

***The Commons Strikes Back:
Building Resilient Communities in an Age of Catastrophic
Collapse***

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DRAFT VERSION

***“There is no such thing as society”
--Margaret Thatcher***

***“Rats and roaches live by competition under the law of supply and demand;
it is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and
mercy”
--Wendell Berry***

A point of common ground among analysts of our current global predicament is the conclusion that solutions to vexing problems rest within a drastic scaling back humanity's complexity. Lester Brown (2007), David Korten (1999), Bill McKibben (2007), each maintain that small, local, decentralized communities must be the defining features to human organization if we are to prevent a catastrophic collapse. Given the reality of intensified complexity defined by global capitalism's push to bring forward the "great transformation" of the Global South, their call for a return to the commons appears a fantasy of new age dreamers (Kuecker, 2006). Prospects that humanity will break from capitalist hegemony and willingly embrace the commons are dim. In such darkness, the prudent course is to plant the seeds for the "fire climax cultures" (Swanger, 2005) of a post-collapse global commons. In exploring the idea of community in an age of catastrophic systemic collapse, this essay begins with the concept of "resilience" in systems theory, and then moves to a working definition of "community." Next, it explores the neoliberal destruction of the global commons by placing emphasis on the idea of the "post-social" and the "prudential" citizen. This analysis offers a key argument: the post-social impact on the global commons replicates global capitalism's uneven development, marking a sharp difference between community in Global North and South. The Global North's capacity for resilience is examined using the concept of "emergence," which suggests the severe limitations of its ability to survive collapse; whereas the concept of "capillaries of power" suggests the importance of "autonomy" within the commons of the Global South, and how it is the key for ensuring resilience in catastrophic collapse.

The key for surviving catastrophic systemic collapse is making resilience the central project of humanity. Homer-Dixon (2006, p. 20) states, “We can keep future breakdown constrained—that is, not too severe – by making our technological, economic, and social systems more *resilient* to unexpected shocks.” A system is resilient when it is able to absorb shocks that threaten synchronous failure and collapse (Homer-Dixon, 2006, p. 283). The more complex systems become, the less resilient they are. Contrary to the “end of history,” celebratory narratives of the neoliberals (Friedman 2000; Fukuyama 1989), our current age of globalization has pushed humanity beyond a tipping-point of sustainability and into a precarious state of extreme loss of resilience (Kuecker, 2007). To compensate for the loss of resilience complex systems enter a positive feed back loop of increasing complexity stimulating even deeper declines in resilience. Following the laws of thermodynamics, especially entropy, the reproduction of complex systems requires high-energy inputs. Decreasing energy inputs causes a decrease in resilience that increases vulnerability to systemic disturbances (Gundersun and Holling, 2002). Homer-Dixon (p. 286) states, “In a resilient system, individual nodes—like people, companies, communities, and even whole countries – are able to draw on support and resources from elsewhere, but they’re also self-sufficient enough to provide for their essential needs in an emergency.” In contrast to neoliberal thinking, the commons is an important feature to resilience. Homer-Dixon (2006, p. 286) explains, “And we’ve forgotten, too, that resilience is a ‘public good’ – something in whose benefits everyone shares, whether or not they pay for it. As with any public good, whether national defense or fire protection, if the government doesn’t intervene, everyone tends to wait for someone else to pay.”

Defining community is a difficult task because it is an abstraction for complex social relations. Most of us carry an intuitive if not instinctual understanding of community. Yet, when pushed to define “community” we often find such definitions akin to “nailing Jell-o to the wall.” Not unlike Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s (1964) reaction to the quagmire of defining what constitutes obscenity in pornography – “I know it when I see it” – most people muddle through life without a precise definition of a concept that many of us would actually risk our lives to defend. Benedict Anderson’s (1991) “imagined community” definition of nationalism illustrates the assumed quality to the abstraction; while using the term “community” to define the meaning of nation, he does not actually define community. Although Anderson did not venture too far into social theory, the idea of community as “imagined” carries important analytical frames embedded within the dynamic interrelationship between structure and agency, which invites us to think of community as a discursive practice, a schema, a rule set, a hegemonic process, and potentially a paradigm. A major challenge for social theory is to use the interplay between structure and agency for analyzing the triad relationship between community, resilience, and catastrophic systemic collapse.

