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Nixers, Fixers, and the Axes of Conformity

The rise of global counterpublics

Commentators take for granted that politicians today are activists and that every activist must have a vision and policy template with which to reform their communities. In Canada, party leaders campaign on complex policy platforms that have been certified by accountants to be workable within the resources of government. In the United States, presidential candidates design complex reform strategies to fix health care and other social ills.¹ These tomes of enlightenment show voters that politicians have mastered not only the art of campaigning, but also the science of changing the world. In Europe, electoral victory is frequently presented as the art of brokerage politics combined with the science of policy formulation. In the United States, elections are a repeating test of the laws of behavioralism, and pollsters take on a divine aspect. A cynic might be prompted to observe that on some level the Europeans are absorbed with the possibilities of social engineering, and the Americans are obsessed with the inevitabilities of electoral engineering.

It used to be that the Left self-identified as activists through the Marxist concept of praxis, which is a synthesis of theory and practice. On the Right, political action was not so rigorously theorized. It was generally regarded, at worst, in the same self-interested terms as entrepreneurialism and at best as public service. The mass fascist movements of the 1930s changed this perception, and after the Second World War it was finally recognized that activism on the Left and the Right is qualitatively similar in the way that it

combines political theory, social values, and the strategies of mass organizing to rally public opinion. It is a legacy of the transformative events of the civil rights movement in 1960s America that politicians and front-line political actors on both the Right and Left now tend to define themselves as activists.² They discuss in serious terms the potential benefits of grassroots rallies, the exigencies of face-to-face debates and door-knocking exercises, and the benefits of mass advertising and branding. They have taken to heart Walter Benjamin's exhortation to move beyond the "stage of eternal discussion," to say the least.³

Political activism has evolved into a Leviathan bridled by bright and educated tacticians and administrators. The best examples of the new world of activism are the worldwide concerts to raise awareness about poverty and the environment. The Live 8 concerts organized by Bob Geldof in 2005 and the Live Earth concerts organized by Al Gore in 2007 are consciousness-raising experiences to a large degree, celebrating the fact that global warming is now at the top of the public agenda. Few imagine that they can be taken at face value as a transformative political experience for audiences. Instead they are about the modern activist lifestyle, part lifestyle identity, part informed political commitment, and all about effecting change through the creation of transformative social movements.

Defiant publics want to reclaim their voices and assert their ideas in the public domain. These nagging, hectoring, persistent publics have a presence we can feel and an impact we can see. What makes them unique is that they exist "by virtue of their imagining" and their ideas are almost infinite in number. They live through texts, debate, and discursive communities. They embody civil society's predilection to be engaged when something seems to be wrong, unjust, in need of fixing – or something bolder, to destroy and build anew.

In the expanding universe of modern dissent, diversity of political identity is the rule. The choices seem infinite. There is a style and identity tool-kit for every position on the political spectrum. You no longer have to choose between an identity as a capitalist or a socialist. You can be a deep environmental paradigm shifter, a radical feminist, an anti-racist activist, a poverty eradicator, a moral

crusader, a gay rights campaigner, a globalization fixer, a populist blogger, an anti-fascist agitator, a back-to-basics localist, an online “hacktivist,” a union militant, a libertarian skeptic, an anarchist spoiler, an anti-war demonstrator, or a corporate culture-jammer, just to name a few of the emergent on- and offline political identities. Micro-activism thrives in this environment. If your cause is not on the list, start your own network, connect with others, organize your own community, and raise awareness.⁴

Contrast this growth with the overall decline in voting and membership in political parties across the industrialized world and one can see how consequential the shift in the political environment actually is. People are increasingly cynical about trusting mainstream political leaders and political parties that promise the world but never deliver. So with a political culture of operating on a cumulative record of broken electoral promises it is hardly surprising that distrust of political parties has reached a boiling point and can be tracked across the world in this democratic age. Voters march with their feet and don’t vote, but those who do vote have plans to vote strategically. The new information economy gives people on the ground the tools to challenge elite structures and institutions. The actual word counterpublic is not yet in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but you can find “counter-intuitive,” “counter-irritant,” and “counter-motion” all of which share something of the bristling qualities of the modern counterpublic. They are “counter” because they are against the grain, against conventional wisdom, against embedded conformity, and inevitably against elites and their expectations. These are the public groups that lead opinion and create the political identities whose proliferation so marks this era of globalization.

The post-modern compass of dissent

The effectiveness of counterpublics can be measured by their *performativity* or the impact of their ideas on public opinion, their *capacity* to incite anger or to force a reaction for or against a major issue, and the *resilience* of their message to inspire other groups of activists that come later. These metrics point us to examine and evaluate a new kind of political culture of opposition that is the

product of the information times. The compass of dissent today is very different from the one designed by leftist intellectuals and conservative thinkers after the Second World War. In those times, left-wing activists looked to large-scale geopolitics to orient their activism and refine their theories of the revolutionary mission of the proletariat. They wanted to build mass socialist parties and seize the commanding heights of the economy. The nationalization of industry was supposed to be the best way to create a more equal set of social relations. The welfare state would replace the market as the principal mechanism for social organization.⁵

Socialist theory placed full-scale revolution at the center of the political project.⁶ This worldview privileged systems and structures with the power to change collective behavior and create high levels of expectations for individuals. In social theory agency, voice, and process took a back seat to a world constructed on the ideas of functionalism and top-down collective action. Micro-activism was seen as a second-tier if not second-rate area of research. In the zeal to create an economy rooted in public plenty rather than private scarcity, socialist theorists buried important democratic concerns about identity, gender, and the value of the individual under the weighty historical mission of the proletariat. They were burdened, in the words of Milan Kundera, by the “unbearable lightness of being”.

In the real world of state policy, the Left settled for the social democratic compromise. Harold Wilson, Pierre Trudeau, François Mitterand, and John F. Kennedy all made their peace with global financial markets. In the golden age of Keynesianism, the mixed economy set a high standard for market regulation and social provision in the industrialized world. Organized labor and the middle class were all the better for it.⁷ But with the internationalization of markets and the idea that citizenship could only be rooted in one’s singular loyalty to your community of fate, socialist theory turned out to have feet of clay.

