

8

The dead hand of modern
democracy: Lessons for emergent
post-modern democrats
By Ken White

Let us not be too hasty to bury the present; it's not dead yet, and a pre-mortem might provide some useful information. Those of us moving ahead ought to remember Santayana's famous dictum, and meditate—deeply—on what, and whom, we might leave behind.

Emergent democracy can augment and, perhaps, even gradually supplant outmoded forms of self-governance, but *only* if we appreciate why those forms were once “moded”—suited to their times and uses. After all, Democracy 2.0 (if we consider Athens “1.0”) has enjoyed a pretty good 220-year run, even with all its failings.

Considering which critical functions of modern democracy deserve preservation in intent, if not in form, offers the opportunity to appreciate the rich complexity of democratic self-governance and its astonishingly diverse modes of participation and action. By attending to what made modern democracy successful we might learn a few lessons; extract some insights from the old model; and identify a few pitfalls we ought to avoid, even as we cheerfully acknowledge the inevitability of creating a new set of pitfalls.

I draw on personal experience in arriving at this conclusion. Working in the United States on democratic reforms (including campaign financing) for many years, I came to appreciate the difference between “reform” and “redesign.” Although the former may occur more often in some limited way, the promise of the latter drives truly significant change. As

Buckminster Fuller said: “You never change things by fighting against the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the old model obsolete.”¹

But it is also true that there is nothing new under the sun. As JS Bruner points out, we humans tend to respond with “effective surprise” to concepts and artifacts that take familiar things and rearrange them in new ways.² Those working with a chaordic model of change (in the zone where chaos and order overlap)³ have found that the most fertile territory for innovation is in the boundary zone, where unlike things co-mingle. The chaordic model of self-governance has been described as a mix of Lao Tse, Adam Smith, and Thomas Jefferson.⁴

It is not that we dismiss what exists out of hand and live in a normative fantasyland, but that we honor what has been created even as we disrupt the familiar. There is much energy for wholesale change, and rightly so. As the editors of this book noted in their précis: “[B]ottom-up governance...resists the past for the past’s sake and reinvents society anew constantly. It is innovative, preserving and cannibalizing the past to create better solutions to social problems each day. It is many small changes that add up to profound solutions, an order that is intended to change, everything that has made democracy the most compelling form of governance on Earth.”

Therefore we should neither praise nor to bury the present. In some cases, we will merely be trying to reclaim what once was—or at least what once was possible. Since every generation must reinvent the familiar in ways just unique enough to claim originality, some of what we call “emergent” might sound very familiar to a suffragette or an abolitionist. Paine, Publius, and all the pamphleteers and organizers of the American Revolution would feel at home, we suspect—and hope!—with much of what is described and proposed between these covers. In two senses, we are radicals (both “beginning at the roots” and “departing from the usual”).

We can take some of our cues from the places modern democracy has succeeded and failed, and perhaps most interestingly from the places of greatest struggle. In addition to obvious challenges like inequality and tyranny (as if those weren’t challenges enough), emergent democrats face the vexing problem of creating forms of participation that embrace a variety of people and cultures, yet are flexible and responsive enough to avoid the “structure trap.”

As will be explored more fully, the “structure trap” is the tendency to believe that we know exactly what we want to accomplish; who will do the work; how the work will happen; and what outcomes will occur. Accordingly, we build out elaborate rules, regulations, procedures, structures, and personnel

¹ Bucky cite to come.

² J.S. Bruner, *On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand* (Harvard University Press, 1979).

³ See www.chaordic.org for more information.

⁴ M. Mitchell Waldrop, “The Trillion-Dollar Vision of Dee Hock” (*Fast Company*, Oct./Nov. 1996).

to match our assumptions. Although useful for engineering bridges, in other applications this “trap” drives our efforts toward a pre-determined goal, even if the circumstances change or the outcomes don’t match the intentions. Once locked in to a particular plan, we follow it to its logical conclusion: planned obsolescence, bureaucratic sclerosis, rising frustration, and inevitable breakdown. Arguably, we are approaching or have reached the limits of modern democracy’s “structure trap.”

