

# CREATING A GOOD SOCIETY

by Randy Schutt

Is it possible to create a good society?

Surrounded as we are by skeptics, cynics, and naysayers, it is difficult to even consider the possibility that we could create a good society. In this ultraconservative time when the mass media regale us with xenophobic militarism, when even bedrock New Deal programs like Social Security are under severe attack, and when basic humanitarian notions like fellowship are widely mocked as silly remnants of the '60s, it is difficult to believe that progressive ideas of democracy and compassion could ever become predominant elements of our culture or our institutions. Of course, we know we should be wary of our critics since many of them have a stake in us believing it is impossible for society to be any different than it is now. They know that cynicism disempowers us and makes us easier to control. Still, much of our disbelief likely comes from our own personal experience working on change campaigns that either failed outright, or succeeded but were distorted or overturned a few years later.

Nevertheless, it is not foolish to believe that we can create a good society. We have seen how the conservative 1950s rapidly segued into the exciting, transformative 1960s, vividly demonstrating that major positive change can come when least expected. In the last few decades, we have also seen people's movements overturn governments in Nicaragua, Poland, East Germany, the Soviet Union, Iran, the Philippines, South Africa, and many other countries, demonstrating that goodhearted people can oust corrupt and oppressive regimes. In just the past thirty years, we have watched widespread tolerance supersede pervasive homophobia, powerfully demonstrating that even deeply seated fear and hatred can be overcome — and relatively quickly. These accomplishments hint at what is possible.

Moreover, considered in the larger context, our struggle appears quite promising. Over the last five hundred years, humankind has developed an amazing array of ideas and techniques for addressing problems. We have made great strides in understanding poverty, delinquency, crime, disease, conflict, and prejudice. For example, there are now people who know how to:

- Topple brutal military dictatorships using nonviolent methods
- Structure society to ensure that everyone's basic human needs for air, water, food, shelter, safety, healthcare, and transportation are met
- Help people overcome their racism, sexism, and homophobia and build compassion for others
- Help people heal their emotional wounds, even from deep trauma caused by war and torture

- Raise children so they will become responsible, caring, and confident adults
- Build cooperative structures so that people can work democratically together

Humanity has also realized many remarkable achievements. For example, in the United States we have:

- Ended dueling as a way to resolve conflicts
- Ended slavery
- Supplied clean water and sanitary sewers to most people
- Developed universal education and an extensive free library system
- Enacted universal suffrage
- Developed vaccines and antibiotics that make early death from disease much less likely than before
- Shifted to regarding psychosis as a mental illness rather than as moral depravity

Of course, there is still much to do. At a minimum, to create a good society we must:

- End war as a way to resolve conflicts
- End economic slavery that forces some people to work in sweatshops, others to engage in prostitution, and others to work in dangerous conditions
- End economic domination, including inequality in income and wealth, manipulation of the government by wealthy individuals and corporations, and destruction of the environment
- Diversify and democratize the mass media so that all perspectives can be heard
- Greatly reduce the amount of racism, sexism, classism, ageism, homophobia, and similar prejudices
- Greatly reduce the number of people addicted to destructive drugs
- Greatly reduce government control over citizens (through the police, prisons, and the INS)

These are daunting tasks. Still, our society knows how to solve these major social problems. There are people who have developed powerful, effective, and humane ways to solve each of them. Each problem has actually been addressed satisfactorily at least once, somewhere in the world. Moreover, scholars have documented and analyzed these solutions. Consequently, at this point, we are not required to develop more solutions, but merely to implement the positive ones that humanity has already developed. If we could just apply these good solutions most of the time,

instead of only a tiny part of the time, I am convinced we would have a good society.

Of course, it is not easy to implement these solutions or we would have already done it. Many obstacles stand in the way, which I classify into five major categories:

**1. An adverse power structure** — Society's institutions and structures entice and coerce us all to support inhumane institutions and social structures and to resist progressive change. In particular, members of the power elite seek to maintain their status and privilege, and everyone else tries to fit into the existing structure, maintain whatever privileges we have, and advance our position relative to others.

**2. Destructive cultural conditioning** — Harmful traditions, customs, religious practices, prejudices, and advertising images impede progressive change. For example, individualism, materialism, militarism, racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and similar prejudices hinder and counteract progressive initiatives.