On the Right, conservative thinkers used the realist balance of power to justify their worldview.⁸ They wanted to control the intellectual agenda in the West in order to galvanize support behind Cold War policies that fitted their particular theoretical view of mutually assured destruction, containment, and the

domino effect of socialist revolution. Did their jingoism protect the West from Stalinist-style authoritarianism? Scholars are divided about how much the containment of the Soviet Union helped or hurt Western prosperity. The Great Fear of “communism from within” galvanized conservative activists and spurred the political witch hunts that destroyed lives and damaged the credibility of conservatism as a bastion of the traditional values of freedom of expression and belief.⁹ After the Cold War ended, conservatives gloated that the Left was rudderless, discredited, and lying in the dustbin of history. The critical point that neither the Left nor the Right anticipated was the scrambling of ideology that was to take place beyond the rubble of the Berlin Wall.¹⁰

The ordinals of social inclusion and citizen identity

Dissent today consists of four large, interrelated, and loosely linked clusters of engagement. The projects are guided by big ideas, soft concepts, and emerging worldviews that mark them as distinct from Cold War politics. Fixed meta-ideologies are present but take a back seat. The ordinals are points of departure and beacons for action on behalf of the vulnerable, excluded, displaced, precarious, marginalized, and victimized.

The first project on the modern compass of dissent is *social inclusion*. It is concerned chiefly with the preservation of the social bond – that difficult to define energy that draws upon the power of group identification – through economic development, poverty eradication, and the enhancement of social equality.¹¹ The World Social forum is at the crossroads of this powerful current. This is a huge category. It includes city activists across the globe who seek to protect the rights of the homeless in the capital cities of the world, immigration campaigners fighting for a world without borders and human rights crusaders, such as Oxfam and Save the Children, fighting for child poverty eradication. It is one that links activists in most self-described progressive movements, from the environmental movement, to labor rights networks, and even libertarian think tanks. The questions of how we can live together in a densely populated, multicultural, and increasingly complex social world absorbs the talent and time of millions of activists, analysts, and academics.

The second large ordinal is *trust and human security*. Millions who still believe that public authority is the primary means by which society defends the weak are particularly interested in the challenges of the right to human security and individual safety and the way that these rights can translate into meaningful democratic action. These activists can be called cosmo-populists – believers in the possibilities of cosmopolitan citizenship who understand the massive power potential of populism and localism. The World Social Forum attracts tens of thousands of young militants under this banner. Anti-poverty campaigners such as OneWorld, ActionAid, and the Global Development Network furious with the World Bank for their support for neo-liberal policies, are turning up the volume on governments to make good on their Millennium Development Goals. Local environmental activists are noisily pressuring their governments to honour their Kyoto commitments.

The best-known organization of this type is Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) which now operates around the world. Founded by a group of physicians working with the Red Cross in the Nigerian civil war in Biafra in the early seventies, it is the prototype of the new cosmopolitan NGO humanitarian aid organization. Originally its founding activists criticized the techniques used by the Red Cross in Nazi Germany saying that their silence in Auschwitz was tantamount to complicity. These young and outspoken doctors created an alternative to the International Committee of the Red Cross that had required its volunteers to sign a contract of cooperation with a country's authorities. In establishing MSF their goal was to provide quick medical relief and at the same time speak out against human rights violations.¹²

All of these organizations prioritize the local but are committed to building communities on a global scale. This cluster contains human rights campaigners, crusaders against weapons of mass destruction, theorists of social capital, and even some military intelligence advocates. In a strange twist, the American neo-conservative movement draws some of its energy and legitimacy by copying the language and ethos of human security campaigners. Also, the American military has experienced in an immediate way the real effects of a breakdown of basic human rights in Iraq, and they are

turning to human security advocates for help. These dissenters are focused on the Arendtian ideal of the right to have rights.¹³

The third axis is the *individual freedom* cluster. These activists privilege the libertarian aspects of liberalism at the same time that they recognize the essential role of the state in protecting minorities. Their project is one of liberal inclusion and cosmopolitan recognition. Make Aids History, ACT UP, Global Aids Alliance, and Health Global Alliance Project (GAP) are among the most successful transnational movements that have produced a new generation of activists. This group includes gay rights activists, freedom of speech defenders such as the Media Coalition, subaltern community representatives, and all manner of counterculture proponents of alternative lifestyles, from radical social experiments to fundamentalist religious sects. This cluster aims to free individuals from the bias and prejudice that deny them the opportunity to develop their capabilities and allow them to become productive members of society.¹⁴

Disability International is a powerful voice for those with any kind of physical or mental impairment and typifies the liberal ethos of building an inclusive world through legislative reform. Thousands of AIDS activists, medical researchers, artist collectives, and self-help groups are fighting ignorance, racism, and social exclusion in the name of individual freedom. All these kinds of projects are inspired by a powerful ideal of liberal individualism but are much more than that. They are fundamentally collectivist because they accept as true that social reform has to change the relations of power between the individual and society.

The last ordinal is the *building political community* cluster. Its project is that of the micro-activist – developing networks and enhancing the relational power of the public like Habitat for Humanity that builds homes for the homeless and low-income groups worldwide.¹⁵ Debt relief activists like the Jubilee Debt Campaign support the goal that the people of the Third World countries cannot be held accountable for the massive indebtedness that their elites or kleptocracies incurred. Micro-activists are also organized and highly visible campaigners championing dozens of causes as different as cancelation of Third World Debt to protecting sex trade workers. In the cities of the world we can

feel the presence of thousands of micro-activist organizations defending the homeless, fighting for rent controls and clean water and against the ubiquitous wrecking ball of developers in the barrios of São Paulo, the slums of New Delhi or the inner city projects of Boston.

Many of these local activists are connectors and masters of the weak social tie, as Malcolm Gladwell termed them.¹⁶ They bridge the divide between movements and organizations of all sizes and types like the Third World Network. The human dimension of international organization fascinates them, and they are consumed with the potentiality of institution building. This group includes homelessness activists, advocates of the rights of the disabled, undocumented worker activists, networkers who aim to rebuild inner city communities, and even church groups that oppose capital punishment. Their primary goals are to oppose arbitrary state action and reinstate the procedural fairness that they perceive to be lacking in modern democratic societies. Organizations like the Polaris project to combat human trafficking and modern-day slavery aim to “empower individual survivors of trafficking while also creating long-term social change.” These radicals come in a variety of forms from Jane Jacobs-type social democrats, to concerned liberals like Al Gore. The violence of heavy-handed bureaucratic responses to social problems is the catalyst for large-scale social change.

