

CONSEQUENTIALISM AND PHILANTHROPY: THE LEGACY OF A REVOLUTIONARY

In Honor of Richard Cornuelle

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Insofar as civility—the virtue of the citizen—requires disinterested interest in what is right not for the direct benefit of the individual but for the country, the generosity of philanthropy achieves significance far beyond that of charity. After all, to allow freedom of speech and freedom of association is to be extraordinarily philanthropic, because to do so is in principle to tolerate what one may not approve of out of fidelity to the appreciation and cultivation of what it means to be human.

—Steven Grosby, “Philanthropy and Human Action,”
Conversations on Philanthropy VI, 2009

Our first and foremost purpose is to affirm the moral commitments of parents, young persons, neighbors, and citizens, to affirm the importance of the communities within which such commitments take shape and are transmitted from one generation to the next. This is not primarily a legal matter. On the contrary, when a community reaches the point at which these responsibilities are largely enforced by the powers of the state, it is in deep moral crisis.

—Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community*, 1993

The nation has become economics-obsessed and politics-obsessed, and has pushed these disciplines far beyond their limits. And today, America suffers from a sickness that economic analysis cannot clarify and political action cannot cure. Having come

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perilously close to viewing society and state as identical, we are trying vainly to force economics and politics to do the work of elemental social reform.

As government has increasingly monopolized the public business, the role of the citizen has been dangerously diminished. Citizenship once meant more than voting—it meant direct, personal, hands-on involvement in the common concerns of the community.”

—Richard Cornuelle, *Healing America*, 1983

Community is not an act of will that can be induced by persuasion or exhortation. Community is a consequence.

—Richard Cornuelle, “De-Nationalizing Community,” *Philanthropy*, 1996

Early in *De-Managing America*, Richard Cornuelle raises the questions of how life in America really works, what we know about it, and how we can make it better. He expresses his admiration for the resilience of people, and makes clear his desire to confront myths he previously accepted as truth. Then he writes, “And in the process, I came to believe completely in the indomitability of the human spirit. I feel a powerful force pushing us inexorably toward a good society—the steady urgent pressure of men and women straining to be human, to discover and express all the things they can be. And although I can’t prove it, I believe the things straining for fuller expression are good things—warmth, understanding, loving-kindness, creativity, laughter” (1975, 6).

As we explore Cornuelle’s books and papers, we are reminded repeatedly of this optimism, of this sense of a powerful force pushing us toward the good society through what is good in individuals. If we examine Cornuelle’s wrestling with the practical applications of optimism, we better understand that he was interested in consequences, in what we are *creating* in our work together. This legacy shows his struggle against ideologies, orthodoxies, and labels; he wants to engage citizens in actions that transcend the particular alignments of parties or factions and which transform the structures and systems he found so stultifying. His thinking about generosity, about human potential, and about the future revolves around shared benefit. Only insofar as the term invited exploration would he have accepted a label which included an “ism.” This essay is an attempt to trace the evolution of the work around social change which Cornuelle viewed as revolutionary.

Of a Revolution

From his early writings to his “tracking” of emergent, vital, voluntary action as described by Lenore Ealy (2009),¹ Cornuelle sought to clarify the social processes through which we discover and express civility. As a self-styled revolutionary and social critic, he describes the failures not only of government programs but also of foundations and charities that were trying to ameliorate social inequities. More importantly, he grapples with the assumptions and language framing the arguments and the policies. Especially in “New Work for Invisible Hands” (1991), he writes eloquently about the damage done by taking economic theory on faith and applying that theory to the associational and social spheres of human activities. In *Reclaiming the American Dream*, he writes of the failures of applying market solutions to public problems (1993 [1965], 185) and in *Healing America*, of the failure of economic and political thinkers to appreciate the full importance of personal relationships (1983, 142). These comments may seem confusing, but they are juxtaposed to illustrate the evolution of Cornuelle’s thought.

Cornuelle admires Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1993), for her observation of the real social life on a street and its “intricate network of voluntary controls.” *This* is how things actually happen in real life, not in an abstract theory about that life. (It is interesting to note that Cornuelle did not seem to succumb to the pessimism that Jane Jacobs expressed in her final book, *Dark Age Ahead*, although his writing was consistently resonant with her thinking.) Like Elinor Ostrom, Cornuelle wants to know how people work together to manage their own resources and knowledge. He wants to know about the outcomes of association, and how association is sustained over time. Although he named “the independent sector” early in his writings, he grew away from the sector view and toward an understanding of the interdependence of all aspects of voluntary human endeavor. Our question then becomes, what is the legacy of a revolutionary who is confident in the capacities of fellow revolutionaries but not in the revolution itself?

