

A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT ABOUT CREATING A GOOD SOCIETY

by Randy Schutt

In this extremely conservative time dominated by terrorism, war, and incessant attack on even the most widely respected liberal programs, it is difficult to imagine that there will ever be a time when progressives can achieve major successes. Nowadays, our long-sought dream of creating a fair, democratic, and compassionate society — the beloved community — seems hopelessly unrealistic and unattainable.

However, dramatic and unexpected changes for the better can occur even in conservative times. Mass movements can spring forth miraculously, upend staid conventionality, and implement far-reaching progressive policies. It has happened before and it can happen again.

For example, bursting out of the conservative 1950s, the civil rights movement in the 1960s ended oppressive Jim Crow laws and forced the passage of the Voting Rights Act. Similar movements later in the decade liberated other racial minority groups, women, gay men, and lesbians. The anti-war movement forced the end of the immoral Vietnam War. The environmental movement forced the passage of the Clean Air and Clean Water Act and creation of the Environmental Protection Agency. In the 1970s, the safe energy movement halted development of nuclear power. In the 1980s, progressive groups prevented the U.S. from intervening militarily in Central America. Abroad, meanwhile, liberation movements toppled oppressive regimes in South Africa, the Philippines, Nicaragua, Iran, Spain, the Soviet Union, and countries across eastern Europe.

Clearly, positive change is possible, even if it feels impossible right now. Our feelings of hopelessness do not accurately reflect the possibilities. With that understanding, please take a moment to engage in a thought experiment with me if you will.

Imagine a society where not a single person lives in poverty. Imagine a society where it is safe to walk city streets at any hour of the day or night. Imagine a society where addiction to cigarettes, alcohol, and other destructive drugs is rare. Imagine a society where corruption in business and government is not tolerated and is quite uncommon. Imagine a society where murder, rape, domestic violence, and sexual abuse of children are extremely rare occurrences. Imagine a society that values the health and welfare of its citizenry more than anything else — more than power and more than money. Imagine a society where racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other irrational hatreds are virtually unknown. Imagine a society where every citizen is encouraged to understand and participate in civic affairs and

most actually do. Imagine a society where people laugh freely, openly, and often. Imagine a society where people are glad to be alive.

Now imagine that it is your job — personally — to create such a society, to somehow transform our current society into a truly good society. How would you go about doing that? What would you do? Whom would you get to help you? How would you motivate them to work for positive change?

With Massive Wealth

Now, imagine for just a moment, an extraordinary event. Imagine that in the confusion following the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon — when the members of Congress were considering allocating additional money to the 300+ billion dollar military budget — they made a mistake. Imagine that instead of allocating money to the Pentagon, they accidentally issued the check for \$350 billion to you.

Suddenly, you would have \$350 billion to bring about progressive social change. Assuming you invested the \$350 billion in some sort of socially responsible manner and that these investments returned an average of 10% in interest and dividends every year, you could then spend approximately \$35 billion each year for social change.

How would you spend this money?

Let's assume that you decided to focus first on changing the United States. With \$35 billion to spend each year, you could hire approximately one million people to work for change if you paid them each a modest, but livable salary (with benefits) totaling \$35,000. One million activists would be an exceptional number of full-time, paid social change activists. Clearly, they could create quite a social change effort — far greater than what we have today.

One million activists would amount to about one out of every two hundred adults in the U.S. If these activists were all strongly-motivated, grassroots activists evenly distributed across the United States, each dedicated to making the world better by influencing ordinary people, they would likely be able to inform vast numbers of their neighbors and friends about progressive alternatives and persuade many people to adopt a progressive perspective.

Alternatively, if you decided to focus on changing laws, you could hire different activists with different skills. You could hire 30,000 researchers, publicists, lobbyists, and activists in Washington, D.C. to influence federal legislators — plus 1,000 people in each of the 50 state capitals as well

as 2,000 grassroots activists in every single one of the 435 Congressional Districts to influence local decision-makers. If instead, you decided to hire people to build alternative institutions (such as alternative news outlets, alternative schools, alternative social clubs, co-operatives, land trusts, co-housing communities, organic farmers' markets, non-violent security forces, etc.) or to build alternative political parties (like the Green Party, Labor Party, or New Party), you would have massive numbers of people to carry out the necessary work. If you focused instead on building a non-violent direct action movement — like the civil rights movement of the 1960s — there would be massive numbers of people who could strike, boycott, and blockade destructive institutions.

If you chose a combination of these strategies, these one million full-time paid activists would likely be able to challenge a vast number of destructive institutions and social norms — exploitation, corruption, racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and violence of any kind. These million activists could build large numbers of strong alternative institutions that adhered to progressive ideals of justice, equality, tolerance, and compassion. They could challenge destructive laws, policies, and social norms. Moreover, they could build strong political parties dedicated to progressive ideals. They could teach thousands of workshops on ways to overcome racism, sexism, and other internalized oppression. They could transform the news media, labor unions, businesses, churches, social service agencies, the government, the military, and our culture. They could teach thousands of classes on progressive childrearing and cooperative decision-making.

Over the course of a few decades, as these activists persuaded people and transformed institutions, it is likely that resistance would wane and it would get easier and easier to bring about even greater change. Eventually, they could totally transform society — pushing society much closer to progressive ideals of democracy, justice, peace, and compassion. Clearly, by spending \$35 billion and employing one million progressive activists every year for decades, you could have an enormous influence on society.