The bigtent strategy and dynamics of crossover

These broad rubrics lend themselves to a big tent buy-in strategy that is one of the foundational elements of modern public dissent. It accounts for the astonishing speed in the diffusion of dissenting ideas and mind-sets. It is this lethal combination of mind-set plus ideology that defines the particular place of every group of activists on the map of activism. And what of the orthodox Left – where is it? Of course any one of the twenty or so varieties of socialist revolution is present as part of the larger movements and culture of dissent, but they are no longer the luminous polar North Star of social activism. Marxism used to be a categorical imperative for a select set of highly influential thinkers, but the potency of classical

Marxist thought was diluted with the decline of Cold War international relations. By the turn of the twenty-first century, it had been almost fully subsumed in the pragmatic projects of progressive social movements and in the desire of activists for concrete strategies of social change.

So all in all the modern compass of dissent is ideologically fluid; it allows individuals to cross over into other movements and jump between causes and battles, from battling Bush to protecting local neighbors from private developers. The power dynamics favor those with a large capacity for technical understanding, networking ability, and a clarity of vision that convinces the cynical and wins new converts to the cause.¹⁷ This complex and highly regionalized culture of dissent in every continent has triggered a massive cycle of political rebellion and non-conformity that cuts across the deep divides of age, class, and culture. What is the potent mix of hard to manage tensions?

Skeptics are by far the largest group of dissident and disgruntled global publics. They constantly challenge public authorities and elites about their values, priorities, and ideas. From the Greek *skeptikos*, the act of doubting is synonymous with the related notion of bearing a responsibility to dissuade others. Skeptics make common cause with persuasion and dissent. The British website opendemocracy.net is a prime example of skeptic thought, as is its American counterpart, truthout.org. They are always drilling down, searching, reading, processing the news, views, analysis, and opinion not carried by mainstream media. To get the latest behind the headline news about Burma, human rights in Iraq, pro-democracy movements in Eastern Europe, a critique of Al Gore's latest book, these sites attract tens of thousands of info-activists.

By instinct, skeptics are wary of conventional wisdom and official explanations. They like to look behind the world of appearances and beyond accepted nostrums, and for that reason, they aren't loyal subjects of a president, prime minister, or the nation writ large. They want real answers to their questions about the use and misuse of power. They are often young, well-educated, or self-taught Internet users skilled in digging for the truth. They read, research, and track issues over time. They don't let themselves be guiled by officialese and want hard evidence not sophistry in answer to their questions and worries.

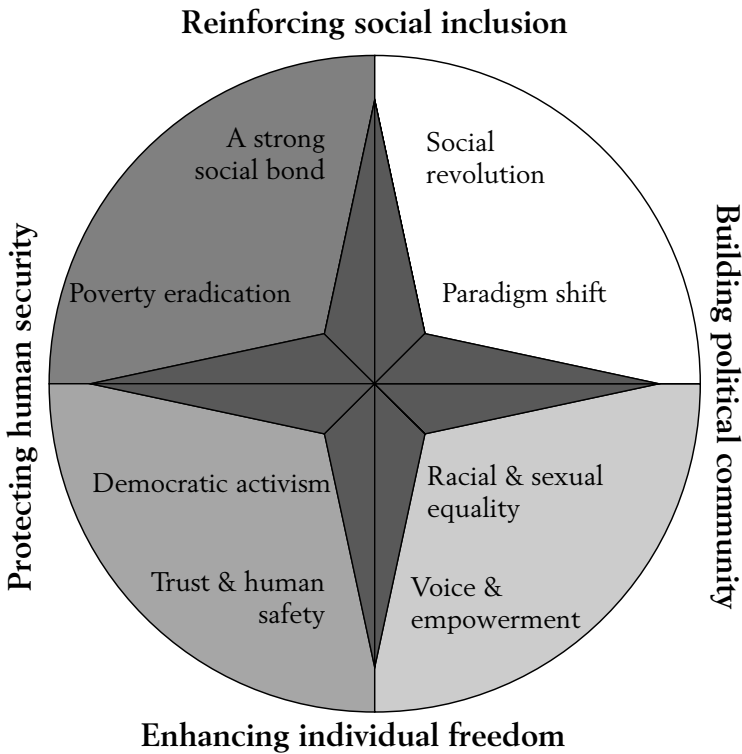


Figure 4.1 The compass of post-modern dissent

Source: Daniel Drache, Roberts Centre, 2007

Skeptics are issue-focused and not necessarily joiners of social movements. They don't march in the streets and wouldn't be caught dead at the World Social Forum. They aren't anti-globalizers by temperament and see value in public security because they are middle-of-the-roaders and take a long time debating which "side" they will support. They want to weigh the arguments for and against. But they are worried and open to argument and persuasion.

Many in this category have a visceral reaction to polarizing political personalities like Vice President Dick Cheney, former prime minister Margaret Thatcher, former Italian president Silvio Berlusconi, and Russian president (now prime minister) Vladimir Putin rather than a specific boiler-plate ideology. Modern skeptics

are fragmented and highly fluid bodies of opinion, wary of authority, and suspicious of the political class and the way they package their ideas. They are often drawn from the ranks of the middle class, but this categorization is not all that useful in advanced industrial countries where computer access cuts across traditional socio-economic divides. Their place-rooted pluralism sits easily with both their instinct to challenge their own national leaders as well as their voracious interest in the geopolitical universe beyond the nation-state. In a global age, they follow the global citizen's golden rule that you do not need to be a citizen of a country in order to make a judgment about it.

Skeptics militate, persuade, and argue largely under the radar screen. They may not be seen, but their ability to move public opinion is always felt. This genre of dissent builds a "democratic dam," to invoke Stuart Hall's powerful language, against conformity and the selfish individualist. Skeptical dissenters "stand apart" with others in disagreement. It is this act of dissociation from the establishment that makes the disbelieving counterpublic a force to be reckoned with in a liberal democracy. Liberal democracy as practiced is essentially about making deals and exchanging promises for votes; *strong* democracy, according to Benjamin Barber, is about choice and participation, where politics is done *by* citizens rather than *to* citizens.¹⁸

Low visibility often leads experts to underestimate the skeptic in an age of celebrity and fast-flowing information, but their energy and commitment has reactivated the idea of a "public of citizens."¹⁹ This dynamic has given birth to other new sets of loyalties. They are angered by the broken promises of politicians – an anger that they feed off – and particularly by the deception, perpetrated by Bush and Blair, surrounding Weapons of Mass Destruction. They are unforgiving about being lied to and betrayed. They are angry about global warming and the indifference of governments to take effective action to limit greenhouse gas emissions. They support groups like Eco-Justice, Friends of the Earth, and thousands of grassroots environmentalist organizations.

