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Reclaiming Politics

The times are changing, and our approach to politics
may need to change as well

by *[Robert Gilman](#)*

One of the articles in [Reclaiming Politics \(IC#30\)](#)

Fall/Winter 1991, Page 10

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Something strange is happening on the American political landscape. After decades of steadily declining voter participation, and many other signs of growing citizen alienation, Americans are finally reawakening to politics. Why now?

Most of the media pundits, in analyzing recent election results, have focused on the combination of the uncertainty in the economy and various congressional scandals as the key that is unlocking people's interest. No doubt there is some truth to this, but the economy has often been in much worse shape during the past few decades; and it seems like there has always been some political scandal keeping the press active. There must be something more.

EROSION AT THE CENTER

That something more, I've come to believe, is the disintegration of a fundamental assumption that has dominated American politics for decades. To understand this shift, we need to go back to the end of World War II. North America emerged from the war as the only major industrial area still intact. The United States was, in fact, *the* superpower - economically, technologically, militarily, and in popular culture. One indicator of the level of US dominance was that in 1948 the US accounted for 2/3 of the economic activity of the *whole world*. US society didn't wake up to its new status for a while, but by the time of the Eisenhower era, we were quite comfortable with our new role as the "affluent society."

Out of this comfort came an idea that has since dominated American politics: The "center" (i.e. the US mainstream) is basically doing OK, and all that's left to do is to tidy up the "edges."

The conservatives felt that the "edge" which most needed attention was communism - that irritant on the frontier of "our" world. Most of the politically significant liberals shared a concern about communism (at least they were willing to vote for billions of dollars to fight it), but they also felt that the internal "edges" - poverty, civil rights, etc. - needed attention as well.

The height of this "we're OK, let's tidy the edges" attitude came in the early 1960s with the combination of the Civil Rights Act, the Peace Corps, the War On Poverty, and the "police action" in Vietnam. While these were all controversial, nevertheless there were enough people who felt sufficiently comfortable in their own lives and who believed in the American ideals they had learned in school - and fought for during World War II - that they were glad to generously spread their good fortune out to the "edges."

Popular support for this approach began to erode as early as the late 1960s. Nevertheless, US global dominance remained basically intact. Even as recently as 1985 the US portion of world economic activity was still 45%, almost half. Now it is less than a third and falling.

The general comfort level in the mainstream permitted the activists who dominated both political parties to continue to pursue their various "edge-fixing" agendas. The Democratic party became a magnet for every racial, ethnic, sexual preference, and differently-abled group that felt (usually quite rightly) that it was not getting a fair deal, that it was an "edge." Correspondingly, the Republicans attracted the religious right, libertarians, and entrepreneurs - groups that felt marginalized (turned into "edges") by the prevailing sentiments expressed in the "liberal" press.

In either case, the message was clear: "There are no pressing problems facing society as a whole, at least none that can be addressed through politics. The only issues appropriate for politics are special interest (or edge adjustment) issues." Even the environment and education have somehow been fit into this mold. Given this message, it should hardly surprise us that more and more eligible voters dropped out of the formal political process over the last few decades. Those who saw themselves on one edge or another, especially the poor, grew tired of promises without results. Those who saw themselves in the center felt they had better (or more enjoyable) things to do than involve themselves in an activity with little direct connection to their lives.

This situation is now going through a massive shift. The current economic recession is hitting the center as well as the edges and seems to be pushing people to acknowledge that the center is no longer OK. We may have "won" the Cold War, but it is increasingly obvious that we have been losing ground in almost every other facet of our lives.

Is this just a temporary problem, something that can be fixed with a new team in Washington, DC? I doubt it. The problems we have accumulated over the past decades are too massive to be cleared away in just a few years.

LIMITS TO BUSINESS-AS-USUAL

Yet even if we could somehow magically erase the usual list of problems - high levels of debt, poor schools, persistent poverty, etc. - and get back to business-as-usual, there is still another, more profound way in which "the center is no longer OK."

