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What is our society now

By Claire Andre and Manuel Velasquez In the Good Society, sociologist Robert Bellah and his coauthors challenge Americans to take a good look at themselves. Faced with growing homelessness, rising unemployment, crumbling highways, and impending ecological disaster, our response is one of apathy, frustration, cynicism, and retreat into our private worlds. The social problems confronting us today, the authors argue, are largely the result of failures of our institutions, and our response, largely the result of our failure to realize the degree to which our lives are shaped by institutional forces and the degree to which we, as a democratic society, can shape these forces for the better. What prevents Americans from "taking charge" is, according to the authors, our long and abiding allegiance to "individualism" -- the belief that "the good society" is one in which individuals are left free to pursue their private satisfactions independently of others, a pattern of thinking that emphasizes individual achievement and self-fulfillment. As the authors point out, this way of thinking about ourselves and our society can be traced back to our country's eighteenth century founders, most notably John Locke: "Locke's teaching was one of the most powerful ideologies ever invented, if not the most powerful. It promised an unheard of degree of individual freedom, an unlimited opportunity to compete for material well-being, and an unprecedented limitation on the arbitrary powers of government to interfere with individual initiative." Our nation's founders, however, assumed that the freedom of individuals to pursue their own ends would be tempered by a "public spirit" and concern for the common good that would shape our social institutions: "The Lockean ideal of the autonomous individual was, in the eighteenth century, embedded in a complex moral ecology that included family and church on the one hand and on the other a vigorous public sphere in which economic initiative, it was hoped, grew together with public spirit...The eighteenth century idea of a public was...a discursive community capable of thinking about the public good." It is precisely this sense of common purpose and public spirit crucial to the guidance of institutions in a democracy that is absent from our society today. A ruthless individualism, expressed primarily through a market mentality, has invaded every sphere of our lives, undermining those institutions, such as the family or the university, that have traditionally functioned as foci of collective purposes, history, and culture. This lack of common purpose and concern for the common good bodes ill for a people claiming to be a democracy. Caught up in our private pursuits, we allow the workings of our major institutions -- the economy and government -- to go on "over our heads." One way of summing up the difficulty Americans have in understanding the fundamental roots of their problems is to say that they still have a Lockean political culture, emphasizing individual freedom and the pursuit of individual affluence (the American dream) in a society with a most un-Lockean economy and government. We have the illusion that we can control our fate because individual economic opportunity is indeed considerable, especially if one starts with middle class advantages; and our political life is formally free. Yet powerful forces affecting the lives of all of us are not operating under the norm of democratic consent. In particular, the private governments of the great corporations make decisions on the basis of their own advantage, not of the public good. The federal government has enviously increased its power, especially in the form of the military industrial complex, in ways that are almost invulnerable to citizen knowledge, much less control, on the grounds of national defense. The private rewards and the formal freedoms have obscured from us how much we have lost in genuine democratic control of the society we live in. The authors see hope, however, in renovating our institutions in a way that will revitalize and transform our democracy. In a culture of individuals possessed by individualism, such a transformation will not be easy. First and foremost, we will have to shed our individualistic blinders and learn to "pay attention" to ways in which we are dependent on and collectively responsible for the institutions that shape our common life. Second, we will need to find or create spaces in our lives where we can "practice" democracy -- beginning with our families (responsibilities shared equitably between parents) and our places of work (increased worker participation). Educational and religious institutions, as bearers of our moral ideals, will also play a vital role in preparing us for active and intelligent participation in public life. Our larger political and economic institutions can be redesigned to encourage and nurture citizen participation. More government policy and planning decisions, for example, can be relegated to local levels, encouraging wider citizen participation and responsibility for government policy. Underlying these proposals is a belief that as we begin to participate in public projects, our perspectives and concerns will broaden. From a focus on self and a view of society as unrelated autonomous individuals, we will come to look beyond ourselves and come to view ourselves as members of a larger community concerned not only about ourselves but about our fellow Americans, peoples of other nations, future generations, and non human life. "When citizens are engaged in thinking about the whole, they find their conceptions of their interests broadened, and their commitment to the search for a common good deepens." The result: an informed and morally sensitive public active in discussing and debating issues ranging from international financing to day care, within a framework informed by a shared vision of a good