
Ntunnaquômen, máttapsh yóteg awássih, cuttaunchemókous.

[I have had a good dream, come sit by the fire, warm yourself, I will tell my story.]

—From the Algonkian language of my
Massachusêuck (“Massachuset”) ancestors

.. ..

So [the Peacemaker] passed from settlement to settlement finding that men desired peace and would practice it if they knew for certainty that others would practice it too.

But first, after leaving the hunters [the Peacemaker] sought the house of a certain woman who lived by the warrior’s path which passed between the east and the west.

When [the Peacemaker] arrived, the woman placed food before him and, after he had eaten, asked him his message.

“I carry the Mind of the Master of Life,” he replied, “and my message will bring an end to the wars between east and west.”

“How will this be?” asked the woman, who wondered at his words, for it was her custom to feed the warriors passing before her door on their way between the east and the west.

“The Word that I bring,” he said, “is that all peoples shall love one another and live together in peace. . . .”

“Thy message is good,” said the woman, “but a word is nothing until it is given form and set to work in the world. What form shall this message take when it comes to dwell among men?”

“It will take the form of the longhouse,” replied [the Peacemaker], “in which there are many fires, one for each family, yet all live as one household under one chief mother. . . . They shall be the Kunonsionni, the Longhouse. They shall have one mind and live under one law. Thinking will replace killing, and there shall be one commonwealth.”

—The Message of the Peacemaker to the Mother of the Nations, during the creation of the Haudenosaunee or “Iroquois” Confederacy (circa 14th century)

First Words

A MAJOR PROBLEM of the twenty-first century will be the crisis of diverse, often competing, social/cultural identities among people uprooted by corrosively powerful global economic combines. This crisis will be significant not just in itself, but because it has the direct consequence of undermining coordinated resistance to the destructiveness of globalized systems of power. In an era rushing toward mindless materialism, propelled by powerlid, unfeeling economic syndicates that uproot body and soul, more and more people will seek refuge in compartmentalized forms of social identity. However, the search for safety in such sealed compartments is by itself largely illusory. Fragmented, isolated, and unknowing of, or hostile to, one another, people are more, not less vulnerable to the very forces of destruction from which they seek escape.

Yet the strong desire for rooted nation is *not* the source of the problem. The real difficulty is not that people feel the need for such grounded affiliation in a culture, religion, community, cosmology, or philosophy. Rather, as Simone Weil, writing in the dark days of exile from Nazi domination, observed in her book *The Need for Roots*, “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul” (1952, 41).¹ The real dilemma we face is the lack of constructive and mutually respectful interaction among those diverse settings, rather than the diversity itself.

Confronted and often confounded by a crushing, globalizing monoculture that is supported by willing national elites, and

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imposed from the core regions of economic power, we are not becoming better-connected peoples despite “mass communications.” Instead, we are being broken down into ever more atomized elements, subordinated as mere uncommunicating parts of “mass culture.” Some of these compartmentalized and fractured groupings take the form of rabid and genocidal nationalisms, as in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Guatemala, often with the compliance or direct support of some western nations. The elite construction of this globalization rotates most of us around a dense negative center of gravity, the content of which is determined by those with power, but which does not provide pathways for positive horizontal communication among the many peoples of the world. With the notable and partial technological exception of the Internet (which of course requires electricity and money),² along with some forms of popular culture that draw from the wells of resistance,³ and of various nongovernmental conferences and convocations (that also require money), vast millions of peoples, many of them impoverished and struggling against essentially the same homogenizing global forces, have little or no way of corresponding with one another, no matter how much their daily situations correspond in terms of poverty and subordination.⁴ So the corrosive equation we face is one of:

HOMOGENIZATION + FRAGMENTATION = SUBORDINATION

By contrast, the reality of highly diverse communities, organizations, cosmologies, and philosophies that *are* in resistance to this domination indicates that heterogeneity is an important basis from which to work for a just world. Certainly such heterogeneity cannot be ignored or marginalized. In this sense the dialectically opposite equation to the one above is:

HETEROGENEITY + COOPERATION = RESISTANCE AND FREEDOM

I propose that there is a way to both maintain particularistic rooted affiliations and create broad constellations of inclusive cooperation that constructively draw from such diversity. I call this way of cooperation *transcommunalism*.

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Introduction

TODAY, HUGE AND GROWING systems of economic domination continue their profit-driven bulldozer crush across the world. As some small portions of national populations are absorbed into affluent class positions, increasing numbers of people are relegated to disease-ridden paramilitary-controlled backwaters of the free-market mainstream. From rain forests to sweatshops, from Siberia to the Amazon, from the hydroelectric dam flooding of the Indigenous lands of the Sami in Scandinavia and the Cree in Québec to the chemically wrecked bodies of young women working in the U.S.-owned electronics factories in northern Mexico—from all the compass points, in a staggering variety of forms, the global economy is corrosively impacting nature and humans. Marx and Engels assailed capitalism’s “uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions” and its “everlasting uncertainty and agitation”—condemnations that can be applied even more emphatically today than when they wrote those words in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto*.¹ Technological improvements in political networking now tie ever larger sections of national and local political elites into the structural roles of eager administrative servants and armed guardians for megabusiness enterprise as it rips away the very air and earth upon which millions of species of living beings depend. In many parts of the world, thousands of desperate people flee their homes to seek temporary relief in near slave labor conditions of factories that produce luxury items for the

affluent. Workers in the “developed world” find their jobs obliterated as business syndicates move their operations to those areas of highest maximum labor exploitation. In numerous sprawling megacities, hundreds of thousands of castaways live in the back alleys of despair. Indigenous peoples, whose sacred ancestral lands have been in place for centuries, face acceleration of this century’s disruption as giant corporations, armored by governmental protections, strip-mine and clear-cut the soul of the earth. For Indigenous peoples, the technological “progress” of the expansionary capitalist “free market” brutally equals cultural extinction in an equation that has lasted for centuries.²