Any definition of community must recognize that it is anchored in the concept of the “commons.” It is something shared between people. Community is derived from the bonds formed between people with similar life experiences: a shared locality, worldview, agenda, dreams, or fears. This definition resonates with the “social capital” definition of community in Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2000), but finds more promise in the limited structure and agency approach advocated in *Better Together* (Feldstein and Putnam,

2003). The latter invites use of Paul James (2006) “embodied” and “disembodied” social actors, which suggests the importance of Bourdieu’s (1977) idea of “*habitus*” for thinking about the structure-agency link that welds structure with action and thought (Sewell, 1992). In this way we might think of community as places and localities of “praxis,” where the “ongoing interaction of reflection, dialogue, and action” (Darder, Baltodano, and Torres, 2003: p. 15) meet in transformative moments.

Of great significance is the idea that community as praxis is the mechanism for overcoming the alienation of modernity. In her classic study of Bolivian tin miners, June Nash (1979, p. 325) states, “the final source of alienation is the separation of the worker from the sense of identity from within a community,” which “provides the moral basis for human action that goes beyond self-interest.” Nash takes from Victor’s Turner’s (1974) “*communitas*,” in which “consciousness and willingness, in so far as they exist, constitute a social bond uniting these people over and above any formal social bonds which are due to the existence of regulated social relations and organized social groups.” Turner, according to Nash, “shows how *communitas* emerges in periods of anti-structure when the society is in a stage of liminality. This threshold condition, in which the usual structural processes are in abeyance, is a period when ‘undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, nonrational (thought not irrational) behavior is manifested” (p. 330). Nash continues, “to the extent that the community has these generative bonds of new growth, the people can sustain the most brutal attacks” (p. 330). Community constitutes a suspension of the individual’s agenda in favor of the collective, a sacrifice of the ego for the good of the commons. This sacrifice recalls the teaching of non-western religions as reflected in the writings of Gandhi and the Dalai Lama (1999). Community is an ethical replacement of the “I” narrative with the “We” narrative that is undertaken when the individual breaks away from the false consciousness of modernity and enters transformations inherent to consciousness formation associated with social movements. Community then becomes an act of resistance to the destructive forces of globalization, and the key to resilience in a collapsing system.

Neoliberal globalization has nearly completed the process of what Karl Polanyi (2001) called the “Great Transformation,” the epic structural change of society, politics, and culture from communalism to individualism caused by the brutal transition to capitalist market forces. From Chicago to Moscow, Shanghai to Mexico City, rural village to urban slum, this newest wave of globalization has torn the social fabric to shreds, and in the process has left the global commons less resilient to the challenges of multiple and interlocking crises. We will see, however, that this process is geographically uneven. To understand the destruction of the commons, consideration of the “social” and “post-social” is needed.

For Gilles Deleuze (1979) and Jonathan Xavier Inda (2006) the social was the nineteenth century state’s response to social pathologies resulting from the development of industrial capitalism that required the social services, insurances, and securities we associated, until recently, with the welfare state. “The goal of administering these domains,” Inda explains, “was to ensure collective security through curtailing the risks to individuals and families” in order to “allevi[ate] the harmful consequences of unrestrained economic activity by

interceding directly into the conditions of employment, and more generally through promoting the betterment of the social life of individuals” (10). The social transformed industrial capitalism’s risks—accidents, sickness, unemployment - “into insurable risks that were individually remunerated but collectively borne” (11). In da elaborates, “It provided a certain measure of individual and collective security against the uncertainties of social life” (11). Human communities once carried these risks before capitalism rendered the commons dysfunctional. Key to this analysis is how the “allocation of social provisions to individuals on the basis of their membership in a collectivity embodied a particular conception of the subject. The subject of government was conceptualized here as a social citizen -- as a social being whose security was guaranteed through collective dependencies and solidarities” (11).

After its apogee during the three decades following World War Two, the idea of the social came under intensified attack by policy makers influenced by neoliberal economics (Harvey, 1989). Leading the charge was Britain’s “Iron Lady,” Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In a 1987 interview with journalist Douglas Keay, Thatcher declared,

I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There's no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation.