Contrarians are by temperament and conviction tough opponents of governmental authority. Where skeptics are amateur spoilers, contrarians are professional doubters. They are pessimists par

excellence who fear the worst and perceive a world falling apart.²⁰ Skeptics suspect that things are worse than the experts say on Iraq, on global warming, and corruption in government. Pessimistic contrarians believe that the experts are deliberately hiding the truth. They look at the world convinced that system and structure run everything; people matter but can never beat global capitalism.

The pessimists hold to the view that reform is always on offer but the political class's aim is to co-opt the opposition to put a stop to more fundamental change. Contrarians are often public intellectuals who don't trust official explanations, are chary of bureaucrats and media spin, and know how to dig in their heels to champion unpopular views. They see things from the perspective of the minority, the underdog, and the maligned. They ferret out misinformation and intend to hold the political class to account.

The contrarians represent a huge body of opinion with hard-core support among the young, the better educated, the alienated, and, particularly, the baby boomers who lived through the collapse of the golden age of Keynesianism. Many contrarians have quit electoral politics and don't vote. These anti-politician dissenters are actively reshaping political life for explicitly democratic ends. Contrarians are skeptics who have ratcheted up their criticism and now believe that their worldview is incompatible with the one presented by elites. They want more accountability for state spending, more transparency in war-making, and peace-making, and more democracy in jaded and spin-weary postindustrial societies.

Even though contrarians tend to be fatalistic about the possibilities for a better world, they are highly effective by working to limit market authority and subordinate political power to greater citizen oversight. With constant access to the World Wide Web, they don't give up on their causes easily. They are focused and committed and their attention span is far longer than that of most people. Some would call them obsessive and driven by fantasies of conspiracy and catastrophe, but in truth, contrarians like Will Hutton of *The Guardian* are always drilling down to find the nuggets of information that governments are withholding.

The iconic example of the full-blooded contrarian is Noam Chomsky, the spiritual godfather of dissent activism today. His ideas are radical and run counter to received wisdom at every turn.

In *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* published in 2003, for instance, he presents a devastating analysis of Bush's pursuit of total domination and the catastrophic consequences of US militarism. What's more, his abrasive style and in-your-face attitude cannot be kept in check by group pressure or public sanction. Contrarians like Chomsky and his like-minded disciples defy mainstream public opinion and convention. They thrive because liberal emphasis on agreement and acceptable public opinion misses too much. Because the cold warriors ignored so many warning bells in their rush to the end of history, the contrarian has plenty of ammunition to punch through the assumptions of elites and the hypocrisy of the political class.

Radical dystopians are self-proclaimed paradigm shifters who finger the "system" as the enemy. They are operating according to their own social gestalt and include men and women of conscience, anarchists, revolutionary socialists, and radical green activists. They are the shock troops of the anti-globalization movement with their slogan "Another world is possible."²¹ They have a Hegelian/Marxist belief that they can redesign society from top to bottom following a master plan of rational thought and collective imagining. Vast numbers of them are hard-core back to the earth environmentalists, international socialists, Trotskyists, Maoists, anarchists, and dystopic feminists of many different varieties. Radical dystopians have an enormous constituency in the under-thirty demographic. They also have a huge presence in the global south where their militancy finds an outlet in postcolonial struggle.

Their critique of global capitalism from a structural perspective provides a powerful vision for the angry activist who sees a linkage between racism, poverty, and globalization. Their apostolic zeal for poverty reduction and egalitarian redistribution spills over into the mainstream and often energizes less radical activists. Bono of the band U2 is an atypical example of how a mainstream superstar with his consciousness-raising feats can have a major impact on pivotal groups and individuals. Within their transnational networks, coalitions, and advocacy campaigns, the active localism of the radical dystopian has become the platform for new political initiatives on the supranational level. The World Social Forum is the "bigger than big" annual meeting place where tens of thousands

of anti-poverty, anti-racist, anti-war activists worldwide assemble to develop strategies and alternative visions to global capitalism.²²

Practical utopians are reformers who champion a system overhaul. Unlike the radical dystopians, they believe that the system can be saved, but it needs emergency surgery and a long recovery period. Practical utopians are often recognized as expert policy analysts and dedicated global actors. They are frequently hardworking, well-funded, non-governmental organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières, Oxfam International, World Vision, Amnesty International, World Wildlife Fund, Greenpeace, and Human Rights Watch to name only a few of the best known. They attempt to cajole, shame, and persuade governments to change policies that violate international law and human rights.

Their campaigns, especially those in Europe and the global south, have become a key element in mobilizing publics and public opinion worldwide. For example, global human rights organizations, church groups, and international lawyers have worked hard to mobilize public opinion on a number of high-profile human rights issue areas such as the Land Mine Treaty, and more recently systemic prisoner abuse in the “war on terror” in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Practical utopians not only keep the pressure on governments, but they are often instrumental in providing technical, legal, and moral leadership. They have a major impact on how people think about their local and national public authority and are unrelenting in calling for democratic accountability.²³ They want to “fix” a world gone wrong – make multinational corporations answerable before the law, create accountable institutions for the world economy, and ratchet up the United Nations as the world’s governing body. They are not revolutionaries; rather they are hard-nosed reformers advocating practical changes in everything from the environment, to global justice, to human rights, and beyond.

Demonstrating more and new forms of citizen engagement

Despite the sensational media coverage of post-9/11 hysteria, publics in postindustrial societies are becoming more inclusive, and they place a premium upon the values of tolerance, respect, and a

humanist impulse to fight exclusion. Following the murder of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands in 2004, Dutch voters frothed at the idea of radical Muslims in their midst, working to overthrow their moderate society. They voted in anti-immigrant politicians and adopted policy measures designed to admit “good” Muslims to the country and weed out the bad. Three years on, the hysteria has faded, and many Dutch people are sheepish about their experiment with xenophobia. They understand better the tensions of immigration, but are less inclined to abdicate their values for short-term and largely symbolic security gains.