In this global house of crisis, with its many different rooms in which the instruments of torture and death are varied in technology but ultimately lead to destruction, we need alliances among the myriad communities and organizations that are resisting devastation on thousands of different fronts in distinct ways around the world. Consequently a key practical issue is what kinds of productive relationships among these often highly different struggles can be established, without simply duplicating the hierarchies of power and domination with which we are contending. If such egalitarian alliances are not created, then the world will lack what could well be the only major effective barrier to rapacious technological/economic undertakings that corrode the entirety of existence from the air and oceans to the earth, and from body to soul.

I propose that around the world many are poised on the edge of an important development within which is emerging a twenty-first-century mode of organizing for justice and dignity that I call *transcommunalism*. By transcommunalism I mean the constructive and developmental interaction occurring among distinct autonomy-oriented communities and organizations, each with its own particular history, outlook, and agenda. This interaction, developed through interpersonal relations of people engaged in common tasks, is producing working groups of activists whose roots are in communities and organizations, but who also form bridges among diverse peoples as they address substantial, albeit often varied corrosive dilemmas—from economic crisis to envi-

ronmental degradation, from Indigenous land rights to the organizing of workers across national borders. It is to the facilitation of transcommunal cooperation that this essay is aimed.

Transcommunalists do not employ a “melting pot approach” in which particular community and organizational allegiance is obliterated in order for cooperation to occur. On the contrary, transcommunal activists are effective at bridging diverse community and organizational positions precisely because they emerge from and work within distinctive communal and organizational settings. Rather than being an abstract call for “unity,” transcommunality relies on concrete interpersonal ties growing out of what I refer to as *shared practical action* from diverse participants. From such practical action flows increasing communication, mutual respect, and understanding.

Transcommunality must be distinguished from an inward-focused identity politics (common to many vanguard leftist and ethnic-nationalist leadership elites) that consciously cuts off its participants from contact with others in the name of racial, ethnic, or ideological claims of purity. By contrast, a transcommunal identity politics celebrates and asserts distinctive and essential community/organizational allegiances that can serve as multiple bases for common action with others. Such politics recognizes what Denis-Constant Martin calls the capacity of particularistic vantage points to simultaneously express universalistic elements such as justice and freedom (1994, 35). Consequently, transcommunality emphasizes a constant process of negotiational construction of organization among diverse participants, rather than an imposed monolithic system. Such negotiated action involves the recognition that dispute and difference, sometimes profound, must be accepted as a basic aspect of the “human condition” rather than being constrained through top-down, police-like controls.

Transcommunality at its best avoids the pitfalls of unifying philosophies that attempt to reconcile all differences, usually through force, about which Isaiah Berlin (1957) warned us. The transcommunal emphasis on negotiation/renegotiation recognizes that differences of perspective can only be effectively addressed if such viewpoints are respected while simultaneously

their partisans have the frameworks within which they can actually speak to and come to know one another.³

Transcommunitality is not a utopian abstraction if by “utopia” we mean that which does not exist.⁴ Transcommunal cooperation is both an historic reality and a living mode. In my own involvement with community organizations around the United States, such as the California-based Barrios Unidos, Stop the Violence /Increase the Peace, and the Milagros Education Project, I see activists who work cooperatively across “race,” “ethnic,” and other lines to negotiate peace and nonviolence with youth in the street. In 1993 at the National Gang Peace Summit held in Kansas City, I saw hundreds of young women and men from rival street organizations around the country, where many different African American, Latino, Native American, and white communities work together for an end to violence. Today there are thousands of examples of such transcommunal action among a wide variety of groups worldwide. Such efforts are just part of a widening set of overlapping constellations of wide varieties of activists, organizations, and institutions—all rooted in and proud of their particular affiliations while also being able to reach out to others. My offering here is to illuminate this transcommunal way of thinking and acting.

Given the heterogeneity of organizing actions around the world, the question before us is no longer Lenin’s famous Vanguard party slogan, “What is to be done?” with its implication that some one group or person must develop THE answer. Rather, in an environment of multifaceted modes of action, we are now faced with the different question of “What is being done?” This question implies multiple answers, all being worked out in diverse settings that are being impacted in many ways by powerful globalizing forces. So a different line of inquiry immediately develops. “What is being done, and how?” How can we enhance cooperation among diverse peoples struggling for justice and freedom in a wide variety of ways and situations? Transcommunitality, rather than bypassing or obliterating multiplicity, offers a conceptual framework that opens up ways of cooperation and communication among diverse approaches and ways of thought.