Having arrived at a possible ending, we might consider what led us to this new beginning, and how to begin well.

What Went Right

The genius of democracy⁵ continues to be that even in its truncated and corrupted form, it offers a little something for almost everyone. Of course, that means some bad with the good. Just as democracy generally rewards the diligent, so too it offers the craven with opportunities to exploit the dark side of human nature. But democracy endures precisely because of the potential it may still offer: an elegantly simple way for people to decide—intentionally—how to live and grow and self-govern together. Tattered, sullied, unfulfilled and unfulfilling, yet the promise endures.

The challenge for emergent democracy is to do better: more engaging forms of participation; stronger defenses against regression and backlash; better approaches to preventing power concentration and minority suppression and the like. And more. To improve upon a form of self-governance that, in its supple state, neatly balances an incredible array of interests and forces. Even as we see its flaws and seek to improve upon its failings, we must at least acknowledge a few of the things modern democracies sometimes get or, at least, used to get, right:

Voice, vote, and exit. Every citizen has options for participation, decisionmaking, or, if desired, no participation at all, without forfeiting any future rights.

Opportunity. The current money-in-politics debacle notwithstanding, the barriers to participation in democracy have become remarkably low. Expressing opinions, activism, organizing, voting, and running for office: the options are plentiful (even for noncitizens in many places). “Anyone can

⁵ Because most—but not all—of my experience is in U.S. politics, I use the American democratic experiment as a primary reference point. Although an inherently limited perspective, it nonetheless provides greater focus. Many consider some democracies, such as those in Western Europe, to be more evolved—a claim I do not dispute. However, those systems are neither emergent nor perfect end states.

grow up to be President” may have gone the way of Abraham Lincoln’s log cabin in the United States, but the myth endures with incredible potency.

Scale and scalability. In addition to the familiar, if increasingly illusory, tripartite U.S. balance of power among the co-equal executive, legislative, and judicial branches, subtler forms and experiences of power shape the democratic experience.

Localism. As commentators from deTocqueville to contemporary sociologist Robert Putnam never seem to tire of pointing out, the experiences of local, volunteer-based groups are one of the underpinnings of American democracy, providing citizens a sense of agency and empowerment.

Nested hierarchies. The American form of democracy also relies, in part, on familiar, nested hierarchies (e.g., local, state, national; subcommittee, committee, legislature). As Theda Skocpol points out,⁶ Americans used to experience the hierarchical form through their participation in traditional, voluntary organizations—alas, before most of them died or transmuted into virtual corporations.

Cross-cutting interactions. Similarly, one underlying assumption of modern democracy is the opportunity for *unlike* citizens to engage with each other outside of hierarchies, whether through activities sponsored by government, businesses, nonprofits, community groups, and other forms of organization. Of course, the trend in American life toward the marketization of everything and economic balkanization runs exactly counter to this ideal.

Self-organized, emergent activities. Given the overscheduled, hyper-organized, self-absorbed character of modern American life, it’s a wonder anything gets self-organized...but still it happens. However, the self-organizing impulse and experience, and the potential it offers, are too often smothered by the embrace of existing institutions, or lost as soon as the first move toward “institutionalization” is made. Hence, the structure problem that discourages many citizens from organizing because they begin dealing more with the management of people, groups, and resources than in actual activism.

Boundaries and boundary permeability. As any parent of an adolescent can tell you, two fundamental human needs are identity within a fairly predictable, bounded group, and the freedom to reach across boundaries for stimulation and innovation. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison disagreed on the form that best honored this tension, but agreed on its fundamental importance in the democratic experience.

Community. Communities allow people to experience modern democracy—for better or worse—on a small scale. Since relationships are the keys to communities, and democracies, the quality of the interactions in communities profoundly influences the value individuals attach to democracy.