Thatcher’s statement is a clear articulation of the “post-social.” In da explains, “This new ideal is such that political government is no longer obligated to tackle all the ills of social and economic life. It is no longer required to plan, know, and direct from the center in order to address society’s desire for health, security, and welfare” (12). In the new order, the market replaces the state as the mechanism for ensuring the social good. “For it is through the market,” In da states, “that individual actors are expected to secure their well-being. The market is seen as the perfect mechanism for assuring the life of the population - for averting the risks linked to old age, ill health, poverty, accidents, and so forth” (13). Subsequently, the “public provision of welfare and social protection ceases to appear as a necessary part of governing the well-being of the population” (13). Of special importance in the formation of the post-social is the idea of “prudentialism.”

In da explains that the post-social carries with it a “new subject of government,” which displaces the former “subject as a social citizen whose capacities and obligations were expressed in the idiom of collective solidarity and social responsibility” with the idea of the prudential citizen. “For post-social regimes of government,” In da states, “the political subject is less a social citizen whose security is guaranteed through the bonds of collective social life and the receipt of public largesse than an individual whose citizenship is derived

from active self-promotion and the free exercise of personal choice. The post-social citizen is thus to be an entrepreneur unto him- or herself” (pp. 14-15). The neoliberal construct views the citizen not as a dependent and obligated member of society, but as an autonomous, individual actor, making rational choices that maximize optimal outcomes. Inda states, “Post-social forms of rule, then, govern not through collective solidarity but through the directed and responsible actions of self-governing agents. They rest upon the reconstitution of the political subject from a social being with rights and needs to a post-social citizen with choices and yearnings to self-fulfillment” (p. 15). The prudent individual now carries the burden of his or her security within an ever-increasing world of insecurities. In the post-social, “ethical beings are ones who assume charge of their own well-being and adopt a prudent disposition toward the future. They are persons who comport themselves rationally and responsibly” (p. 17).

The rise of prudential citizenship in the post-social has had at least two major consequences. The first concerns what happens to those whose social behavior does not fit within the neoliberal’s construct of prudential activity. Those deemed not to be prudential, are the marginalized of the world. As Inda illustrates in the case of migrants, they become the targets of criminalization. They are those homeless in the United States who have been displaced from mental health institutions, and frequently end up in the ever-growing prison industrial complex. Those yet criminalized constitute an absolutely phenomenal extent of the human population, perhaps reaching as high as 4 billion. They are the urban poor portrayed in Mike Davis *Planet of Slums* (2006). They are the indigenous peoples whose culture remains antithetical to the Enlightenment’s project of transforming each of us into agents of rational choice within a commodified commons (Fenlon and Hall, 2008). They are the world’s remaining peasants, struggling for security in subsistence production (McMichael, 2006; Patel, 2005; Patel, 2006; and Rosset, 2006). Collectively, they constitute Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s (2000 and 2004) conceptualization of the “multitude.”

The multitude, however, are made invisible by the neoliberal’s free market, because they are simply too poor to shop at Wal Mart. Philip McMichael (1996: 276) estimates 80% of the global population lives “outside global consumer networks.” Disarticulated from state welfare, subsidies, and clientelism, the multitudes have few means for claiming citizenship within the free market system (Alvarez and Escobar, 1998: 1). Neoliberals only see the poor as the “social problem”: the street children, the homeless, the street vendor, the shantytown dweller, or the beggar. When neoliberals see the multitude’s social action they see it as socially deviant activity. When social protest boomed in the 1990s elites reduced resistance to mindless protest, a pathological, phobic response to sound political economy (Kuecker, 2006). For Hardt and Negri, however, the multitudes are the promise for the seeds of resistance to their notion of Empire.

The second significant consequence of prudentialism concerns the contradictory trend of communities carrying the burden of the social within a political context of extreme hostility to the very idea of the public good, the commons, or the commonwealth. The point is illustrated with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank’s embrace of the informal sector. In this case, the neoliberals celebrate the prudentialism of the urban poor,

who desperately organize in their community in effort to survive the brutal impact of the neoliberal's forced formation of the post-social known as "structural adjustment policies." Neoliberals think the informal sector, once liberated from the shackles of the "social" state and provided proper legal frameworks ensuring the sanctity of property and contracts, will become an arena of agency where people pursue their rational self-interest (De Soto, 1989). In the eyes of the IMF and World Bank, they are the phoenix of entrepreneurs empowered by market economies to rise up from the trap of poverty (Davis, 70-94; 178-186). Likewise, we find prudential migrants, defending their communities by the rational choice of constructing complex webs of transnational community, all designed to reproduce their origin communities under the assault of barbarous agrarian policies implemented by mechanisms like the North American Free Trade Agreement (Durand, Malone, and Massey, 2002; and **Stephen, 200X**).

