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Half a century ago, in the Sixties – that **fabled** era of **free** sex and **free** access to drugs – the serious young radical took aim at institutions. In particular big corporations and big government, whose size, complexity, and rigidity seemed to hold individuals in an iron grip. The “Port Huron Statement,” a founding document of the New Left in 1962, was equally hard on state socialism and multi-national corporations; both regimes seemed bureaucratic prisons.

History has partly granted the framers of the “Port Huron Statement” their wish. The socialist rule of five-year plans, of centralized economic control, is gone. So is the capitalist corporation which provided employees jobs for life, which provided the same products or services year after year. So also have welfare institutions like health care or education become less fixed in form and smaller in scale. The goal for rulers today, as for radicals fifty years ago, is to take apart rigid bureaucracy.

Yet history has granted the New Left its wish in a perverse form. The insurgents of my youth believed that by dismantling institutions we could produce communities: face-to-face relations of trust and solidarity, relations constantly negotiated and renewed, a communal realm in which people became sensitive to one another's needs. This

certainly has not happened. **The fragmenting of big institutions has left many people's lives in a fragmented state:** the places they work more resembling train stations than villages, family life disoriented by the demands of work; migration is the icon of the global age, moving on rather than settling in. Taking institutions apart has not produced more community.

If you are **nostalgically**-minded – and what sensitive soul isn't? – you would find this just one more reason for regret. Yet the last half century has been an **unprecedented** time of wealth creation, in Asia and Latin America as well as in the global North, a generation of new wealth deeply tied to the dismantling of fixed government and corporate bureaucracies. So too has the technological revolution in the last generation flourished most in those institutions which are the least centrally controlled. Such growth comes at a high price: ever greater economic inequality as well as social instability. Still, it would be irrational to believe that this economic explosion should never have happened.

Here is where culture enters the picture. I mean “culture” in its anthropological rather than artistic sense. What values and practices can hold people together as the institutions in which they live fragment? My generation **suffered from a want of imagination** in answering this question, in advancing the virtues of small-scale community. “Community” is not the only way to glue together a culture; most obviously, strangers in a city inhabit a common culture, even though they do not know one another. But the problem of a supportive culture is more than a matter of size. Only a certain kind

of human being can prosper in unstable, fragmentary social conditions. This ideal man or woman has to address three challenges:

The first concerns time: **how to manage short-term relationships**, and oneself, while migrating from task to task, job to job, place to place. If institutions no longer provide a long-term frame, the individual may have to improvise his or her life-narrative, or even do without any sustained sense of self.

The second challenge concerns talent: **how to develop new skills**, how to mine potential abilities, as reality's demands shift. Practically, in the modern economy, the “shelf-life” of many skills is short; in technology and the sciences, as in advanced forms of manufacturing, workers now need to retrain on average every eight to twelve years. Talent is also a matter of culture. The emerging social order militates against the ideal of craftsmanship, that is learning to do just one thing really well; such commitment can often prove economically destructive. In place of craftsmanship, modern culture advances an idea of meritocracy which celebrates potential ability rather than past achievement.

The third challenge follows from this. **It concerns surrender; that is, how to let go of the past.** The head of a dynamic company recently asserted that no one “owns” their place in her organization, that past service in particular earns no employee a **guaranteed place**. How could one respond to that assertion positively? A peculiar trait of personality is needed to do so, one which discounts the experiences it has already had; this trait of personality resembles more the consumer ever avid for new things, discarding old if perfectly **serviceable** goods, rather than the owner who jealousy guards what he or she already possesses.

What I want to show is how society goes about searching for this ideal man or woman. And I'll step beyond the scholar's remit in judging that search. A self oriented to the short-term, focused on potential ability, willing to abandon past experience is – to put a kindly face on the matter – an unusual sort of human being. Most people are not like this; **they need a sustaining life narrative**, they take pride in being good at something specific, and they value the experiences they've lived through. **The cultural ideal required in new institutions thus damages many of the people who inhabit them.**