

The Rise of Localist Politics

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Until very recently, the centralization of administrative power under expert control—what we might call, for shorthand, *rational planning*—was considered essential to public policy solutions. In the industrial and post-industrial eras, advances in science and technology seemed to promise a future of unprecedented efficiency. Centralized programs could coordinate masses of people toward desired goals, in areas from government to business to philanthropy to city planning. Modern policy problems were considered to be, fundamentally, systemic issues too complex for local citizens and requiring expert professional attention. Technology and globalization would only increase the value of this approach.

Now, however, trends have begun to shift in a very different direction. Some of the preeminent projects of rational planning are foundering or altogether failing. The entitlement crisis, the housing bubble, and other prominent stories and scandals have made Americans more skeptical of distant experts. Advances in technology and business have created new possibilities for individual and local empowerment. The pressure is on for products, services, and organizational practices that will enable consumers and participants to solve problems themselves.

By contrast, rational planning viewed human beings mainly in the aggregate, essentially as a collection of data points that could be predicted and manipulated based on such categorical differences as race and gender. The messy web of mediating institutions—families, churches, nonprofits—could be sidestepped. Mass programs, which could operate on a scale impossible in the pre-industrial age, would be able to deal directly with the masses, matching problems with solutions and products with demand. Freed from the complex and sometimes onerous network of relationships formerly required for political life, Americans would interact directly with the powerhouses of finance and planning: the government, major corporations, big foundations, and so on.

This model, it was believed, could be applied across the board. Its most obvious value was in the mass production of goods and services. Top-down, command-and-control business models, replicated identically across the world, would bring ruthless efficiency to the private sector. Corporations would get bigger and bigger, driving material prosperity. And these concepts were applied not just to government and commerce

but also to aspects of social life, including city design, which became specialized so that people would live in one place, work in another, shop in another, and play in still another (the invention of the suburb took this model to its logical end). Cities and houses, said French architect Le Corbusier, were “machines for living in.”

But while rational planning allowed for success and efficiency on a greater scale than ever before, it also extended failure and inefficiency to the same scale—and nowhere has this been more obvious than in the political and social sphere. The impending fiscal collapse of the major entitlement programs of the twentieth century signals just what an enormous failure rational planning often proved to be. And “big philanthropy” ran into similar problems as “big government.” Large private foundations like those of Rockefeller and Gates dedicated themselves to wiping out social problems with millions of dollars and professional plans. These foundations have pursued technocratic solutions to such problems as school reform and AIDS in Africa—and they are baffled when, as so often happens, their multibillion-dollar efforts fail miserably. What these failures in government and philanthropy have in common is the idea that whole societies are just “machines for living in.” Experts, the rational planners believed, could descend on a big problem, substitute their theoretical (“scientific”) knowledge for the practical knowledge of the locals, and fix it.

Entire generations in the United States have now grown up in the society the rational planners envisioned, complete with established suburbs, schools, big businesses and foundations, and federal entitlement programs. They live in suburban socioeconomic segregation, and rarely participate in local politics (which has largely become professionalized). Some newer cities, like Houston, were designed by their planners around the car and the TV—not the citizen and the self-governing community. A parent today has good reason to take his family to the suburbs for cheaper housing and better schools, a low-income citizen has every incentive to collect a government welfare check, and neither has any clear reason to participate in politics except to lobby the bureaucracy to maintain his status quo. The experts will take care of the rest.

Yet over the course of a century, human experience has not validated the rational planning assumption—and a response is coming, if the rising generation is any indication. The people who grew up under the realized model of the rationally planned society are increasingly inclined to shrug

it off. Rational planning seems to have created a demand for precisely the things it required people to give up. People who have grown up this way—particularly young people now in their teens, twenties, and early thirties—feel isolated and long for a sense of place. They want to make a difference, not in mass organizations or abstract causes, but in connections and relationships close to home. Where their parents protested, these young people volunteer. They often find their first taste of community life in college, where they live, work, and play in the same environment, and can participate in the community by choosing from among the hundreds of student groups and activities on offer. A 2010 study at the University of Northern Colorado found that students who were involved in at least one campus organization considered the university to be a community; those who weren't involved did not. In short, it seems that to feel connected to the big, they need to be active in the small.