We might extend this analysis to civilian responses to natural disasters, especially when weak or indifferent states fail to act. One leading example is the formation of "civil society" in Mexico after the 1985 earthquake, which is seen by many as a key moment of gestation for the emergence of Mexico's "*globofobico*" social movements in the 1990s and 2000s (Poniatowska, 1988; Olson, 2000). Perhaps we see a similar phenomena taking shape in the aftermath of the May 2008 Mayamar cyclone. *The Financial Times* reports thousands "ordinary citizens are taking up the task of providing relief." It states: "Resigned to the junta's inability to safeguard its own citizens, a disparate network of individuals, businesses, and religious groups are braving their own hardships to organize convoys of supplies, food, and medicines" (27 May 2008, p. 1). **[Add Hurricane Katrina]**

Amartya Sen (1999) advances the idea that development is one's freedom from structural limitations. "Development," he states, "requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systemic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states" (p. 3). Sen's analysis emphasizes the flawed notion of prudentialism without the "social;" and, as he recognizes (2005), development as freedom without the "social" is nothing more than "structural violence," in which grinding realities of poverty and repression do violence to that which makes us all human (Galtung, 1969; Spitz, 1978; Scheper-Hughes, 1992; and Farmer, 2005). Sen's analysis also echoes the idea of social capital, the value of networks and functional community as mechanisms, even *habitus*, for individual self-interest and agency to contribute to the common good (Coleman, 1988). Social capital, however, is destroyed in the post-social. **[Perhaps Bring in J. Sachs' Common Wealth?]**

The post-social's significance for the commons replicates global capitalism's uneven development, having sharp differentials between the Global North and Global South while being a complete disaster for both. The point is illustrated when foreigners visit Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico. Zapatistas often ask visitors what their struggle is in the United States. A common response is the struggle against affluence, how it has destroyed citizenship, and left people alienated and unable to organize. The Zapatista recognition highlights three key points. First, there is substantive difference between the commons in the Gobal North and the commons in the Global South. Second, this difference is

generated by distinct historical trajectories within the history of capitalism's uneven temporal and spatial development, which finds its most current articulation in the impact of the post-social on the commons. Third, this difference corresponds to distinct positions within our collapsing complex system. These distinctions can be theorized using the concepts of "emergence" for the Global North and "capillaries" for the Global South. [Note to Yaso-- here is the entrance point for thinking about "engaged research" and solidarity, especially taking from Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders* and Giroux's border pedagogy.]

In the Global North, the post-social leaves the commons highly dysfunctional. Putman's *Bowling Alone* captures this dysfunctionality. He illustrates how social capital has been undermined by affluence. In *Ecology of Fear*, Davis (1998, pp. 360-422) illustrates how dysfunctional commons drives Americans deeper into social pathologies that generate a culture of fear and lead people to embrace apartheid like practices of walled communities, increased policing, more penetrating technologies of surveillance, and ever more criminalization of the marginalized (Kuecker, 2007).

Despite Ray and Anderson's (2000) argument that a paradigm shift toward the "cultural creatives" is within the core values of the American Dream (and by extension, Western Civilization), the fundamental reality is that fire climax cultures are too few and too isolated to have any meaningful impact in a world defined by catastrophic systemic collapse. Likewise, we can have a plethora of Paul Rogat Loeb's (1999) engaged community activists who undergo life-transforming experiences that shake them into social activism, but these engaged citizens are miniscule in number when facing the magnitude of transforming the Global North into a society and culture that is resilient to catastrophic systemic collapse. The idea that the Global North, with all of its high technology, human capital, and ingenuity, will either obviate or surmount the challenge of catastrophic systemic collapse is deeply rooted in a modernist vision of progress, while being one that blinds itself from being able to see "progress" as a driving factor to collapse. With ideologies like US exceptionalism framing our understandings of the current global predicament, any notion that a paradigm shift is soon at hand is naive, misguided and potentially dangerous, regardless how many times we quote Margaret Meade's famous words: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has" (Mead, 2008). Being stuck with our faith in modern progress—and potentially facing a reality where the Global North can not escape the modernity that created it - becomes the Global North's equivalent to the Global South's post-colonial problematic. The inability to transcend modernity appears to be the defining feature tainting the ideas and policies created to contend with the problems of the 21st century.