society, and a citizenry capable of instituting reforms in our economic and political institutions so that they work for the common benefit of all peoples. This reinvigoration of democracy is not proposed as an idealistic project but as a practical necessity. The authors write that nowhere is the need more evident than in the international sphere, where problems are beyond the capacity of any single nation to solve. Our economic life is dominated by the dynamics of a vast world market that cannot be controlled by the action of any single nation-state. Problems of environmental pollution transcend national boundaries. The proliferation of nuclear weapons threatens the security of all. Vast disparities in global wealth and power lead to petering conflicts that endanger economic health and political security around the world. In a world of increasing complexity and interdependence, we can no longer afford "to go our own way." Rather, we need to exercise our capacity for developing institutions that recognize our interconnectedness, moving toward the creation of "the good society," "where the common good is the pursuit of the good in common." The Good Society, by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1991). Photo Courtesy: Yellow Dog Productions/Getty Images What does the word community mean? The answer can vary, even according to the dictionary. Dictionary.com uses a variety of factors to define what community means, ranging from a group of people who share a common locality and government to those who share common interests or characteristics. Various philosophers have attempted to define the "ideal" society, though it's still widely believed that such a concept has yet to be achieved. It is possible, however, to focus on the positive attributes and social qualities that are believed to pave the way toward the proverbial "ideal community." What Does Community Mean to You? What does community mean to you? Upon reflection, you may realize that this is a question that requires more reflection than you'd have thought. "Community" can mean different things to different people and can range from a small, tight-knit group to the population of a large geographical area. Photo Courtesy: Thomas Barwick/Getty Images When you think of your community, do you think of: Your family? Your neighborhood? Your friends? Certain social or religious groups you belong to? Your city, state, or country? Needless to say, community's meaning can vary greatly depending upon who you ask. For example, if you live in a large city, you may think of your community as a group of friends who share your interests. On the other hand, if you live in a small town, you may think of your community as your family, friends, or the whole town itself. Depending on the various ways you define the term, you might find yourself part of several communities all at once. What Makes an Ideal Society? That is the question -- and one that's been debated by countless philosophers throughout history. Over time, countless great thinkers have come up with a variety of theories. But, in the same way the term "community" fluctuates today, those great thinkers of yore all have their own thoughts on what makes an ideal society. Photo Courtesy: Hill Street Studios/Getty Images Confucius: Confucius was a Chinese philosopher and teacher who is considered the father of Eastern thought to this day. His works concentrated heavily on societal ideals such as ren, which encompasses the ideals of goodness, benevolence, and love. He also advocated for one of the earliest versions of the so-called "Golden Rule" -- "What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others." Plato: In Plato's famous work The Republic, he provides a detailed account of his ideal society. While some of his ideas seem odd or even shocking to readers today, some scholars believe that parts of the work may not have been intended to be taken literally. The essence of his theory describes a society where each person is assigned a role aligned with their unique attributes. To this end, the society in question can function smoothly as a single organism. Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Rousseau was the author of a 1762 book called The Social Contract, which introduced a concept important to many of the philosophers who followed him. That concept was the social contract -- or the notion that in order to maintain social order, individuals must consent to the rule of a government. Mary Wollstonecraft: Wollstonecraft was an 18th-century writer and philosopher who insisted that women should have the same rights as men. Long before feminism was considered a virtue, Wollstonecraft boldly proclaimed that the long-held belief that women were inferior to men was nonsense. Examples of Community Leaders So, what qualities must a successful leader have in order to foster a strong sense of community? While, arguably, it's near-impossible to point to any truly ideal societies, there have certainly been leaders who've inspired communities and planted the seeds for lasting change -- a kind of change that points toward both a better society and more supportive communities. Photo Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons; Janet Fries/Getty Images; Melina Mara/The Washington Post/Getty Images Some of the qualities that history-making, community-focused leaders share include the following: Self-Awareness: Being aware of one's strengths and weaknesses is important for any type of leader. Knowing one's limits can help one delegate more effectively. Empathy: Recognizing how the community perceives them as well as what individuals, and the community at large, are going through and feeling makes a leader stand out. Empathy allows one to understand different viewpoints and, moreover, effect change that benefits all, especially those that don't traditionally have a say. Honesty & Integrity: In order to be an effective leader, one must be trustworthy. Being honest is important, but