Forward-thinking CEOs, looking to hire these young people, are structuring their companies accordingly. The cutting-edge companies of today still use metrics and scientific techniques of the sort that characterized the rational planning era, but they are also seeking to develop a more place-centered, organic approach. The simple reason: command-and-control can solve some problems, but often creates others—chief among them the corporate ignorance fostered by a lack of on-the-ground expertise. The Prelude Corporation, at one time the largest lobster producer in North America, tried rational planning—and discovered (too late to save itself) that lobster fishing relies heavily on local knowledge. GM and Chrysler, bloated beyond the control of their centralized management, needed federal bailouts in 2009.

By contrast, Ford is on the upswing after making aggressive changes to allow its teams the freedom to innovate. In 2008, the management of Starbucks realized it had started to obsess over mass production and growth, and gotten away from what made its company work—small teams dedicated to making good coffee. Rather than the top-down hierarchical strategy of directed control, companies like these are developing organizational cultures manifested through smaller networks in which local knowledge matters; they emphasize getting the best out of a team rather than micro-managing and bossing it around. The organizations that have made these adjustments—or were founded based upon them, such as Apple, Amazon, and Google—are reporting higher job satisfaction, faster innovation, and greater profits than organizations still laboring under the old methods.

Civic Life, Politics, and Place

This “localist” trend is beginning to reshape American politics as well. Among its other flaws, the rational planning model was based on the mistaken notion that science could be substituted for the practical knowledge of ordinary citizens. But the social sciences have simply never come close to approaching the physical sciences in their explanatory or predictive power. They cannot grasp or manage some of the most basic variables in public policy, including the human need for ownership over our stake in society—that is, the needs for belonging and participation. As a 2009 report for the James Irvine Foundation puts it, people “want the opportunity to be more than passive audience members whose social activism is limited to writing a check.” And as Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone* (2000), has documented, communities whose citizens feel a sense of local empowerment report (among other things) better local government, less crime, and faster economic growth. Many citizens are more inclined to participate even in the most basic act of civic life—voting—when a particular issue seems to directly affect them, and they are convinced they can affect it back.

American cities are catching on to the change. Whether in city design or problem-solving, more and more municipalities are trying solutions that involve multifaceted participation, as documented in a 2009 report for Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement. Some, like Rochester, New York, have sought to improve their local governance by instituting neighborhood councils; this allows people to relate to the city from the vantage point of a smaller political unit they can see and understand firsthand. Boston, with its “Complete Streets” project, is experimenting with “new urbanism,” a mixed-use method of city design that makes neighborhoods more self-sufficient and friendly to social interaction. And cities from Colorado Springs to St. Petersburg, Florida are making headway against social problems through public-private partnerships and a thriving nonprofit sector. For public policy at the national or state level to succeed, it increasingly appears that it must find ways to empower, rather than hinder, local self-government—and in doing so, it has to resist the temptation to micromanage from afar.

The move toward localism is driven by expediency more than ideology. Cities, businesses, and other organizations are instituting place-centered practices not because of identification with a movement or theory, but because they are finding that a more organic approach just plain works better. Doing things the “messy” way often proves more effective in the long run.

This shift makes electoral politics trickier, too: muddling through and finding messy local solutions is harder to sell to the public than a grand, oversimplified vision. Tougher still is encouraging localism while refraining from excessive intervention. But it is possible that the leader or party who embraces the localist approach, who articulates the ideas underlying it, who treats communities of engaged citizens as if they matter, may actually have the opportunity to sell it as a grand vision—to make it a movement.

Localist Politics, Left and Right

Much of the recent rise of localism has come from the left, from foodie and environmental efforts on the cultural side, to the extensive use of social media to mobilize community activists on the political side. Actually, localist rhetoric has existed on the “New Left” since the 1960s, when radicals like Saul Alinsky argued that rational planning left out the importance of community organization and local leadership. Fundamentally, however, even the New Left did not abandon the left’s longstanding preference for rational planning with its emphasis on people in the aggregate—that is, in *masses*. “People are the stuff that makes up the dream of democracy,” argued Alinsky in *Reveille for Radicals* (1946). He shared the old left’s view of people as masses in categories and wanted to mobilize the groups for larger political goals. The modern new left has not departed from that mindset; only its preferred method is different.