By now it is becoming quite clear that if we do not make massive changes in our relationship to the environment - particularly the rate at which we are consuming resources and generating waste - we will very likely create a series of global economic, social and ecological catastrophes beginning within the next few decades. This is the consensus from reputable sources such as the United Nations Environment Program, Worldwatch Institute, scientists who study species extinction, those researching global climate change, and many, many others.

It is hard to know just how bad these catastrophes could get, but one thing is clear. If we keep on with business-as-usual we will go through a cycle that system theorists describe as "overshoot and collapse."

Back in 1972, Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, Jørgen Randers and William Behrens III published the now famous study, *The Limits to Growth* (NY: Signet), in which they showed that business-as-usual would lead to overshoot and collapse in world population, industrial production per capita and food per capita (see figure below). In their model the collapse began in the first quarter of the 21st century and continued down for at least the rest of the century.

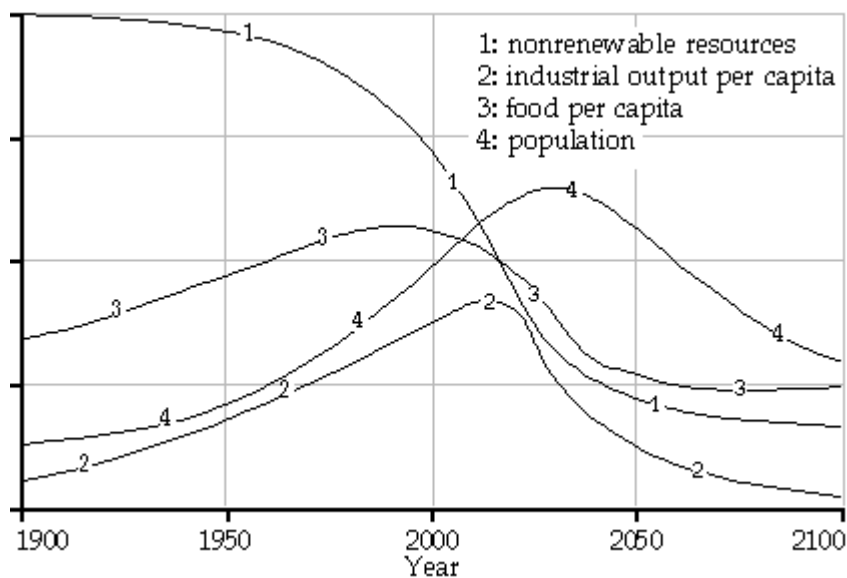


Figure 1: Overshoot and collapse from business-as-usual based on the computer model used for The Limits to Growth.

The first three authors are now working on a 20-years-after review of *The Limits to Growth*, and they have shared with us some of their pre-publication results. They have found that the real numbers between 1970 and 1990 followed the tracks "predicted" in 1972 remarkably well, and that the underlying model needed only minor modifications to bring it up to date.

The only way to avoid the catastrophes that would result from "overshoot and collapse" is to make changes *well before* we are absolutely forced to.

There is - fortunately - lots of good news here. The necessary changes to avert this collapse are well within our human and technological capacity, as we have discussed in many previous issues of *IN CONTEXT*. For example, by shifting to proven more-efficient technologies, we could greatly reduce our resource use and rate of pollution creation. By changing dietary habits to reduce our consumption of grain-fed livestock, we could expand our effective food supply without putting more pressure on agricultural land. There are, in fact, a wealth of proven practical steps we can take that would not only avert the catastrophe, but would usher us into a much more humane and sustainable era. Indeed, when these steps are put into the *The Limits to Growth* model, the result is a smooth transition to a sustainable world.

So why don't we take these steps? Because what makes practical sense and what makes political sense are very different things:

From a practical point of view, making changes will be much easier *before* the collapse.

* We can choose now, while we still have fossil fuels and other non-renewable resources, to *invest* these into building a society and economy based on renewable energy, the careful recycling of materials, and the equitable economic institutions required for a sustainable society.

* In so doing, we can still rely on our basic ecological and social systems, for although these are under stress, most are still functioning.

* In contrast, after the collapse, in a world where disasters have torn the social and economic fabric apart, wasted our remaining natural resources, and caused great environmental damage, constructive change will be much more difficult, at the very least. Many actions, such as restoring ecosystems whose key species have become extinct, will be simply impossible.