integrity -- a measure of honesty over time -- is even more essential. Willingness to Learn: We all make mistakes. As such, even the best community leaders aren't right 100 percent of the time. To this end, being adaptable, flexible and open to learning from one's mistakes is essential. Often, this means listening to the perspectives of others -- including those who may have different backgrounds or identities than you and, therefore, a different view of obstacles, values and more. Dedication: Even if they are an elected official, a community leader has likely volunteered for their role -- and that requires dedication. Being passionate and committed not only helps a leader create real change, but it helps them inspire and rally others, too. While history has certainly seen its fair share of leaders, here are a few truly inspiring change-makers: Martin Luther King Jr.: A Black Baptist minister and activist, Martin Luther King Jr. became one of the most visible leaders in the American Civil Rights Movement. In addition to leading the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King participated in and led marches for Black folks' right to vote, desegregation, and labor rights. Nelson Mandela: As the first Black head of state to be elected in a democratic election, former South African President Nelson Mandela made history in many ways. Most notably, Mandela is known for being an anti-apartheid revolutionary. Harvey Milk: An American politician, Harvey Milk was the first openly gay elected official in United States' history. A member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Milk was an LGBTQ+ rights icon. Marsha P. Johnson: American gay liberation activist and self-identified drag queen Marsha P. Johnson is best known for advocating for queer rights and playing an instrumental role in the Stonewall uprising of 1969. Known as the "mayor of Christopher Street" by New York City's Greenwich Village community, Johnson was a founding member of the Gay Liberation Front and, alongside Sylvia Rivera, co-founded radical activist group S.T.A.R. Stacey Abrams: Lawyer, author, and politician Stacey Abrams served in the Georgia House of Representatives for a decade before running for governor in 2018, making her the first Black woman to run for the position on a major party ticket. When Abrams lost the race, she founded Fair Fight Action to address voter suppression. In championing voters' rights, Abrams has been credited with boosting voter turnout in Georgia in 2020, thus impacting the presidential election as well as Georgia's two Senate races -- and making history through community organizing. What Makes a Community Successful? Due to the countless number of philosophers who have tackled the question of what a perfect society looks like, it's no surprise that they didn't all agree. That said, there are a few key components that many of them seem to have in common. Photo Courtesy: 10'000 Hours/Getty Images The key values that tend to make a community successful include: Freedom of Opinion & Expression: Each member of a healthy community should feel free to express their ideas or opinions without the fear of being punished or censored for those beliefs. Common Goals & Values: While this doesn't necessarily mean that everyone in a community shares the exact same religious or political beliefs, positive communities are usually developed around a common goal. For instance, Americans all share the core values of the "American Dream," even though they may come from very diverse backgrounds. Clear Rules & Laws: It's important that each member of a community knows what's expected of them within the context of said community. Fairness: The rules and laws should be applied equally to all members of the community. Shared Heritage & Traditions: Communities are generally strengthened by shared traditions. This could encompass anything from a weekly religious gathering to an annual small-town parade. Community Interaction: Interaction helps members of a community develop the type of emotional bonds that make them a strong unit. The closer the members of a community are, the more likely they are to be able to accomplish shared goals. Strong Community Leadership: It's important for a community to have strong leaders whose values align with their own. Ideally, the values and outlook of a community should encompass those of as many different people in the community as possible. Examples of community leaders could include a town's elected officials, a religious leader, the head of a local volunteer organization, the president of the P.T.A., or the CEO of a business. Importance of Community As you can see, being a part of a community is an important part of the human experience. As the poet John Donne once famously said, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." Photo Courtesy: Thomas Barwick/Getty Images Being a part of a community has several vital benefits to each individual member. Communities can help us seek out and interpret our own core values while learning from one another and growing. While we may or may not realize it, who we are and what we believe in as people will be largely shaped by the communities we align ourselves with. This is why it's so important for young people to seek out communities that help them shape the people they want to become. For adults, communities are equally important in helping one grow, find purpose, and more. As we get older, a strong sense of community with those around us can help fend off loneliness and provide support or mutual aid. Take a moment to examine the communities that intersect with your own life, and ask yourself the following questions: Do they align with your own values? Are they helping you grow as a person? What goals do you feel with other members of the group? Are there other communities you might also consider joining to help you grow towards your own individual goals? MORE FROM REFERENCE.COM

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