⁶ Including Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

Rubbing elbows. Democracies depend on unlike people interacting with each other peaceably and productively, leading to the exploration and appreciation of difference—and the spark of creativity that can arise from interactions among people with divergent viewpoints. The experience of finding unexpected convergences, compromising with integrity, and building relationships across boundaries provides the good will, and even trust, that helps binds individuals and communities separated by interests, geography, and ideology.

Mobility. Individuals and groups with relative social, political, geographical, and economic mobility are more likely to experience self-empowerment and self-organization, even if their experience comes in a less self-initiated setting. It is enough for many to have the option available, but the option must be genuine.

Clarity. Democracies and democratic societies go to great lengths to demarcate boundaries and relationships. In societies that advocate political equality, small distinctions—such as the official boundaries that dictate voting districts and the unofficial “turfs” of neighborhoods (and, sadly, gangs)—matter quite intensely. Clarity aids identity; and boundaries provide clarity. However, absolute boundaries tend to limit the influence of small groups—one reason that intensely focused “cause” campaigns tend to die out or diffuse when their moment in the sun passes.

Public space. Hannah Arendt called public space the “lost treasure” of “public happiness” that usually surfaces only at times of intense struggle against tyranny, when people labor to “create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear.”⁷ In a democracy, we ought to keep physical, social, and political open spaces around to remind us of what can be, and to keep our public space skills from atrophying.

Cause and effect. Adapting the “machine” metaphor, democracies often reduce politics to a “input>output” formula. Although this cause and effect relationship simplifies an invariably far more complicated process, it does offer a comforting level of clarity.

Responsibility, accountability, clarity. Responsibility without authority leads to tyranny; without accountability it leads to ineffectuality. In a system that assumes sovereignty of the people but holds power and authority centrally, transparency becomes essential. The “cause>effect” relationships may not always be clear, but the actual pathways of decision can be traced with sufficient determination.

Aspirations and principles. Democratic societies allow people to dream, not of the sweet by and by, but of the here and now, and take actions toward those dreams. Because democracies make clear the principles by which they are governed, dreamers like Martin Luther King and M.K. Gandhi can challenge rules and affirm change based on disconnects between principles and laws.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Peter Smith Publishing, 1984).

Values. Democracy depends, in good part, on its citizens developing and sharing a certain core set of values—values that can neither be mandated nor enforced. Although government may have some role in inculcating and enforcing those values through, for example, the funding and regulation of schools, local and federal laws, etc., the values themselves arise largely in areas beyond government control: families, communities, cultures, religions, ideas, and the arts. Values emerge from democratic experience and democracy requires a significant proportion of the citizenry to share common values. The paradox of a self-governing system is that both must emerge simultaneously.

Public work. As Harry Boyte and others observe, the experience of democracy flourishes when people engage together in shared, public work.⁸ Usually this work is unencumbered by government, and it is often self-organized work.

Identity. The myth of rugged individualism, although deeply ingrained in American culture, is less central to other modern democracies. But its implication—that individuals and not just groups have rights and responsibilities, that only respect for fundamental freedoms can counterbalance centralizing tendencies—appear in virtually every modern democracy.

Unity and diversity. “E Pluribus unum” and the converse have been the subject of endless debate. But the debate centers largely on interpretation and actualization. Few democrats dispute the fundamental premise: without diversity, there cannot be true harmony; without unity, there is no safe space for variety. Individuals are unique only in the company of others; ideas for societal change come alive only when adopted by others. Where order overlaps chaos lives the most productive space for democracy.

Stability and process. A certain degree of stability keeps societies from spinning apart, and allows citizens and business interests to have long-term perspectives. Basic processes and laws are not subject to frivolous change, and most governments have intentionally slow procedures to prevent impetuous decisions and encourage reflection and protection of minority interests. Although frustrating when wrongs need immediate correction, history suggests this deliberation is usually a virtue.

Even that lengthy list does not do justice to the many other things modern democracies tend to get right. An equally long list could be made of the things that they get wrong. The issue is not to put modern democracy on a pedestal or in the in the dock for crimes against humanity, but to recognize the enormous challenges of working in and around such a complex and, perhaps, over-developed system.