In fact, publics across Europe are adopting the values of dissent faster than their elites and governments, and this has led to an increase in political malaise and a trend away from mass political participation. Based on data from surveys done between 1974 and 2000, Ronald Inglehart found, for example, that only about one quarter of the public had ever signed a petition in 1974. By 2000, a majority of people, about 63 percent, had signed a petition. In little more than twenty-five years, petitions had become something that a majority were familiar with and were willing to use to make their views known. The same is true of taking part in a demonstration. Only 9 percent of the people surveyed had taken part in a demonstration in 1974. By 2000, 21 percent of respondents admitted to taking part in this form of direct action.²⁴

Consumer boycotts are less confrontational than direct action, yet extraordinarily, fewer people have participated in these than in demonstrations. The numbers nevertheless show a persistent rise – from 6 to 15 percent. Dissent is now a mainstream activity in which ordinary people assert their preferences. The trend in the latter half of the twentieth century has been markedly toward what Nevitte has termed “the decline of deference.”²⁵ Significantly, Inglehart established that the decline of deference and the rise of defiance is most pronounced in Western societies. In post-communist countries, people remained more likely to defer to their elites and less likely to challenge existing power structures.

The postmodern compass of dissent reflects the ambiguities and certainties of our times. More people have access to higher levels of education, and it is not surprising that they have also become more knowledgeable about the issues that affect them at home and

in the wider world. Positions on the ordinals are fluid, matching our own ambiguous relationship to identity politics. In the past, activists imagined that their identities were forged in the crucible of political struggle. Today, political positions are the product of *self-styled identity formation*. You might be a corporate culture jammer as a sociology student in college then a political contrarian when you work as a business consultant later in life. The era of Western, postwar affluence in which we assumed that dissent was primarily driven by the young, the proletarian, and the idealistic is over. This gives the compass of dissent an enormous advantage because modern activism links generations, social classes, and even ethnic solitudes in new and innovative ways. With their emphasis on being strategic, ready to form coalitions, and accommodate people with very different views is it any wonder, with so many points of entry, that activism and contrariness have come of age?

The embedded axes of conformity

Communities on the right side of the political spectrum have a strikingly different set of ideas about the social responsibility of government and the distortions flowing from enlarged markets and global competitive pressures. They are linked to each other through their social values and societal ideas. But they are a different sort of counterpublic; one that makes use of digital strategies to defend the holy trinity of patriarchy, god, and country – my country right or wrong. They believe in the transformative potential of the economically interested individual, and paradoxically, the right to indifference. Everyone has the right not to care, even if it is socially harmful, as it is when conformists use their disinterest to propagate a form of not so benign racism and exclusion.

They also support highly intrusive forms of state authority, such as those seen most recently in the breakdown of civil liberties and a transfer of power to law enforcement in America. New forms of fundamentalism, militancy, and xenophobic patriotism have emerged from the fringe to occupy a large public space of global debate and discussion. They have thousands of websites, blogs, and chatlines and Robert Kagan, David Frum, and William Kristol are but a few of the media stars and public intellectuals setting the

agenda and marshaling the troops. At the core, conservatives of every stripe are conflicted about the inviolability of rights. Property rights should be expanded, but the right to privacy is something that the Arab tourist coming to the US or UK is not entitled to.

In the US, conformity is an industry unlike any other. The Hoover Institution, the National Review, the Mount Pelerin Society, the Chicago School of Economics, The Project for the New American Century, and the American Enterprise Institute have provided the US Right with its message of inspiration over the past twenty years. John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge estimate that conservative think tanks spent \$1 billion promoting conservative ideas in the 1990s to convince publics that conservatism is a politically and economically progressive creed:

The American right exhibits a far deeper hostility toward the state than any other modern conservative party. How many European conservatives would display bumper stickers saying "I love my country but I hate my government?" How many would argue that we need to make government so small that it can be drowned in a bath tub?²⁶

What makes every conformist movement so powerful, however, is its celebration of an ideological, knee-jerk reaction, which it terms "common sense." Thomas Paine, a giant historical figure for the American Right, would surely shudder if he knew that his public call to political consciousness would be twisted into a call to protect privilege and the prerogatives of the wealthy. In the conformist mentality, it is better to be white than black; better to be rich than poor; better to be skinny than fat; better to be Christian than Muslim – because these things single one out as separate from the herd. And once you have been culled from the herd, there is no protection from the terror of individualism. This is the great irony of neo-liberalism. Its accepted norms and practices are frequently at odds with its highest ideals and values. An aggressive belief in Western capitalism and support for the war against terrorism have created a virtual geography of conformity privileging private wealth creation, social conservatism, and laissez-faire liberalism. What are the modern ordinals of conformity?