From a political point of view, however, there will continue to be a lot of pressure to delay these changes as long as possible.

* Such a fundamental shift in our way of life will mean massive economic changes. Whole new industries will grow while others will become obsolete. Many people will need to change jobs, and many current investments will lose their value.

* Those who stand to lose, at least in the short term, are currently well-established, organized, and powerful. Those who stand to gain, on the other hand, are either currently dispersed and unorganized or simply have no political voice - such as today's and tomorrow's children.

In the past, those who have felt the need for change have generally responded to this classic political problem with either 1) despair and inaction or 2) confrontation and polarization. The first accomplishes nothing, and the second has proven to be a very painful, costly, and often ineffectual method of significant cultural change. Given the unprecedented magnitude of the challenges we face, we can not afford either choice.

STRATEGIES FOR RECLAIMING POLITICS

What, then, *are* we to do? I have no overall answer, but I would like to share some ideas that seem to point in the right direction:

We will each be a gainer and a loser. We are truly all in this together, and it makes factual, moral, and strategic sense to stay well aware of our common interests and common destiny. Some will, of course, act in opposition to the changes necessary to reach a sustainable world. Yet delaying these changes will soon harm their quality of life as well. As Ted Turner said recently, "It is no fun being rich in a dying world."

At the same time, those of us who promote such changes need to acknowledge the things that we will all be losing, such as the childlike/childish innocence of being able to treat nature as inexhaustible and infinitely resilient. Such acknowledgement can help us follow Gandhi's example in never losing sight of our profound connection to those who, today, happen to be playing the role of our opponents.

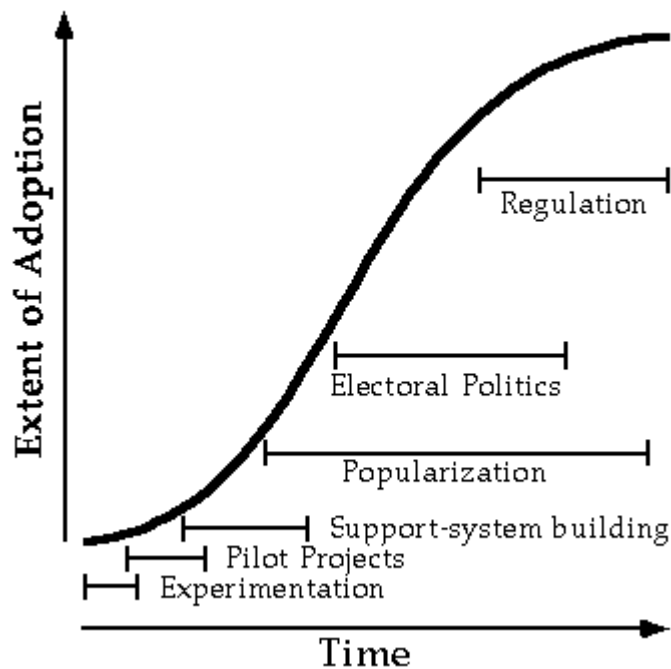
We also would do well to remember the clear lesson from successful conflict resolution: expanding on "common ground" is the fastest, more realistic path to meaningful change. Polarization and confrontation are useful, at most, as an occasional spice within the main course of pursuing our common interest.

Diffusion is more effective than coercion. Two issues back Alan AtKisson described the process of "innovation diffusion" - that is, the free spread of new ideas, technologies, values, etc. throughout a culture (see "The Innovation Diffusion Game," *IN CONTEXT* #28, page 58). The spread of the *fax machine* and of *environmental awareness* are two very different examples of this diffusion process.

An important lesson here - as history is making clear - is that any innovation that can be spread through *free adoption* will likely spread faster and last longer than an innovation that requires the *power of the state* to bring it into being. Some changes can only be handled through legislation, but we should challenge our creativity by searching long and hard to find *diffusion-based* strategies before turning to government.