**3. Dysfunctional emotional conditioning** — Emotional traumas condition people to act in dysfunctional ways. This conditioning means many people suffer from rigidity, depression, low self-esteem, irrational behavior, addictions, inhibitions, compulsions, phobias, etc.

**4. Widespread ignorance** — Most people have a limited understanding of the workings of society or how conditioning affects us. Moreover, few people know about positive alternatives or progressive social change methods.

**5. Scarcity of progressive resources among people of goodwill working for change** — Most progressive activists are financially poor, have little skill or knowledge about social change, and receive meager personal and financial support.

Is there a way to overcome all these obstacles?

Past efforts are instructive. Historically, progressives have advanced ten methods for bringing about major transformation of society. Each addresses some or all of these obstacles and each has positive and negative aspects:

- **Violent Revolution**

Revolutions are riveting spectacles that attract wide attention, interrupt daily routines, and expeditiously replace old powerholders with new ones. However, they are also bloody, chaotic, terrifying, and tragic. The violence of battle usually makes warriors callous and hard-hearted. If successful, revolutions transfer power to new powerholders, but these new powerholders have learned that brutality gives them power. They often rule in as brutal and oppressive way as the old powerholders did. Seldom do they create democratic or compassionate structures or address destructive cultural or emotional conditioning.

- **Historical Materialism**

Marx predicted that the transition to socialism is inevitable as members of the working class develop class-consciousness, realize their oppression, rise up, and overthrow the owning class. However, this process has still not happened — 150 years after Marx described it. Moreover, it appears that this process will not happen anytime soon.

- **A Vanguard Party**

Vanguard parties may be able to speed up the “inevitable” process by teaching and leading the masses. However, the secrecy and hierarchical organization required by vanguard parties allow them to go astray. When successful, as in the Soviet Union, they often become as brutal and oppressive as the regimes they replace. Seldom do they create democratic or compassionate structures or address destructive cultural or emotional conditioning.

- **Countercultural Transformation**

Cultural change has the potential to transform people deeply in all realms of their lives, leading to a nonviolent and encompassing transformation. However, to create an alternative culture often means separating from the dominant culture, which can lead to insular, cliquish communities that are out of touch with the dominant society and unable to reach regular people. In addition, people bring the dominant culture with them and often reproduce much of it in their new communities.

- **Alternative Institutions**

New, radical institutions provide positive, humane alternatives to existing institutions and can undermine oppressive existing institutions. However, unless the rest of society changes at the same time, alternative institutions are vulnerable to attack or subversion by other conventional institutions.

- **Mass Advertising**

Mass advertising is an easy way to persuade large numbers of people to adopt a new perspective. However, ads are expensive. They are also better suited to disseminating inflammatory propaganda than to building an informed democracy of empowered citizens.

- **Technological Advances**

Technology, such as robots, medicine, transportation, and computers, can make society much better. However, other similar technological advances (such as weapons development) can make society more dangerous and cause environmental destruction.

- **Conventional Electoral Politics**

Political campaigns are a nonviolent, legal, and straightforward way to change society. However, winner-take-all elections tend to favor bland centrists. Moreover, it is very difficult to win a political campaign. Candidates with the most money usually win. Once elected, politicians are often unresponsive to those who elected them — they are often more beholden to moneyed interests or their own personal whims.

- **Mass Social Movements**

Social movements that engage in direct lobbying, leafletting, boycotts, strikes, and blockades can bring about massive change in a variety of realms. However, because movements rely on large numbers of people they are vulnerable to the differences among diverse people and to infiltration and disruption by opponents. They are also vulnerable to people's ignorance, cultural and emotional conditioning.

- **Incremental Policy Change**

Incremental efforts focused on immediate issues using methods of direct mail, canvassing, lobbying, and support for progressive politicians can bring about important changes. However, these changes are usually limited and are often reversed later.