If the “revolution” Cornuelle described in *De-Managing America* was not merely the replacing of authority but the transformation of personal responsibility and shared associational life, then evidence of that revolution should appear in every form of public life. Later, in *Healing America*, Cornuelle makes a statement that seems vividly applicable today, “I believe there is building in America a new silent plurality—a growing group who believe that our complaints are organic and beyond the reach of politics as we now practice it. More and more of us are

sensing that our country is in a kind of trouble that cannot be cured by conventional political action, but by its unfamiliar opposite—by de-politicising, or demanaging, a society that has outgrown its present structures and is not working” (1983, 151).

Among the several themes raised in that paragraph, pluralism occurs repeatedly in his other writings. In the Afterword to *Reclaiming the American Dream*, for example, Cornuelle writes, “The leaders of the charitable subsector hold out a vision of a comfortable future in the arms of the state, but pluralism becomes pretense when one sector of a professed pluralistic polity becomes dependent on another. A chastened, captive, and obedient pluralism is worse than no pluralism at all” (193). Earlier in the book he reflected briefly on the decline of American pluralism, and while asking for a history of this phenomenon to be written, he expressed his suspicion that the deterioration began as a result of the policies of Woodrow Wilson. Pluralism is important in Cornuelle’s thinking because it indicates opportunity for learning and for outcomes accessible only through association. As Peter Drucker wrote, “But all earlier pluralist societies destroyed themselves because no one took care of the common good. They abounded in communities but could not sustain community, let alone create it” (1999, 1). In “De-Nationalizing Community,” Cornuelle later expands on this thinking:

The drive to nationalize community had produced a society that was badly out of balance, misshapen, its central government grossly overgrown, and its capacity for concerted local and voluntary action severely underdeveloped, atrophied. The once proudly pluralistic society where initiative was widely diffused, diversity was celebrated, monopoly thought bad and choice thought good, where fixing what seemed to be wrong with the society was a game any number could play, had become the opposite. I expect it was at about this time that we began to talk about giving people a “sense” of community because opportunities for real and rewarding involvement in community affairs were disappearing (1996, 11).

This loss of pluralism and of the engagement in community affairs also has roots in the ascription of authority to experts—be they politicians, economists, or service professionals. Expert knowledge is segmented and isolated. Furthermore, indicators, metrics, and aggregates are proxies for reality, and Cornuelle was eloquent about the dangers of applying the contrivances of market analyses to social and public life. As the technologies of experts become policy, each separate

sphere of expertise must defend itself—and its funding—against the whole. As we have sadly seen with foundations, the assessment of risk becomes the priority in any such defense. Whereas others extolled efficiency as the goal and justification of processes, Cornuelle wrote, “Management which manages by specifying results is emancipating. It opens to all the possibility of inventiveness and resourcefulness. It is a way of depoliticizing the management process. It is highly productive, because it tends to release the full potential of people, rather than some predetermined and necessarily deformed fraction of that potential” (1975, 100-101).

This form of consequentialism, the releasing of the full potential of people through association which unites effort to achieve a specific result, is a key theme for Cornuelle. It is also a theme that is constantly reinforced by Cornuelle’s colleagues Ivan Illich and John McKnight. Both speak of the disabling co-opting of our capacities by professionals, institutions, and government; sometimes they write with outrage, often with righteous indignation, and always with a sense of command that we can and should do better. Each of the three reflects upon the purposes of our public institutions and the meaning, or lack thereof, that we find as we act within and on behalf of those institutions. As Cornuelle chose “**De**-Managing” and “**Re**claiming” in his titles, Illich (1971) used “**De**Schooling” and John McKnight (1977) referred to “**Dis**abling” Help. The resonance among the three writers is important; they share a preoccupation with human capacity or potential, with our individual and social competence, and with what Grosby (2009) called civility. Each of the three wants to undo the damages done to individual human beings, to political life, and to our shared future.

Competition vs. Cooperation

Cornuelle wrote that an independent sector “competes” with government for responsibilities, and he even supplied a chapter on how to compete. By the time he wrote the Afterword to *Reclaiming the American Dream*, however, he had come to recognize some of the naiveté of that idea, and some errors in his own assumptions. He had stated a basic belief that a diverse and uncoordinated aggregation of voluntary efforts will compete consciously with a monopoly (government). We admire his integrity in stating how wrong he was in the Afterword, and we perceive that competition cannot be the model for what he desires. Just as you cannot plan peace in the language of war, so you cannot engage others in the collaboration which builds community by using the language of transactions and competition. What perhaps drove Cornuelle’s investigative and rhetorical project may in fact

have been a search for a positive language of social learning in community that would appeal to American libertarians, conservatives, and liberals alike.