The standard-bearer for the modern left is, of course, Alinsky’s intellectual descendant Barack Obama, the community organizer whose 2008 presidential campaign is a useful case study in the irony of localism on the political left. His rallying cry was an appeal to ordinary citizens to get involved, to serve in our communities, to be the change that we’d been waiting for. This rhetoric may have been vague, but it was certainly not a call for big, centralized government. But localism and community service are not what the Obama administration has focused on or will likely be most remembered for.

It is hard, first of all, to find examples of Obama administration initiatives for community service that are significantly different from those of the Bush administration. More notably, President Obama has overseen an explosion in the size of the federal government, even beyond the controversial bailouts that at least had the (arguable) justification of averting a depression. Most significantly, his administration has delivered on

another of his central campaign promises: the passage of his 2,700-page health care bill, which, along with Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society, completes the great trifecta of the twentieth-century liberal vision of central administration. Despite the different packaging, the left and its leaders are still champions of rational planning, and they refuse to see the problems that arise from it as anything but evidence of need for further expert tweaking. It would be too difficult otherwise to admit the irredeemable failures that have arisen from a century of their governing philosophy.

But where do conservatives stand on questions of localism in American political life? While the rhetoric of the right has vehemently opposed the progressive faith in rational planning, the right has actually implicitly joined the left in its acceptance of the old paradigm: political life is characterized by individuals in the aggregate. The difference is that whereas the left emphasized the aggregate, the right has emphasized the individual. There were sound historical reasons for this orientation: conservative heroes such as Goldwater, Reagan, and their intellectual successors were fighting a battle against collectivism at home and abroad, protecting the individual against the heavy press of the group. But the resulting strong libertarian streak has led much of the right to blindly disdain all government, including the crucial institutions of local self-government. Likewise, the backlash against the Obama administration's big-government efforts—evident especially in the Tea Party movement—has come in the form of appeals to individual liberty rather than calls for local self-government, stronger communities, and responsible citizenship.

A nation's ability to have a "small" national government depends on its ability to foster strong civic life on the local level. For example, the federal government's direct role in fighting homelessness has noticeably decreased over the past decade, as public-private partnerships between city governments and local nonprofits have proven more effective than the federal failures of the Great Society. The city of Denver, under a Democratic mayor (now governor of Colorado), reduced its chronically homeless population by over 60 percent in four years on the strength of strategic partnerships with faith-based nonprofits. Although these efforts sound like they would appeal to conservatives, few have been promulgated or picked up by the GOP. While Republicans may be willing to challenge rational planning from time to time, they have largely been unable to recognize that they are arguing on the old paradigm's playing field—they

are defending their own end zone, but not suggesting a different sport, responding to centralization and isolation by maintaining the individual's right to be isolated.

Meanwhile, a small “new right” has begun to emerge: more localist than nationalist, more Burke than Hayek, and fairly amicable with the New Left (many of its members are not Republicans). In Britain, a similar coterie has gained significant political influence with the ascendancy of Prime Minister David Cameron and his “Big Society,” encouraging people to get involved in their communities instead of relying on the government for services. In the United States, it is mainly comprised of offbeat academics, has few formal organizations, and has the Internet for its main intellectual outlet, on sites such as FrontPorchRepublic.com—an opinion source for so-called “crunchy cons,” as Rod Dreher called them in his book of the same name. “There are hopeful signs that people are beginning to think seriously about the importance of localism, human scale, limits, and stewardship, the very things woefully lacking in the current spending orgy,” writes Mark Mitchell, a professor at Patrick Henry College and a regular contributor to FrontPorchRepublic.com. “While a return to these ideals is still only in its infancy, change is afoot. This represents a glimmer of sanity in a world succumbing to the apparent security promised by centralization.”

But overall, the new right is still at a theoretical stage: its adherents rarely offer specific policy proposals, and too frequently, its ideas are unspecific or unrealistic. This new right has little political influence and no organized strategy. But, like the right in general, it has devoted a great deal of thought to foundational ideas from which specific policies could be developed.

While localism has so far been a movement mostly on the left, it seems ripe for the right to take it up as its own. Indeed, it remains difficult to fully reconcile localism with the left's remaining adherence to centralized government and rational planning. Localism is philosophically more at home on the right: at the heart of conservatism is a belief in the value of relationships, self-government, and local institutions. It is high time for the right to put the policy together with the principles. We are, after all, the change that we've been waiting for.

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