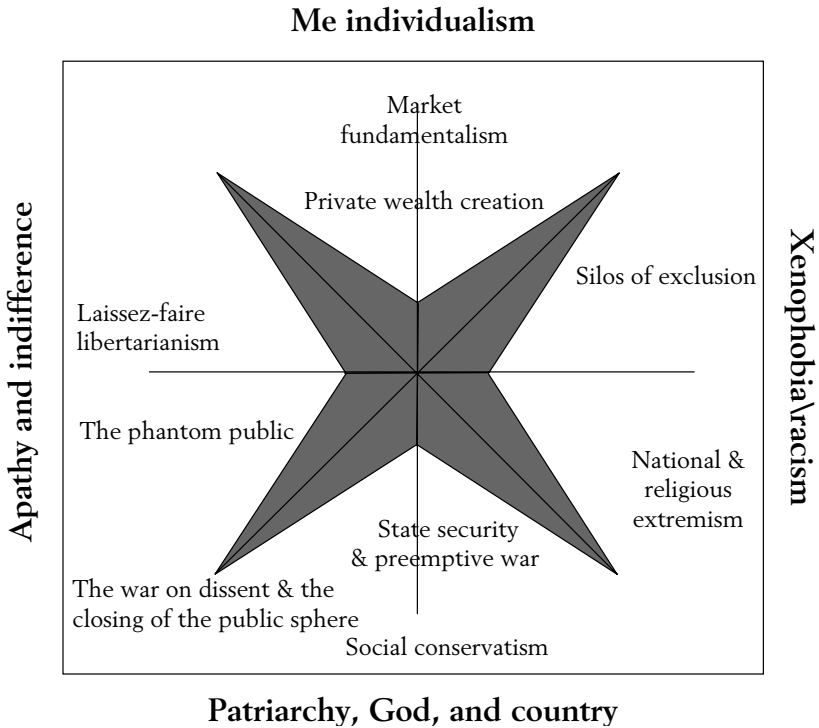


Figure 4.2 The embedded axes of conformity: me individualism

Source: Daniel Drache, Roberts Centre, 2007

Modern conformity and the culture of reaction

At one extreme of its axes is a very large group comprising the *distracted* and *disinterested*. They are not unhappy, nor are they disaffected with the status quo – quite the opposite. So long as the system takes care of their basic needs, they remain disinterested in politics, vote infrequently, and do not read newspapers. They are as likely to be professional, urban middle-class as small “c” conservative working-class. Margaret Thatcher, Jean-Marie Le Pen, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush junior and senior chalked up massive electoral victories by building highly effective, cross-class coalitions from these critical constituencies. In every industrial country, the

culture of conformity has its roots in smaller, urban centres outside the major cities. They are the silent majority of Middle America, the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) middle-class loyalists in Mexico, and the *pieds-noirs* from France's former colonies who feel marginalized by failed immigration policy, the fallout from globalization and the challenge of multiculturalism.

The materialism and hedonism that define conformist mentality are driven by a desire to appear too different, to not stand out – to be “normal.” The suburban need to “keep up with the herd mentality of the Joneses” is the example of this mentality that is a staple of modern sociology. In this cliché, consumption is driven not by personal desire for expression, but by the neurotic need to blend in. The critical safe path is to be socially invisible, and have other people admire you for your calculated ability to stay flush in the middle of the pack.

The socially disinterested at all times see themselves as separate from the political system, and their predictable social values are those of family and work. They tend to be reflexively politically conservative, have an obsessive respect for hierarchy, and an unshakeable belief that no matter who is in charge, the basically unequal nature of wealth and privilege never changes. Frequently they may not be wealthy themselves, but they are confident and take comfort from knowing that even though things won't necessarily get better, they probably won't get a whole lot worse. The person in the driver's seat – not them – is better equipped to run the show, whether through an accident of birth or dint of training, it matters little to the disinterested, disengaged citizen.

This mind-set bias to escape into distraction is not the luxury of the few; it is the lifestyle choice of many. Conservative activists do not push traditionally-minded people to look outward beyond their local solidarities and externalize their concerns and worries. Rather, they heap praise on the common sense of the mythic everyman who recognizes that his immediate concerns are those directly at hand. In the words of Ortega y Gasset, the iconic conservative thinker, “the characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them where ever they will.”²⁷

The disengaged citizen and traditional roles in society

The disinterested citizen's only responsibility, as far as they are concerned, is to follow their bliss, as long as it does not lead them too far from the world of home and family. They make their parochialism into a civic virtue in celebrating their inability to connect. You can see them congratulating themselves for being smart enough to recognize the deep implications of citizenship in a free society: everyone has the inviolable right to do nothing.

A large portion of this know-nothing-do-nothing attitude as much in view in New Delhi as New York must be attributed to the American-inspired culture of distraction that drives the global entertainment industries. If you do not like the world you live in, escape into the world of entertainment, personal hedonism, and Disney. The distracted and disinterested are convinced that they cannot make a difference in the world around them, and it is foolish to waste their efforts trying. Not surprisingly in many urban-dominated cultures in the capital cities of the world they slip into a lifestyle of feigned individualism and lifestyle ego-gratification.²⁸

The disinterested citizen exists in the middle of the social pack and draws comfort from the fact that all the big issues and choices do not filter into their cocoon. The *undecided and waverers*, however, are aware that in the Internet age traditional roles and behaviors are declining. Business, marriage, and fatherhood are no longer defined by a single template idea. The undecided citizen accepts that perpetual disinterest is a valid political position, but they are not sure that they are willing to entirely give up all of their control over public engagement in the way that the distracted citizen has. As a result, these people are more skeptical of the paternalism of conservative pundits, but they are also turned off by the excesses of dissent.

They do not identify with values of the literary set, whom they consider to be wealthier and probably less commonsensical than themselves. Nor can they imagine for a moment marching in a political protest. American pollsters lump the soccer moms and NASCAR dads into this category. They are conventional in every sense of the term, but they always are interested in the world their children will inherit. Their self-interest in the intergenerational

transfer of wealth and skills puts them into a special category that is neither non-conformist nor risk-taker. Sociologically they inhabit a sort of no man's land for a principal reason. They experienced the power of dissent in the 1970s and have the important digital skills that make a critical difference for researching the topics of the day. Often affluent, having prospered from investing in financial markets, they have benefited from more than a decade of wealth-creation. Still their curiosity about the political world around them drives the sales of bestselling summer novels and biographies of politicians. They are confident, but they do not like to commit themselves politically. They prefer to maintain their views in private rather than fly them in public.

Of course, the undecided and waverers do not want to be told how to think and what to be outraged about, so they stay away from the news channels owned by Rupert Murdoch. They want to think for themselves, yet they feel that global change has impacted their lives and pulled them in new and often unwanted directions ethically. They are anxious about the inability of public authority to provide a good education for their kids and affordable health care, and are worried about rising crime rates. Ultimately, they realize that if they cannot reason through mainstream ideas and simplistic concepts offered by the political class, they are gradually forced to look elsewhere to find answers to the issues that matter the most to their strongest social values: honesty, integrity, hard work, and independence. This category of conformity is thus influenced less by ideology and more by ideas than other groups. They are likely to be "values voters," voting a lying politician out of office or just as likely to be swing voters in a close election. In their natural form, they are the mushy middle, but once aroused they are a potent force.

In many ways this disgruntled middle is the political phenomenon of our times. Their numbers fuel the growth of skeptical and contrarian dissenting groups. In their respective countries, they are drawn to the tough-minded optimism of Lula (Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva) in Brazil, the magnetic personal populism of Tony Blair in the UK, the glasnost policies of Mikhail Gorbachev in Russia, and the grassroots networking of the Conservative Party in Canada.