Benign Dictatorship or Democracy?

However, let's assume that you are an astute reader of history and understand that if you were to create a social change movement in your own image that it would likely fail or go off course. You would realize that your ignorance and prejudices might blind you to certain kinds of oppression or exploitation, and your interests might steer the movement toward some issues at the expense of others. Moreover, you would realize that if you dictated the exact nature of the social change that you wanted, you would become a dictator. No matter how benign you were, you would still be dictating to others and they would probably simmer with frustration and eventually rebel. Furthermore, because of the immense power you were able to wield, you

might very well become selfish, callous, or corrupt — and end up backing changes that were neither enlightened nor progressive.

So rather than specify the exact nature of the society you wanted these activists to work for, let's assume you would do your best to devolve your power as widely as possible. Rather than dictating social changes, you would encourage each individual you employed to work for a democratic society in her or his own way.

Moreover, you might realize that to be truly democratic, society must consist of knowledgeable and fully empowered citizens who can decide for themselves — cooperatively in conjunction with each other — the kind of society they want to have. Furthermore, they must operate within democratic structures that decentralize and equalize power, enabling everyone to have equal standing.

To be fully empowered and capable of creating such a democratic society, each of the people you hired would therefore need to learn the skills necessary to be effective citizens and activists: how to evaluate alternative policies, lobby, research, write, speak out, build activist organizations, build alternative institutions, overcome oppressive cultural blocks, and so on. They would need to have a clear vision of what a good society would look like, have clear conceptions of feasible strategies for change, and know how to work democratically and cooperatively together. They would need to know how to overcome destructive cultural conditioning (like racism, materialism, and militarism) and how to overcome personal emotional dysfunction (such as low self-esteem, depression, and addiction). They would need to know how to comfort and support each other in difficult times and how to encourage each other in good times. Furthermore, they would need to know how to create a community that provided support and guidance. They would also need to know how to interrupt oppressive behavior in others to ensure that no one — especially their fellow activists — became oppressive or exploitive. They would need to know how to develop effective change organizations and how to work together across geographic, ideological, and cultural boundaries.

Moreover, they would need to know how to help everyone else in society become knowledgeable and empowered citizens. So they would also need to know how to pass on these skills and knowledge to others.

To ensure the million activists you hired would have the necessary knowledge and skills, likely you would provide them with on-going educational opportunities — classes, internships, training videos, individual mentoring, and so on. Moreover, to help them stay on track, you would probably try to provide a support and guidance network as well as an accountability structure.

Without a Wealthy Funder

Clearly, with large amounts of money, it is possible to create massive social change movements and push society

towards progressive ideals. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that Congress will write a check to any of us for \$350 billion. It is a nice fantasy, but one that is unlikely to be realized.

Still, if we hope to create a good society in line with our progressive ideals, we probably need to create a similar network of social change movements with at least a million skillful, knowledgeable, and empowered activists. Since we cannot pay one million people to be full-time activists, we will likely have to rely on a somewhat larger number of volunteer activists who work for change while also holding a part-time or full-time job, and it is likely the process will take longer. In addition, since we cannot pay people to attend educational institutions, we will likely have to find cheaper ways to spread the necessary skills and knowledge. We must also find an inexpensive, but effective method for providing support and guidance.

How Could We Create a Massive Democratic Movement for Progressive Change?

If you will, engage in another thought experiment with me.

Imagine there was a network of fifty education programs distributed among the major metropolitan areas of the United States that each offered a yearlong program of education, support, and encouragement to fledgling activists. Inspired by the vision of creating a good society, imagine that thousands of students enrolled in one of these programs every year. Imagine that these yearlong education programs were structured in a way to make them accessible to the typical activist with limited financial resources: they relied heavily on self-study groups, internships with existing social change organizations, individual mentoring, and practical work with a local social change organization. Also, imagine that each of these programs encouraged their students to go on — after they graduated — to offer support

and education to the other activists they worked with and to create a strong community of activists.

Over time, these programs likely could convey critical knowledge, skills, and experience as well as provide encouragement and support to tens of thousands of activists. This would enhance these activists' skills, enable them to be effective activists, enable them to teach and support thousands of other activists, and enable them to develop powerful social change movements. If each of these activists conveyed her knowledge and skills, and offered encouragement and support to a few dozen more people, then millions of people could learn the skills of active citizenship and social change. Over the course of several decades, these activists could fundamentally transform society — teaching, supporting, and encouraging millions of people to work democratically for positive change.

This is just one possible way of creating a network of democratic social change movements with at least a million skilled activists. There are probably many others.

In this ultraconservative time of terrorism, war, inequality, corporate globalization, religious extremism, and consolidation of important institutions like the news media into a few privileged hands, it may seem impossible to actually create a just, compassionate, and democratic society. But the same ideals and methods that have allowed activists to end slavery, liberate women, and create a reasonably tolerant culture, can also lead us to create a good society. If we can dream of a good society, we can create that society by speaking out and working diligently. Certainly, it would be easier if we had \$350 billion to hire a million skilled activists, but we can do it as we have always done it — with pluck and perseverance. We can create a good society — let's do it!

These ideas are developed more in my book: *Inciting Democracy: A Practical Proposal for Creating a Good Society* (Cleveland, OH: SpringForward Press, September 2001 <<http://www.springforwardpress.com>>).