Cornuelle's advocacy for the independent sector against government led to an unfortunate misapprehension about the role of government in the enterprise of community. He stated that Jonas Salk's discovery of the polio vaccine was a victory of this independent sector and that President Roosevelt's inspiration of this effort was an inspiration of the sector. Forty years after his success, however, Dr. Salk said the process from initial involvement in the vaccine research to the reduction of incidence by more than 80 percent was "a graceful dance with government, businesses, and volunteers each doing their part."² The success of the polio campaign should be proclaimed as what it was: an enormous tribute to collaborative work across all aspects of American society: 100 million people raised \$67 million dollars for the research; and the clinical trial involved 220,000 volunteers; 64,000 school personnel; 20,000 physicians and public health workers; and 1.8 million schoolchildren over two years. All of this was encouraged and inspired by Roosevelt across every "sector" of society.

Nevertheless, Cornuelle is onto something important. Throughout this astonishing success, competition was not for dollars or support; competition was for the result: a vaccine to prevent infection. In the best sense of what Cornuelle advocated, this campaign was energizing: it released citizen power—and harnessed both positive human motivations (advancing knowledge, serving humanity) and negative (fear, egotism, professional status seeking) in ways not seen before or since. It also engaged all sectors of society in the belief, and the work, that they could do what needed to be done. The success of the polio vaccine campaign is a refutation of the cliché in philanthropy that little things are done with love and big things are done for dollars: this remains the largest clinical trial ever conducted, and no one benefitted in dollars. Jonas Salk refused to patent the vaccine, and he gave his award monies to help establish the Salk Institute for Biological Sciences. It was a great sorrow to Salk, as to Cornuelle, that this shared belief in our ability to act together to achieve a shared benefit was first refuted and then abandoned over the decades after 1955.

Agency and Community

Long before Martin Seligman (1995) introduced the term "learned helplessness," Cornuelle, Illich, and McKnight wrote of the dangers of passivity. In *Reclaiming the American Dream*, Cornuelle gives us what must be a chilling

reflection for any thoughtful citizen: “Not long ago I was discussing the potential of the independent sector with one of our chief civilian defense strategists, and was startled at the eagerness of his reaction. I asked him about it. ‘You see,’ he said, ‘we do not know how to defend a passive people. Unless we overcome people’s growing diffidence, we have no effective strategy’” (1993 [1965], 63).

Nor is it only the passivity of citizens which alarms Cornuelle, Illich, and McKnight alike; it is also the constant use of deficit or disabling language. Cornuelle, more than the other two, argues that over time we have done the damage to ourselves by ascribing power outside ourselves, and thus he asserts that we have the power and ability to undo the habits of destruction to that desire for meaning and to help others directly (62). The three ask, “When and where do we unite with a sense of purpose, and what can we do together?” Frequently they speak of competence, which all three perceive as fundamentally a matter of local knowledge joined with skilled application. Cornuelle frequently refers to competence, or the ability to perform, as an aspect of a good society: “A good society—a sensible society—could be defined as one in which responsibility flows to whatever entity is best able to assume it” (1983, 172).

Although I like the thought behind this statement, responsibility does not “flow”: responsibility is a choice of human agency. Pursuing the discussion of citizenship, community, and competence without discussing agency seems to me to ignore the fundamental link among the three authors. In a similar way, arguments based on the metaphor of the invisible hand frequently do not address individual agency. This is an area of exploration now being taken up by other authors. For example, Matthew Crawford insightfully explains the compatibility of agency and community:

The concept of agency is often understood with reference to activity that is self-directed, rather than dictated by another. This distinction has an immediate appeal, but is liable to lead us astray in a characteristically modern way. “Self-directed” activity is usually taken to mean activity directed by the will of a self that simply chooses according to its whim. So the usual opposition is between ends dictated by another and ends dictated by the self. Labor predicated on the first is alienated; that predicated on the second is said to entail self-actualization or fulfillment.

