuring that earning a living is a basic human right, will prevail over the political process now driven by competing self-interests and friend/enemy relationships.

Revitalizing a Governmental Policy that Averts Civil Strife and Reduces the Further Degradation of Natural Systems

Automation, the long history of the capitalist systems of pursuing profits regardless of human impacts, and the digital revolution that is driven by the market liberal ideology and the mythic thinking that nature's evolutionary processes now dictate that the emerging post-biological world of computer decision making, all mean that the life-time employment of the 50s through the 70s, will not return. There may be a temporary increase as infrastructure projects are initiated, but even these will be influenced by automation that will reduce the need for workers. And this temporary improvement will be accompanied by more consumerism that, in turn, will further accelerate all the environmental changes that accompany climate change. In effect, progress in “Making America Great Again” will accelerate the rate of environmental degradation and move us further down the path leading to social chaos and a techno-fascist future.

But there is a way of avoiding the social unrest that will accompany how automation and the digital revolution that benefits the few at the expense of the majority. That is, the policy being debated in European countries about providing everyone a basic income that would cover the cost of food, housing, and other basic necessities needs to be adopted. But workers accustomed to putting in 8 hours a day in the work place will find it hard to adjust to being unemployed—with time on their hands. This is where the non-monetized and community-centered cultural commons may represent the pathway to a sustainable future. The ranges of

activities, skills, traditional forms of knowledge—ranging from the growing and preparing of food, ceremonies, the creative and performing arts, healing practices, craft skills in working with wood, metal, clay, weaving, games such as bridge and chess, knowledge of species and other cycles of change in the local ecosystems, and so forth—have many advantages that lead to the non-monetized forms wealth. These include the personal discovery of a talent and development of skill in making something that is valued by the community—which in turn leads to mutual exchanges (even to barter and local currency systems). People engaged in cultural commons activities will discover that their world is emergent, relational, and co-dependent—and that they are valued by the community and thus have a sense of belonging—which in turn leads to becoming aware of the importance of local decision making and community responsibility. A revitalized cultural commons also leads to less consumerism and thus reduces the adverse impact on the already over-stressed natural systems. And if we have already moved beyond the tipping point leading to the sixth extinction of life on this planet as some scientists now think, participating in the local cultural commons will enable basic needs to be met in ways that will be unavailable to individuals and families isolated from the shared responsibilities that characterize the cultural commons that are largely taken for granted in every community—and especially valued by ethnic groups.

Educating the larger population about the existence and importance of the local cultural commons, but also in enabling them to engage in the life-style changes that lead to the discovery a talent and develop the skills that build on past achievements in the cultural commons inherited from previous generations, should have been the responsibility of public schools and universities. But as automation, the increased reliance on digital systems, and the pressures of global competition have now re-directed the curricula of all educational institutions, there is a need to consider how Roosevelt's Depression Era Civilian Conservation Corps could be adapted in ways what would enable the unemployed and under-employed to develop a skill in one of the largely non-monetized activities that strengthen the cultural commons. But it would not be limited to young men, but open to everyone who has not had the opportunity to explore the non-commercial aspects of community life that leads to discovering a talent and developing the necessary skills necessary to making a contribution to the well-being of the community. This would also involve the current participants in cultural commons activities, which will vary between ethnic communities, to become mentors in introducing others to the skills and networks of mutual support that underlie various activities from the creative and performing arts to the various crafts, games, social justice practices, and so forth.

With nearly a third of the American workforce now part of the contingent economy that has no long term benefits, with the digital revolution now replacing both the under and highly educated workers with robots and algorithms, and with ageism now forcing tens of thousands of highly educated people into early retirement or career change (a spokesperson now provides guidance for former MIT graduates in their early fifties on how to prepare for a new job in other fields), and with millions still unemployed, the government needs to take a leading role in helping to revitalize the local cultural commons across the country. In addition to using its vast communication networks to promote the importance of learning cultural commons related skills and mutual support systems that represent alternatives to the traditional forms of employment in the consumer/industrial culture that is both being made obsolete and has been major contributors

to overshooting environmental limits, it can promote local levels of government to bring together mentors who can promote the lifestyle changes that are now needed as the old industrial order begins to unravel. Learning to make something that builds on previous levels of achievements in some area of the built culture, or developing the talents to necessary to advance one of the performing arts, overcomes the current narrowly conceived ethos where elites, in determining what should constitute new markets, are continually undermining the knowledge of the traditions that the current generation of cultural commons activists build upon. As the cultural commons vary from community to community, and from region to region, the government can play an important role in supporting the diversity of regional talents and in connecting the generations.

Every community, including every ethnic group, has people who carry forward the traditions in growing and preparing food, in the arts, in the use of technologies scaled to local conditions, and in the various crafts that utilize local resources. Living close to the natural resources that communities are dependent upon leads to a form of awareness that is profoundly different from the current consumer relationships with resources. Until the onset of droughts, water could be accessed by turning on the tap, and there was no need to be concerned about the supply running out. The same indifference to environmental limits is taken for granted in purchasing meat, grains, and other food staples. But as the focus of awareness shifts from the mentality promoted by supermarkets, with their seemingly endless supply and diversity of products to what can be grown locally, the issues of available water, good soil conditions, and being free of toxic chemicals become major concerns. And even here intergenerational knowledge becomes important, such as knowing how changes in seasons affects different plants and the availability of water, how to utilize natural predators rather than the use of chemical pesticides, and how to utilize the land and other natural resources in ways that do not undermine the habitats of other species. This is the aspect of localism that supports bio-conservatism.

The intergenerational knowledge, skills, and mentoring relationships essential to passing forward the non-monetized cultural commons activities and achievements represent the practice of cultural conservatism. The cultural conservatism that carries forward the cultural commons is profoundly different from the ideologically driven faux conservatism that adds to the fog of misunderstandings promoted by right-wing media, think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the CATO Institute, and even by supposedly highly educated political commentators. The confusion would be reduced if the word traditions and traditional, and even the word “cautious” were used instead of conservative. It is also important to recognize that some traditions of the cultural commons carry forward a community’s intergenerational racist, exploitive, and other forms of social injustice. This means that while the question of what contributes to an ecologically future should now be the primary focus of the cultural commons, it is also important to be aware of the prejudices, misconceptions, and exploitive relationships that are passed forward in the name of conservatism. The Enlightenment focus on critical thought also needs to be carried forward under the rubric of cultural conservatism, which also needs to be directed at the scientism underlying the digital revolution that now makes all aspects of life subject to hackers, near total surveillance, and an emerging totalitarian mindset. The computer scientists are driven by the market liberal ideology and the misconception that they are agents of the Darwinian process of natural selection. The two questions they fail to ask are: Is there anything from the past that needs to be conserved, such a privacy and wisdom traditions? And how does

the digital revolution enable people to live the less consumer driven lifestyles needed to slow climate change? Every gain in efficiency, profits, and personal convenience attributed to the digital revolution is now being matched by increased threats from hackers and loss of personal security, the spread of disinformation, the ability of corporations to promote even higher levels of consumerism, and the growing international threat of cyber attacks. The revitalization of the local face to face intergenerational communities represents the pathway that will restore moral accountability for the well-being of the Other.

Chet Bowers has written 23 books on the ideological, linguistic, and deep cultural roots of the ecological crisis, including the digital revolution. His latest book, *Reforming Higher Education in an Era of Ecological Crisis and Digital Insecurity* has just been published by Process/Century Press. Wikipedia