One of the most compelling challenges that modern democracies have faced and managed might prove among the most vexing puzzles for a postmodern

⁸ Harry Boyte, *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Temple University Press, 1996).

approach: Including requisite variety and successfully appealing to a broad range of people and belief systems.

Who Got Included

Those with wildly different orientations to power, politics, life, religion—you name it—can and do coexist in well-constructed democracies. One of the most successful innovations of American democracy, for example, is that it allows a clannish set of new immigrants or a rigid bunch of single-issue zealots to claim a share of political power. But here's the rub: These groups eventually realize that to broaden their power and impact, they must broaden their horizons.

Similarly, American democracy has had remarkable success at (albeit sometimes too slowly) reining in bullies and the power-obsessed, even if the methods make the squeamish among us look away. In turn, the sturdy obedience of the dutiful is fractured by the abundant energy of the entrepreneurial, who, in turn, are restrained by the egalitarians, who, in turn tend to communities, which, in turn, produce the next generation of the dutiful.⁹ This diverse system of checks and balances, aspirations and dark desires, basically works.

Those proposing a leap to the next level, beyond the outmoded kludges of parties and paid-in-full politicians and endless, petty rules, and geographically bounded elections, must ask if our proposals will promote so delicate a balance.

The fundamental lesson of social change is to move far enough ahead so that you can be seen as standing apart, but not beyond the sight of those at the back of the crowd. In the case of emergent democracy, the methods and mechanisms must be genuinely inclusive of those willing to move now, while holding out the prospect of inclusion for those whom might want to move later.

What Went Right *and* Wrong

In attempting to serve many interests and many people, modern democracy leaves open the door for every sub-group to stamp its own image on self-governance. When human and social development models are mapped onto the political landscapes, clans can be seen coalescing into groups that cut

⁹ As the old joke says: "There are two types of people. Those who divide things into categories, and those who don't." This particular set of categories, partially derived from experience and partially from research, draws as well upon many sources: Robert Kegan, Don Beck and Clare Graves, Ken Wilber, Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, Mark Gerzon, et. al.

across cultures, religions, and nations. “Tribalists,” people who cluster together with kin groups for protection from a dangerous, mysterious world, for example, may appear quite different in the guise of warring fundamentalist cliques of the East and West. But their underlying commitment to dogma and protocol mark them as blood brothers with their counterparts in other cultures.

Each of these clans approach self-government from radically different stances; each will react quite differently to an emergent democratic approach. Each has found some benefit, some of the time, to existing within the confines of modern democracy.

These clans within nations create narrowly construed myths of democracy, skewed to the most advantageous perspective. The especially underhanded corrupt these myths into ugly realities. With that corruption comes opportunities for exploiting people who share the monocular perspective of one of the competing clans within a democratic population.

Yet all of the clans have found some compelling interest in participating in modern democracy. Somehow, out of the myths, lies, and warped interpretations of democracy arises sufficient self-interest to enable the clans to remain within the confines of modern democracy...or a reasonable approximation. As outlined below, members of each clan see something of themselves and their interests, and act accordingly.

Tribalists

“Sooner or later our tribe always comes to ask us to agree to murder.”¹⁰

Modern democracies barely tolerate tribalists, as long as their numbers remain relatively small among the general population; their political influence remains weak; and their excesses stay in check.

Myth of (Permissible) Tribalism—allows those who feel most connected with small communities of people who look and act like them the “freedom to be let alone.”

Reality of Exceptionalism—exploited by fundamentalists to convince the tribalists that their tribe is superior.

Compelling Interest—protection of the rights of minorities; power when in the majority.

Feudalists

“Might makes right”

¹⁰ Charles Simic.

Democracy has plenty of rules to restrain the power-hungry, and gives the state the power to wield force against those who respect only superior power. Happily, politics gives the power-oriented a nonviolent avenue to pursue their agendas; unhappily, their thirsts are not easily slaked.

Myth of Power—allows excluded groups to band together claim their stake.