The idea of agency I have tried to illustrate in this book is different. It is activity directed toward some end that is affirmed as good by the actor, but this affirmation is not something arbitrary and private. Rather, it flows from an apprehension of real features of the world.... In activities that are directed toward some end (a well-vented drain pipe, a balanced chassis), the goodness of the end in question isn't simply posited. There is a progressive revelation of why one ought to aim at just this, as well as how one can achieve it.... The progressive character of revelation energizes your efforts to become competent—something about the world is coming into clear view, and it is exciting (2009, 207). This ends-directed collaboration is the agency of participation, and it is the agency on which real community is formed among responsible individuals.

Perils of Professionalization and Consumerism

Illich warns repeatedly of our loss of these things through growing dependence on the “management of intimacy” and on the dangers of specialists “creating and adjudicating” human needs (1976, 70, 272), and Cornuelle cautions about the limiting superstitions we hold about our institutions and social life (1975, 55). If we are, as the three friends argued decades ago, *schooled to be passive*, then each of us must try to understand how we can become active and responsible citizens as well as agents of recovery.

It is McKnight who develops the method to build on our shared strengths—our assets—and his understanding of the way forward strongly influenced the others. Interestingly, the vocabulary of the three is not about “the commons”: Cornuelle writes of “a sensible society” (1983), Illich of “conviviality” (1971), and in their most recent book McKnight and Block express their shared belief in “*Abundant Community*”: “First, we see the abundance that we have—individually, as neighbors, and in this place of ours.

Second, we know that the power of what we have grows from creating new connections and relationships among and between what we have.

Third, we know that these connections are no accident. They happen when we individually or collectively act to make the connections—they don't just happen by themselves” (2010, 1).

Cornuelle, Illich, and McKnight refuse the presumption of scarcity and affirm abundance. In fact, they reject the Hobbesian framework of modern thinking. Even though they struggle to transcend the inherited vocabularies of that

dominant worldview, each of them rejects self-interest as the primary human motive. They write with passion that such views of human beings are impoverished, and each strives to establish both theoretical and methodological frameworks for a different approach. None of the three subscribes to the lowest common denominator calculations of a facile utilitarianism, or to simplistic attempts to reduce the dynamic complexities of our lives to discrete transactional components. Each of the three writes about the disabling impact of the professionalization of services and the consequent loss of confidence and competence among ordinary people striving to be contributing citizens. This sense of passivity is a real and increasing danger to democracy, and the authors quote Tocqueville and others as they describe the damage done by the assumptions of need for professional services.

McKnight (2003) and Illich (1976) focus on the failures and dangers of the “institutional assumption,” which holds that hospitals produce health, schools produce wisdom, legal systems create justice, and social service systems produce well-being (see also Cornuelle 1993 [1965], 62-65). The classification of residents of a given area as clients of the local service systems emphasizes the perverse institutional assumption that consumption of services indicates well-being. What this classification ignores is the associational activities of everyday life. Cornuelle urges a research agenda to discover the power and potential of primary institutions (1996, 33).

After extensive research, we now know that a surfeit of choices brings about paralysis and dissatisfaction.³ The official dogma of theorists is that maximum individual freedom means maximum individual choice. This is not verified by studies of behavior. Currently we are confronted with a plethora of consumer choices, and we now live with a plethora of service choices, each vying for our attention and thus escalating our expectations of satisfaction without engaging our active participation. Too frequently our autonomy—existential aloneness—is given the highest value in these arguments.

For instance, in healthcare the argument for patient autonomy shifts responsibility for decisions from the “provider of care” to the patient (or client) even though the patient does not have the knowledge to make those decisions, cannot navigate the structures and systems in which those decisions will be implemented, and will then be essentially abandoned to experience the consequences of the decisions without further care until another “encounter” with the “providers” can be justified. This is disabling choice, not a form of positive liberty.

McKnight writes eloquently about the negative effects of the service industry

and the segregation of the service away from community and away from their capacities as citizens (1995, 12). Cornuelle strongly urges us toward a new vision of citizenship lived in community in order to reinvigorate both community and our sense of ourselves (1991, 4).

Reconnecting with Community

Cornuelle consistently seeks for citizens the practical wisdom of Aristotle: the combination of moral will and moral skill. McKnight epitomizes the three men's resonant insights:

At the heart of the democratic faith is an idea that reaches beyond equality. It is the idea that every person has unique skills, capacities, and gifts and that a good society provides an opportunity for those gifts to be given and shared. In this way the community grows strong because each person provides unique contributions to the common good so that the sum of the parts is a free, productive neighborhood. In this sense, associations are a democratic society's primary vehicle for identifying, combining and manifesting the unique gifts of citizens for the common good (2003).