Not everyone has the stuff to be an angry rightist. This huge sprawling body of opinion on the environment, the war in Iraq, poverty, homelessness, and corporate greed is so important that no politician can afford to ignore it. In the short run, doubters and the hesitant can be appeased and reassured by media smart and politically savvy leaders of the right, but once aroused, the undecided are extraordinarily wrathful. Waverers go one of two ways: either they allow themselves to be kept in the fold reassured by elites, or they take the next step and break with the conformist position venting their resentment at having been deceived and used by politicians.

True believers, conservative reason, and toxic extremists

At the other corner are the *true believers*. These are the hard and fast loyalists, the unapologetic defenders of hierarchy and authority, the bedrock aspirational values of the conformist belief system. In every way they are classical conservatives, inspired by Edmund Burke, always suspicious of the power exercised by the state. In every circumstance, these neo-conservatives will without hesitation choose liberty over equality. They are deep patriots rather than ideological nationalists. True believers are fundamentally committed to defending the hierarchical institutions that ensure maximum liberty with stable continuity. Like Burke, they are most distrustful and scornful of the liberal idea of the promise of progress. The Burkeian ideals of the positive benefits of social hierarchy, their much in view pessimism about the benefits of progress, and a religious-like belief in the superiority of the social value of elite-based politics are the broad organizing principles at the bedrock of conformist belief. It is not surprising to discover that the pundits of the Right are mostly earnest, serious, angry, white men who, if they do not claim expertise themselves, at least claim to know expertise when they see it.

Churchill once famously noted that the conservative “prefers the past to the present, and the present to the future.”²⁹ In many ways, they inhabit a closed mind-set in which there is no dynamic feedback mechanism; the neo-conservative Right is always living in its closed universe self-referencing its iconic thinkers from von Hayek to a Robert Kagan or a David Frum. There is no chance the true

believer will be “won over.” The social Right in the US has demonstrated no temerity in exploiting all of the global Internet’s possibilities for instantaneous dissemination and radical decentralization. It has thousands of informational sites, round-the-clock chat lines, and nervy, pushing-the-envelope, grassroots bloggers. Its roots can be traced back to the entrepreneurial ideal of self-reliance and hard work, but it also makes good use of the Puritan ethos of New World insecurity from the war on post-9/11 terrorism.

The irony is that anti-Semitism is a staple of conformism in Europe and conformists in America are rabidly pro-Israel. The US neo-cons attack the critical Left for having an anti-Israel bias. But intolerance of Muslims is rationalized and defended as just a “practical security consideration,” not the vile prejudice that it actually is. The Christian Right is also online and fighting hard for its place in the virtual cultural wars. These are groups for whom the bias of communication is a deeply unsettling reality because as it empowers online users to think for themselves it destabilizes their privileged social position on- and offline. They sound the alarm that something must be done, and they use all of the many strategic tools at their disposal, including money, time, the organizing tactics of the progressive Left, and the Internet itself to achieve their goal of status quo stability.

Toxic e-extremists inhabit the darkest corners of the Internet. Despite their radical proselytizing and aggressive rhetoric, they are the deepest conservatives and least in touch with reality. The toxic e-extremist believes, like fascists in previous generations, that society should return to a mythical past in which races were pure, the second sex was obedient, and the Old Testament patriarch was the highest attainment of masculine perfection. Of course, this dystopic vision unites extremists from all the monotheistic belief systems. Fundamentalist Christian back-to-the-land cults and Osama bin Laden share these ideas, even if they have little else in common.

These extremists inhabit a world of conspiracy, hate, and anti-social tendencies. They include but are not limited to the Christian nationalist white supremacist movement, the radical and violent Israel for the Jews movement, and the Islamist Jihad movement. In most cases, the most violent altercations today involve one or more

of these toxic extremists. These groups exploit the libertarian vision of a world without boundaries. The Internet has been a boon to them because for the first time in history, they can reach every person who was ever curious about their agenda or drawn to their hateful vision of the future. In every open system, there are evils that masquerade as individual choice. Toxic e-extremists want to destroy the social fabric and reweave it according to their own twisted visions. These anti-social elements are small compared to the larger fabric of the online universe, but they remain a significantly dangerous point on the axes of conformity.

Modernity's cultural conservatives: Their survival values

On balance what defines the modern culture of conformity? The conformist impulse always starts from a singular vantage point of looking back at the past with a nostalgic eye for inspiration and orientation. They believe that even though the past was not perfect, traditional ways are the only tried and tested road map for society – especially with the uncertainty and insecurity of the current age of globalization. Inglehart found that conformists are more likely to hold a number of what he calls “survival values.”³⁰ These values typify many of the positions on the axes of conformity, and they are starkly at odds with the “self-expression values” that fall within the ordinals of the compass of dissent.

Conformists are more likely than dissenters to believe that father naturally knows best and a man has the ingrained qualities that make a better leader than a woman; also that a woman's preferred role and choice is to have children if she is to be fulfilled, and foreigners, homosexuals, and people with HIV/AIDS are high-risk groups and make bad neighbors. Conformists are also more likely to fall into older ways of reasoning about the defining importance of employment. They are likely to agree that hard work is one of the most important things to teach a child, that when jobs are scarce a man has more right to a job than a woman, and a university education is more important for a boy than a girl. Conformists are generally more reluctant to engage politically with other people in public. They are more likely not to have attended a meeting or signed a petition for a political cause. They believe in

the need to be careful about trusting people. Overall, conformists seek predictability and security in traditional forms of gender inequality and a survivalist attitude to social relations. In seeking safety, they take refuge in a set of values that makes them feel paradoxically more vulnerable, and this feeds the conformist's mind-set and deepens her faith.

Not so long ago, the status quo used to be that governments prided themselves on their role as unifiers not dividers and their ability to speak for the nation, the national interest, and the good of the world in general. The Right has found that new technologies have expanded the possibility for identity and given new opportunities to spread the conformist message. Nevertheless, the way that new technologies have given a voice to the formerly marginalized toxic e-extremists has been counterproductive for many of the neo-conservative conformist movements trying to create mainstream cachet. After all, the conformist agenda has increasingly become a protest movement, much like that of dissent, but they are in the strange position of being a disloyal opposition. The hard-line neo-conservative conformists are caught between the dissent movement and mainstream public policy. Even governments recognize that the status quo is no longer good enough. Their collective influence of rigid faith-based politics is being leached away to the centre Right, the undecided and waverers who are disillusioned by the war in Iraq, the perils of climate warming, and US-sanctioned torture. They have lost much ground to the growing effectiveness of the social movements on the compass of dissent.