Reality of Superiority—exploited by America Firsters and supremacists to cow those who want to be on the side of the powerful and unconstrained.

Compelling Interest—consolidation and control of power.

Traditionalists

“Alles in Ordnung”

Those who like a stable social order, slow (if any change), and fixed values find modern democracy increasingly uncomfortable, but still reliable. Their emphasis on control may yield the stability necessary for long-term investment, but it stifles innovation and squelches dissent.

Myth of Order and Structure—allows for stability over time, important both to security-loving individuals and investment-oriented businesses.

Reality of the Nation State—exploited by corporate interests and those actually undermining democratic self-rule to pacify those who believe in security.

Compelling Interest—stability and protection.

Capitalists

“The land of opportunity”

As the economic imperative rapidly trumps the representative imperative in American democracy, the capitalists unleash vast amounts of energy, but often at the expense of community and the environment. Democracy may need capitalism, but the opposite is also true.

Myth of Opportunity—relatively open social and economic mobility has led to many Americans considering themselves “middle class,” and believing that their kids are likely to be better off.

Reality of Disenfranchisement—exploited by those who have twisted economics to their own advantage to capture the enthusiasm of those who believe they can strike it rich by themselves.

Compelling Interest—self-interest and progress.

Ecoists

“Can’t we all just get along?”

The peace and justice crowd, for all their laudable intentions, often sideline themselves through elitist visions that discount reality and dismiss human foibles. But they have been an invaluable counterbalance to the myopic capitalists and the millennial fundamentalists.

Myth of Inclusion—most democracies have, however haltingly, become more socially inclusive, tolerant, and engaged with the world.

Reality of Solidarity—exploited by activists, who thrive on permanent agitation, to enlist those who believe in a just and peaceful world.

Compelling Interest—constraint of baser instincts.

Postmodernists

“Only connect”¹¹

Armed with holistic perspective and an emphasis on interdependence, postmodernists attempt to leverage systemic change based not on ideology, but on creating means more congruent with ends.

Myth of Emergence—the potential to restore true self-governance and empowerment of individuals choosing to self-organize for collective benefit.

Reality of the “Unelected”—exploited by the “black helicopter” crowd to intimidate those who value freedom and independence, and fear the revanchism of anarchy, oligarchy, or bureaucracy.

Compelling Interest—rewiring the game.

Who Might Get Left Out?

So, with all these clans contesting for attention and resources, who could get left out in emergent democracy? Most likely, the “Tribalists” and the “Feudalists,” with the “Traditionalists” seeing the handwriting on the wall. (After all, they are not likely to see any advantage to giving up closely held identity, power, and stability, the things these groups most value but among the first to disappear in an emergent environment.) So, what’s the problem? Hasn’t their time come and gone?

First—according to some estimates¹²—cutting the tribalists and the feudalists out would leave some 40 percent of the world’s population out of emergent

¹¹ E.M. Forster

democracy. Take away the traditionalist/hierarchy crowd, and you've lost another estimated 20 percent to 30 percent, including most of the rest of the developing world, a good chunk of Asia, and much of Eastern Europe and Latin America. Which could leave a small, largely white, mostly elite, and not very representative group of people heading off toward new territory. That's hardly emergent, it's just a new flavor of a minority claiming the right to lead the world....

Although seeing what kind of democracy might emerge from this crowd is an interesting and perhaps even worthwhile experiment, would it be an experiment in truly inclusive and participatory democracy? Perhaps not.

Still, if even a small chunk of people want to explore what's ahead, the experiment might prove useful. So why worry? Two reasons spring to mind:

It's not much of a democracy without people. It is true that most democratic revolutions and evolutions consist of a small but significant percentage of people leading the way. But it is equally true that the small percentage should pay very close attention to making their experiments attractive and accessible to those who will inherit them. Democratic transformations happen when a significant percentage of people are good and ready for them, and not a moment sooner. No amount of "leadership" will entice a population to change that is not ready for change.