Each of these strategies has useful aspects, but also aspects that limit its effectiveness or leads the change effort astray. I believe to be both thoroughly progressive and effective in bringing about fundamental transformation of society, a comprehensive change strategy must have all of the following eight characteristics:

- Powerful and inspiring enough to overcome strong opposition from every direction
- Focused on broad, fundamental, and enduring change (to transform individuals, institutions, and our whole culture enough that they do not revert to the old ways)
- Reliant on ordinary people (since wealthy elite powers usually will not help)
- Democratic and responsive — not autocratic or oppressive
- Focused on ending systemic oppression, not toppling individual oppressors (since anyone has the potential to become an oppressor)
- Nonviolent — not oppressive or destructive
- Moral, principled, true to ideals, with means in harmony with the ends (so efforts do not go astray).
- Direct and personal (so they can deeply touch and thoroughly transform people)

Based on this analysis, I believe the best way to bring about fundamental, democratic progressive change is through a strategy based on two main efforts:

- **Mass Education** that liberates the imagination of every person in society so that everyone can choose collectively and democratically to create a good society
- **Powerful Social Change Movements** capable of challenging entrenched political, economic, and social power and building positive alternative institutions

This strategy should incorporate these six important components:

1. Clear conceptions of progressive change including
  - A clear vision of a good society
  - A comprehensive and feasible strategy for change
2. Widespread education in which people can
  - Learn how society actually functions
  - Learn to practice democracy and cooperation
  - Learn to overcome destructive cultural conditioning
  - Learn to change society
3. Widespread emotional therapy
4. A supportive community for progressive activists
5. Large numbers of progressive activists working simultaneously for change
6. Concerted change efforts continuing for many years

I can imagine this strategy being carried out through an 80-year transformation process that consists of four main stages each roughly 20 years long (though overlapping and intertwining):

1. Lay the Groundwork
  - A. Find other progressive activists
  - B. Educate themselves — learn how human affairs are organized and alternative ways they might be organized
  - C. Learn and practice change skills and overcome destructive and dysfunctional conditioning
  - D. Form supportive communities with other people of goodwill
2. Gather Support
  - A. Raise others' awareness about the possibility of creating a good society and the means to do it
  - B. Build powerful political and social organizations
3. Struggle for Power
  - A. Vigorously challenge the power structure and destructive cultural norms through conventional political and legal methods
  - B. Illuminate domination and oppression using various methods of nonviolent action
  - C. Resist oppression using nonviolent action
  - D. Develop appealing alternative institutions based on progressive ideals
4. Diffuse Change throughout All of Society

Throughout this process, activists would engage in basic social change work. They would:

- Persuade people to have a more progressive perspective
- Encourage and inspire people to act
- Educate people about ways to be effective
- Support people so they can persevere (by building strong and supportive organizations)

There are many ways to launch and carry out this strategy. One particular project that could greatly facilitate the

process would provide a deep, broad education to a large number of dedicated activists. I can imagine that every year, 6,000 dedicated activists — inspired by the possibility of creating a good society — might attend a yearlong program (in fifty centers dispersed around the U.S.) in which they would learn all the skills they needed to work for change and to educate and support other activists. These dedicated activists would then work diligently for at least seven years after they graduated from the program to educate, support, and inspire hundreds of thousands of other activists. Together with these other activists, they would also challenge, educate, support, and inspire everyone in the U.S.

To make this education program effective and inexpensive, it could rely on:

- Student-run study groups
- Internships with existing social change organizations
- Independent social change work
- A small amount of social service work
- Self-study of current affairs
- A series of five ten-day, staffmember-facilitated workshops
- Student-run emotional support groups

As I envision it, graduates of the program would work with various and diverse organizations of their own choosing. Most would probably work in their home community with grassroots groups, though some would work at the state or national level. I expect they would work with issue-oriented advocacy groups, alternative institution development groups, progressive political parties, and with progressive caucuses within existing conventional organizations.

If this education project proceeded as I can imagine, after a twenty-year start-up period, over one million activists would be working concurrently for fundamental progressive transformation of the United States. This would constitute an unprecedented effort — a much larger effort, better supported, and with more skilled activists than ever before. Over the course of eighty years, I believe this concerted effort could fundamentally transform society — implementing progressive ideals and transforming individuals enough that they actually valued and supported the changes. Through this process, we could create a good society in a largely democratic and nonviolent way.

This is just one of many ways I believe we can bring about progressive social transformation of our society. It is possible to 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>>).