Moral authority and dissent

Compared to a decade ago, the neo-liberal culture of conformity is increasingly embattled and on the defensive across the globe. Skeptics, contrarians, and whistleblowers of all kinds have a new legitimacy in a world in which conformity to the economic dogma used to be so pervasive. This confirms what social theorists have always recognized: societies need a system shock when political and economic arrangements become increasingly dysfunctional and when the rules of the game are no longer perceived by the majority as fair and even-handed. It needs a clear-cut course of action and

requires a political theory to challenge conformist thinking about the possibilities of economic participation and social inclusion.

Such a theory has a necessarily pessimistic view of power. Publics have always recognized that power, if unchecked, corrupts its possessor. The relational power of publics is the power to disseminate one's ideas in ever widening political arenas. This form of power is only held vis-à-vis other activists and networks. In that particular regard it is the most decentralized sharing of power resources and is perhaps closest to resembling Nancy Fraser's concept of a public system of checks and balances, a necessary part of the process of creating alternatives. It is a maddeningly slow kind of political mobilization. Incremental change occurs through a thousand small victories (or defeats) by micro-activists at the local level and the periodic breakthroughs of transnational movements such as those that occurred at the iconic "battle in Seattle" or the signing of the international treaty outlawing landmines.

There are two phases to the big debate about "things public." The first phase, which has recently come to an end, considered whether the shrinking of the public domain worldwide was constitutive of a diminishment of democratic society. In this phase, disgruntled publics, dissenting activists, and skeptical public intellectuals won the day. Dissenters are now valuable political commentators, and their contribution adds depth to political debate. Ten years ago the currency of skeptical high-profile economists like Dani Rodrik of Harvard and Robert Hunter Wade of the London School of Economics traded at a lower level than it does today. Elites dismissed them as pessimistic gadflies who did not understand the new world order. Today, their intellectual transgression has been reinterpreted as prescient observation. Even the new conservatism is willing to embrace the non-conformist's impulse to interrogate received wisdom. In conversation with the philosopher Michel Onfray, Nicolas Sarkozy was eager to impress prospective French voters with his dissenter's credibility, stating "I believe in transgression . . . because freedom is transgression."³¹ Dissent has become an essential counterpoint to the mainstream discourse of law, security, markets, and private accumulation.

The second phase, still underway, focuses on the global outcomes and possible local solutions available to democratic activists

and global publics. Experts are now engaged with an in-depth analysis of the potential impacts and outcomes of the compass of dissent and the attempts by activists to “rally the public,” in Michael Warner’s apposite words.

Dissenters stand in sharp contrast to neo-liberal faith in the market’s universalizing qualities. Nevertheless, no single group is in a position to control the public’s agenda any longer. Economic determinism has had to surrender the middle ground in most jurisdictions. Normative ideas about economics and the role of the state have reappeared in public policy making. In virtual politics there is no single command and control center. The battle for public opinion is intense, fluid, and unpredictable. Gradually, the market excesses of the neo-liberal system have roused global publics from the cynicism of conformity to collective engagement. Infinite varieties of public discourse have not led to the fragmentation of politics, nor has this cacophony of voices become unintelligible to the informed listener. Dissenting publics have begun to exercise their reasoning ability and the result is a tsunami of ideas and options for fixing the relationship between publics, states, and markets. Who is listening? Everybody.

Notes

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2. John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).
3. Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 177.
4. For an examination of the politics and visual power of the iconography of dissent, see the Counterpublics Working Group reports, at www.yorku.ca/drache.

5. Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).
6. Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of Political Distinction* (London: Polity, 1996).
7. Philip Armstrong, Andrew Glyn, and John Harrison, *Capitalism Since 1945* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
8. John Gray and David Willetts, *Is Conservatism Dead?* (London: Profile Books, 1997).
9. David Cauter, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1978).
10. Frank Furedi, *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?* 2nd edn (London: Continuum, 2006).
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12. Christine Newell, "A Working History of Médecins Sans Frontières: Changing the Face of Humanitarian Aid," Summer 2005, at www.med.uottawa.ca/medweb/hetenyi/newell.htm.
13. Seyla Benhabib, *The Rights of Others: Aliens, Residents and Citizens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Amnesty International is the most renowned trust and human security organization. See www.amnesty.org/.
14. The Canadian political theorist Charles Taylor has defined this field with his path-breaking work on the politics of recognition. See Charles Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition. Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), and "Democratic Exclusion (and its Remedies?)" in *Citizenship, Diversity and Pluralism: Canadian and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Alain Cairns (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999).
15. A good example of this kind of thinking is Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006). Jane Jacobs's work on cities and neighborhoods is rightly celebrated; Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).
16. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000).
17. James Rosenau, "The Relocation of Authority in a Shrinking World," *Comparative Politics* 24:3 (April 1992), pp. 253–72.

18. Benjamin Barber, *Fear's Empire War: Terrorism and Democracy* (New York: Norton Publishers, 2003).
19. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2000).
20. Scott Lucas, *The Betrayal of Dissent: Beyond Orwell, Hitchens and the New American Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).
21. One of the many writers from the "nixer" position is the highly regarded developmental economist, Susan George. See Susan George, *Another World Is Possible, If . . .* (London: Verso, 2004).
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23. James Rosenau, "Changing Capacities of Citizens, 1945–95" in *Issues in Global Governance: Papers Written for the Commission on Global Governance* (London: Kluwer Law International, 2003), pp. 1–58.
24. Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See in particular chapter 5, "Value Change Over Time," p. 122.
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27. Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (London: Unwin, 1962, original edn 1930), p. 14.
28. Hal Niedzviecki, *Hello, I'm Special: How Individuality Became the New Conformity* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 9.
29. Quoted in Micklethwait and Wooldridge, *The Right Nation*. p. 13.
30. Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization*. See in particular chapter 5, "Value Change Over Time."
31. Michael Onfray in conversation with Nicolas Sarkozy, *Philosophie Magazine* (Spring 2007).