Second, the tribalists and feudalists and traditionalists have access to—and no compunctions about using—dangerous, divisive, and destructive means to protect and advance their interests. Think Serbia and Bosnia, September 11th, or fascist Spain. The physical and political knives are sharp precisely because real power is at stake in government...particularly for the retrograde forces who lash out instinctively at the threat posed by modernity and post-modernity to their interests. When we play politics, we play against and with those who take it in deadly earnest. We need not share their obsession, but we must anticipate, recognize, and respond to their intentions and actions.

Even within relatively stable nation states, it would be folly to ignore the real but sometimes ugly undercurrents of power, identity, and gain in politics. A variety of things motivate political action—from revenge to power to outrage to guilt to fear—but the democratic system successfully bends those motivations into nonviolent forms of participation. As Boston pols like to say: "Politics ain't beanbag."

¹² See <http://www.globalvaluesnetwork.com>. In particular, note Alan Tonkin's "Different Values: Different Democracy, Differing Values Systems Require Differing Types of Democracy."

What We Learned from What Went Wrong

Rube Goldberg lives. Almost any democratic governance structure imaginable quickly morphs into a mind-bendingly complex series of kludges, patches, specifications, and subroutines. Even more “evolved” democracies retain this tendency: witness the European Union’s staggering array of rules regulating the naming of cheeses and wines.

This “structure trap” springs from the Enlightenment/Machine Age/Independent tendency to see living things as machines, and every machine as perfectible. Combine that with the human urge to tinker, and the heart of any elegant system quickly becomes entombed in a labyrinth of “improvements,” “refinements,” “clarifications,” “exceptions,” and the like, thereby creating lifetime employment for a self-perpetuating cadre of lobbyists, bureaucrats, politicians, activists, and lawyers.

To retain its agility and promise, postmodern/Knowledge Age/interdependent/emergent democracy will have to avoid rushing into “production” with a final product. If form truly *follows* function, rather than becoming fixed at birth, emergent democracy might yet emerge.

What We Might Do Next

Emergence happens when initiators describe, rather than prescribe. For example, the charter of a multi-faith group (the United Religions Initiative, www.uri.org) mandates only diversity and non-coercion for its member groups, the members have the freedom to choose a local focus and appropriate actions. The subsequent blossoming both took those groups in useful directions and brought in allies unanticipated by the founders. Experience reveals the uses and usefulness of what is created through emergence—if we accept the role of catalyzers, instead of builders. In planning for emergence, predictions are helpful, but usually not accurate. Intent and direction matter more than a fixed idea of outcomes.

Among emergent democrats, conservatives will have to shed the notion that values and their expression will never evolve. Liberals will have to accept that outcomes cannot be guaranteed. As Dee Hock, founder and CEO Emeritus of VISA, reminded us: “Everything has both intended and unintended consequences. The intended consequences may or may not happen; the unintended consequences always do.”¹³

And all of us, as much as we are able and when appropriate, will have to let go of fixed, usually partisan, attachment to policy prescriptions. Truly

¹³ Dee Hock, in a 1998 speech at the State of the World Forum in San Francisco (“Out of Control and into Order”). See also his book: *Birth of the Chaordic Age* (Berrett-Koehler, 2000).

engaging with the emergent process involves setting the minimal initial conditions carefully, not assuming final outcomes. Dialogues with foregone conclusions are simply monologues with many voices, and exceptionally unconvincing models of emergence.

We should have goals in mind, yes, but tilting the rules of the game in favor of a particular outcome stifles the possibilities of an emergent approach. The challenge of finding the right balance among inclusiveness and diversity; breadth and depth; description and prescription doesn't yield to a simple formula. But experience suggests that emergence only occurs through unexpected allies and unanticipated outcomes, and that being "hard on principles, soft on people" creates an appropriate atmosphere.

For certain, partisanship and power struggles and all the other things that make politics so delicious will find their way into emergent democracy. To paraphrase Kant, no straight things will be made from the crooked timber of emergent democracy. But we will need to recognize, support, and respect those honest brokers who emerge, who speak plainly and acknowledge honestly their interests and biases.