The Global North's resilient commons, if it does happen, will come as a product of the "edge of chaos" and the process of emergence within a collapsing system. During the 1980s an odd assortment of hyper intelligent scientists, economists, and social scientists worked at the Santa Fe Institute (SFI). They sought to understand complexity, especially the place of the "edge of chaos" in systems analysis. Complexity, according to M. Mitchell Waldrop's (1992) analysis of the history and people behind SFI, is seldom a system of stable equilibrium. It hovers near the "edge of chaos," always proximate to systemic

collapse. Complexity is defined by the near lack of coherence and predictability, as if it were overrun by all the possible computations and permutations generated by a multiplicity of interacting parts, sub-systems, networks, and systems. Mark Taylor's exploration of the "moment of complexity," adds to this analysis. He explains, "all significant change takes place *between* too much and too little order" (p. 14). When there is too little order in a system, it can approach the edge of chaos, when the system can breakdown, fail to reproduce, or otherwise disintegrate. But, when there is too little order within the system, the need for ingenuity is augmented. These types of edge of chaos moments, Taylor argues, are often times of great creativity driven by the need to resolve serious problems or limitations within the system. When systems are teetering on the edge of collapse, the innovations necessary for emergence into an adaptive, self-reproducing system are often discovered or implemented. For Taylor, "emergence" is closely related to the "edge of chaos," a moment of creativity when one system tips to something new and different.

Those who study resilience point us to the importance of "emergence." For Homer-Dixon, emergence is the "upside of down" the genesis of a new system, what he calls "catagenesis," the creation of something new from collapse. Homer-Dixon, however, is frustratingly vague about what this genesis may be. Indeed, predicting the future of emergence is hard to phantom, and is perhaps best left to the discipline futuristic studies (Wagar, 1999 and Wallerstein, 1998). It is important, however, to analyze the relationship between collapse, emergence, and resilience as it may provide key insights to guide our thinking about the Global North's sustainable community.

The relationship between resilience, emergence, and the commons in the Global North is fundamentally a problem of structure and agency. Wallerstein (p. 64) offers a critical insight on this point:

I say that when systems are functioning normally, structural determinism outweighs individual and group free will. But in times of crisis and transition, the freewill factor becomes central. The world of 2050 will be what we make it. This leaves full rein for our agency, for our commitment, and for our moral judgment. It also means that this period will be a time of terrible political struggle, because the states are much higher than in so-called normal times.

The creation of resilient communities in the Global North will be far more the product of changing structures than human agency. Keep in mind how Bourdeau's *habitus* is central to the commons, and how the structural conditions defining community constitute the field of *habitus*, the schema formed by everyday practice. Now consider what happens in catastrophic systemic collapse: the structural conditions are radically altered if not eliminated, and from it "emergence" happens. Emergence is the formation of new patterns within the new structures, a new *habitus* that defines the range of possibility for the everyday. For the fire climax cultures to germinate, the fire of structural change has to take place, in particular, structural collapse.

The process of change suggested here might best be informed by consideration of Thomas Haskell's (1985 April & June) analysis of the abolition movement. His question is really

one about causation: how and why bourgeois humanitarian sensibility came into historical formation. He offers a multi-step argument. First people have to develop “recipe knowledge” that compels them to action. He argues this knowledge is generated by the historical development of the capitalist market, which alters participants “causal perception” about the consequences of their actions. People were moved to see slavery as immoral because of the deep transformations in the structures shaping their *habitus*. Lacking the market revolution, abolition may not have been historically possible. The abolition example suggests the necessity for an equally deep transformation in contemporary structures for the Global North’s commons to emerge. Many argue that globalization offers such a scenario. As Naomi Klein (2001, p. 5) observes, “what is emerging is an activist model that mirrors the organic, decentralized, interlinked pathways of the internet.” Events like protests, workshops, *foros*, and *encuentros* routinely converge multiple, transnational communities of resistance in one location. These convergences stimulate the growth, sophistication, and depth of local resistances’ counter-publics and productions of sovereignty (Drainville, DATE; Sader, 2004; Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Kuecker 2008). Yet, globalization, which is the process of producing a global post-social, is not yielding sustainable communities that offer resilience to multiple and interconnected crisis.