Community is based on gifts given freely, and shared; this reminds us of the *generosity* cited by Grosby (2009). However, says Cornuelle, "Reconnecting citizens to the vital business of their world in ways that are both demanding and rewarding will be a long and arduous process" (1996, 33). John Ralston Saul explained it as follows: "The constant base needed to supply values is the result of methodical participation. The individual gains his powers and responsibilities by being there. But we have no widespread belief in the value of participation.... Participation produces, but is also the product of, practical values and common sense, not expertise and reason" (1992, 84).

The sense of disconnection has been explored from the Buddha to Freud to current rap artists, and the proposed paths to connection are as varied, yet it is clear that what Cornuelle wants is a connection to "the *vital* business" and he wants it to be *demanding*. We live in a world fraught with the indigestion of sound bites and preoccupied by the riches available to those who mediate our social connections via screened realities. Fitness, well-being, lifestyle, and identity are commodities today, just as McKnight and Illich feared they would become when they were writing thirty years ago. Methodical participation sounds demanding in and of itself, but Cornuelle and his friends have made a strong case that vitality—

the vital business of living—requires both commitment to connection and real engagement. This is not connection by plug and play; it is connection which becomes the abrasion and construction of what is meaningful. This is real work. This is an acknowledgement of our birth into a world not of our making, and into interdependence which is indebtedness. To deny this is not only ungrateful but a refusal of others' generosity.

Richard Cornuelle wrote that he was not confident that we could reclaim the American dream or heal America with our existing systems. He wrote that his revolutionary efforts had failed: caring and service had become commodities; there was no sense of unifying vision across the nation's 1.5 million registered associations; and communities no longer had any sense of either history or power. He did not lapse into pessimism, however, and his legacy is that of a call to action rather than despair. He knew there was much work to be done to reclaim the real connections between our work and our lives lived together, but he also believed that even if we have been disabled by our institutions and systems, we are yet capable of once more pioneering new institutions and systems which affirm our capacities as citizens.

Cornuelle left us with the gift of guidance, advising that we must evaluate our efforts in new ways, with new language and without adherence to old ideologies. He urged us to move away from engineering models of reform that define one process to which all must conform and on to the aspirational models in which polycentric collaborative communities specify their desired results, thus releasing potential and freeing participants to discover new methods, new ideas, and new talents within themselves. This is competition for results within communities of practice. By urging us to see the errors inherent in applying theories and ideologies developed in one sphere of knowledge to social processes and the complexities and ambiguities of human life as lived, he gave us the gift of liberation from old forms of language and empty habits of thought. To use the term "consequentialism" to describe some of his thinking about philanthropy is to emphasize that he wanted us to value the good that we *do*, and are competent to do, for it is in this work that we share in community.

James Fowler of the University of California-San Diego is studying the critical importance of our social relationships to our health. Paul Zak, a neuro-economist, is examining how oxytocin levels affect our empathy and thus our moral sentiments. Both young scientists are sharing their insights generously and openly without protections of 'property,' giving the hard-won results of their research to

anyone who is willing to pay attention. Both are fascinated by connection and morality, and both are working hard to improve our understanding of ourselves. It is too soon to know how their work will impact our willingness to renew our volunteer efforts to change our society. Yet like Cornuelle, Illich, and McKnight, they aspire as revolutionaries to change the ways we see our capacities and thus transform the consequences flowing from the ways we live our lives.

Conclusion

Cornuelle wrote that we must again be pioneers. The pioneering virtues are improvisational (entrepreneurial) and adaptive competence, appreciation and application of local knowledge and local traditions, cooperation which creates shared resources, an apprenticeship model of skills transfer (not curricula and classrooms), shared actions that enhance self-reliance and agency, coherence of meaning through exploration and adventuresome creativity, and a passion for imagination and hope for what might be, not wants and not external definitions of the future. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the body of work which we have explored here is the long view: in his writings and his personal interactions, Cornuelle let us see his reflections and his growth over time, and as he summons citizens to action, he also gives us confidence that we will change and learn and become wiser if we continue to dream and to work at making our dreams a shared reality.

NOTES

- ¹ Tracking the Re-ascendance of Social Responsibility, unpublished paper by Lenore Ealy. The Project for New Philanthropy Studies. “We were much more adept and enthusiastic at renouncing the perils and perversions of government than at explaining exactly how a society might work with less of it” (Cornuelle 1993 [1965], Afterword).
- ² Personal discussion with H.W. Ion, April 1995.
- ³ See, in particular, the TED talk by Professor Barry Schwartz on the paradox of choice and the challenges this poses (http://www.ted.com/talks/barry_schwartz_on_the_paradox_of_choice).

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