I say *strategies* (plural) because there are many ways to assist the diffusion process. Indeed a key insight into the diffusion process is that the most appropriate strategy for assisting the spread of an innovation changes *dramatically* as the innovation becomes more widely adopted.

Strategies For Spreading Innovations



The above figure gives the basic pattern: At first, the innovation needs to be refined through **experimentation** and **pilot projects**. Pushing to spread an innovation before it has proven itself usually does more harm than good.

Once the innovation has proven its worth, the next step is the development of businesses and organizations that can provide an **support-system** or infrastructure through which the innovation can become available beyond the circle of experimenters. This infrastructure is built through spreading the innovation to "early adoptors," people who are already predisposed to change. At this early stage, attempting to convince the uninterested or the hostile is a waste of effort.

It is only *after* that infrastructure is in place that it makes sense to "go public" through the major media to a broader audience of interested people. For some innovations, this **popularization** phase may be all that is needed to spread them as far as they can go.

However, if the innovation is controversial, or if it needs government support to become fully functional, eventually it will be necessary to enter the arena of **electoral politics**. Political successes can provide the innovation with increased respectability, plus leading to an improved regulatory environment. This is the phase where those who actively oppose the innovation need to be directly addressed, yet it is still best to do so with as little polarization as possible.

Finally, once the innovation has gained majority support, it will occasionally be appropriate to sweep up the laggards through legislation and **regulation**. This step is full of dangers, since it imposes the "tyranny of the majority" and can understandably provoke resentment. It makes sense only when the laggards are creating clear harm through their non-adoption (e.g., a laggard car company that did not include seat belts as standard equipment). Remember, today's laggard may be tomorrow's innovator - as was the case for organic farmers, who were laggards about adopting chemical agriculture yet innovators for sustainable agriculture.

One bonus of focusing on the *full range* of diffusion strategies rather than just on legislation is that entrenched interests are much less able to slow the many routes of diffusion than they are able to block legislation. There is so much innovative activity going on in so many places that it is impossible for centralized institutions to keep track of it, much less broadly interfere. Even totalitarian governments have been unable to control it, and their ability to interfere is decreasing daily.

$$\left[\begin{array}{c} \text{Perceived} \\ \text{value} \\ \text{of the} \\ \text{New Way} \end{array} \right] - \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{Perceived} \\ \text{value} \\ \text{of the} \\ \text{Old Way} \end{array} \right] > \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{Perceived} \\ \text{cost} \\ \text{of the} \\ \text{Change} \end{array} \right]$$

The Equation Of Change

Reducing the "cost of change" offers great leverage. A third concept to consider is illustrated in figure above, which I call, half-jokingly, the "equation of change." What it says is that in order for someone to switch from an old way of doing things to a new way (i.e., to adopt an innovation), that person must feel that the additional value provided by the new way is greater than the "cost" of making the change. Note that the words "value" and "cost" are to be understood in *psychological* as well as monetary terms.

If you have some innovation that you want to promote, this equation says there are three things you can do: 1) Build up the perceived value of the new way (as many innovators do). 2) Depress the perceived value of the old way (as social critics do). 3) Decrease the cost of the change. Political activists have often ignored the third term, but businesses know it to be very important ("easy credit, no money down," etc.).

From a whole-system perspective, it is best to use all three approaches, giving special attention to whichever one offers the most leverage. Right now, with more and more people feeling that "the system isn't working" and with plenty of proven innovations available, the "cost of change" has become the limiting factor. For example, public opinion polls consistently show that large numbers of people are willing to make changes for the good of the environment, but also that only a few have actually made these changes. Doing whatever is possible to reduce the perceived cost of these changes could unleash tremendous movement.

What do these strategic considerations have to do with reclaiming politics? Potentially everything. In a time of possible overshoot and collapse we must all be doing whatever it takes - and more importantly, whatever *works* - to change society in increasingly necessary ways. These changes need to be introduced, experimented with, refined, debated, occasionally even voted on. Many of the most necessary changes will only happen if they are well shepherded into the collective decision-making process. That process, in all its myriad forms, is *politics* in the broadest sense - and it is what we must now reclaim.

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Last Updated 29 June 2000.

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