The deeper and more profound the time-space compression of globalization, the closer the system moves to its “tipping point” of collapse, if it has not already tipped. In part, the Global North’s fire climax cultures are not able to keep pace, and there is the lag-time in cultural production of understandings of the meaning and significance of structural change (Meadows, Meadows, and Randers, 2004; and Homer-Dixon, 2006), especially the mechanisms for how “noise” becomes “information.” Often, time-space compression happens and people are not fully aware of the change, its contours, functions, direction, and meaning. It is noise in process of becoming information through what Taylor (pp. 99-123) describes as “screening,” which results in schemata and *habitus* for understanding catastrophic systemic collapse. The delay in constructing master narratives – Taylor’s screening and schemata -- about time-space compression means we do not fully understand processes like globalization which fundamentally rework abstract and relative spaces, as well as the process of collapse.

In the search for resilient communities in the age of catastrophic collapse, perhaps the best place to look is in those places where collapse is already an everyday reality. The creativity and ingenuity of the multitude is where the 21st Century commons resides. To understand this “the meek shall inherit the earth” argument, consideration of Michel Foucault’s (1980) notion of “capillaries of power” is useful. He illustrates the importance of de-centering analysis of power by looking for power at “its extremities, in its ultimate destinations, with those points where it becomes capillary, that is, in its more regional and local forms and institutions” (p. 96). The de-centered, outer reaches of power are the crucial locations of systemic resilience, especially within the context of the post-social’s extreme levels of marginalization. The capillaries are the domains of collapse’s everyday experience where human action forges the structures that generate *habitus*. Indigenous people in Oaxaca, Mexico, for example, have shown the ability within their particular capillaries to contest regimes of domination, challenge hegemonic structures and relations of power, and pursue

alternatives to elite projects (Rubin, 1997). It is in the capillaries of the global system where the commons has emerged with efforts like the Pariet Project and GILDAPASEI in Papua New Guinea, DECOIN in Junín, Ecuador, the Zapatista autonomous communities in Chiapas, or Via Campesina mobilizations in Latin America, South Asia, and Africa.

Communities that are “off the grid” of modernity are essential for understanding systemic resilience because they provide the most space for autonomy to emerge, and autonomy is essential for sustainable communities of the 21st century. Autonomy might best be understood by thinking about how it answers the most basic question: who has the power to decide. The autonomous answer is the embrace of the most radical expression of the Enlightenment, the fundamental revolt against concentrations of power in the domains of a few individuals, institutions, corporations, and the state. As the most radical construction of the Enlightenment, autonomy is a revolutionary proposition, one fundamentally opposed to the realities of the 21st century’s transnational order. Autonomy aims to destroy concentrations of power and replace them with horizontal forms of democracy, a radical, true, participatory democracy that provides a voice to everyone in the decision making process (Esteva, 1999). Autonomy penetrates every domain of life becoming a radical *habitus*. It is a way of life that connects community to land, environment, religion, language in a complex web of economic, social, and political relations. Autonomy’s focus on reconstitution of community answers the question of ‘who decides’ as communal control over land use, water rights, oil, minerals, trees, as well as indigenous knowledge about the environment. Deeper, autonomy is the ways of living, being, thinking, seeing, that cannot be turned into commodities for the capitalist market. It defies Polanyi’s “Great Transformation.” Autonomy means the community decides what to do with resources and not the Mexican nation-state, not the World Bank, not the United States Department of Treasury, and not consumers in the first world (Díaz-Polanco, 1997; Hernández Navarro, 1998; Aída Hernández Castillo and Mattiace, 2003; and Mattiace, 2003). Autonomy constitutes a domain of sovereignty that negates neoliberalism. Realizing that sovereignty is a revolutionary act.

Given the reality of catastrophic systemic collapse, we urgently need to take measures to enhance the resilience of human society. Among many possible paths into an uncertain future, two major directions appear most likely. The first offers a continuation in our faith in modernity, especially its paradigm of science and technology, which many have shown to be falsely grounded (Berry, 1988; Korten 1999; Homer-Dixon, 2000). The second path of non-capitalist, autonomous, small-scale, subsistence communities has demonstrated amazing resilience in harsh world, one that has often attempted to eliminate it. This essay demonstrates that the first path is least likely to generate the resilient communities that are desperately needed. And, it illustrates the importance of placing top priority on learning from these communities, nurturing them, and strengthening them as the “perfect storm” of systemic collapse becomes ever more severe. Lacking these communities the prospects of surviving catastrophe are slim.

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