Because of the relative novelty of emergent democracy—as form of activity and as a unifying concept for a host of previously unrelated phenomena—we are still gathering experiences and exploring possible connections. The coming transitions will take us from catalytic events to the establishment of egalitarian norms to an exploration of the kind of preconditions and resources that might support true emergence.

But if we rush too hastily to embrace "the answer" or mistake management for catalyzation, we will fall into the structure trap as surely as our predecessors. The urge to consolidate, drive consensus, and produce "cookbooks" is deeply ingrained. The practices of emergence are still, well, emerging. But the evidence points toward a particular trajectory.

Emergence rarely happens in inchoate, boundariless free-for-alls. That is why smaller experiments—and learning from them—are so vital to the emergent process. Identity, trust, context, process, and content all play roles in creating "reliable interdependence,"¹⁴ where participants feel sufficiently informed and connected to work collaboratively and with purpose.

Eventually, the smaller experiments could begin melding connectedness and coalescing alliances and relationships with enough trust and context to encourage an accelerating number of productive interactions...within smaller communities, across communities, and among evolving larger groupings that reach beyond the boundaries of the "emergent" community. A sufficient number of crosscutting relationships, based on shared work, trust, and commitment, will encourage a truly global sense of connectedness. As one

¹⁴ The phrase, I believe, is Tom Hurley's, my predecessor as coordinating director of the Chaordic Commons, Inc.

leader of a chaordic organization describes it: “Think big, start small; add values; scale fast.”¹⁵

From there, activities and experimentation might flourish, loosely united by purpose, principles, and concept. Through an iterative review of the kind of agreements and practices that might most usefully hold the participants and projects in relationship with one another, we could re-evaluate how well our purpose and principles align with the outcomes, and adjust accordingly.¹⁶

And it will all have to be done transparently and openly, and much of it in full view of a skeptical, perhaps even hostile, world.

It won't be easy. Growing up in public never is. But if we are to be, as one Greek philosopher wrote, in “worthy competition with [our] ancestors,” then we must hold ourselves to rather high standards.

Keeping Ourselves Honest

To close the loop on our learning from history, consider a few of the reasons the democratic experiment continues to expand, even as its limitations become increasingly obvious: intent, transparency, and integrity.

Take the American democratic experiment, begun not with a set of rules and regulations, but with a clear statement of intentions and the standards by which it would be judged: “...a decent Respect to the Opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to declare the causes which impel them to [advance a new form of democracy].”

As Pauline Maier and others have pointed out,¹⁷ the central tenets laid out in the Declaration of Independence had bubbled up repeatedly in a variety of forms and locations prior to 1776. Their expression as a manifesto of freedom was in some ways the culmination of lived experiences, not a bolt from the blue.

We should be no less patient with the emergent process, even in the Internet Age. Data flows instantaneously; humans still absorb experience at roughly the same rate as ever. The emergent Declaration of Interdependence will come; the equivalent of a Constitution will as well. All in good time—we are still experimenting in the equivalent of our small towns and guilds.

¹⁵

http://wiki.chaordicinitiatives.org/LearnConv/index.cgi?learning_from_existing_chaordic_orgs

¹⁶ For one view on this approach, see: <http://www.chaordic.org/learn/notes/index.html>.

¹⁷ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (Vintage, 1998).

But recognizing that we are still experimenting does not relieve us of political, moral, and ethical responsibilities. The burden of integrity, like the burden of proof, is always higher upon advocates for change. We must hold ourselves to higher standards than those currently in practice. For if we don't intend to work differently, we have no claim to this work at all.

As Bob Dylan noted and every successful social change movement has embodied: "To live outside the law you must be honest."¹⁸ Any move toward emergent democracy must have a deep appreciation of "the plain truth of things" as its touchstone. No amount of structure; no exciting group of people; no compelling argument can compete with a clearly articulated purpose and deeply held set of principles.

The rest is details, although the devil surely lives there as well.

¹⁸ "Absolutely Sweet Marie," on *Blonde on Blonde*.