

7 Pathway to balance

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Communism, capitalism and populism are three ways to take a country out of balance, in favor, respectively, of their public sector governments, private sector businesses and certain plural sector communities (Mintzberg, 2015).

Few countries remain communist. In 1989, many of those regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed under the dead weight of their own imbalance. In contrast, at the time, most of the democracies of the West maintained a relative balance across the three sectors. But the mistaken belief that it was capitalism that had triumphed – brought down communism – has enabled exactly this to happen in many of these countries ever since.

The United States has led many of the “liberal democracies” toward a dangerous imbalance in favor of private sector interests. And this has, in turn, given rise to the countervailing power of narrow populist interests that have seized power in recent years, whether religious (as in Turkey), class (as in Venezuela) or nationalist (as in Hungary).

Accordingly, few countries today maintain relative balance, and most of these are small – for example, Denmark, New Zealand and Switzerland. Indeed, countries with less than about ten million people comprise 14 of the 22 countries listed as “Full Democracies” on the *Economist’s* 2019 Democracy Index.¹ With so much imbalance in the world today, especially in all three of the established superpowers, major problems continue to fester, globally and locally. These include income disparities, the spread of corruption in government and business, climate change and widespread anger and angst amidst many populations.

A number of easy fixes are being promoted to deal with the imbalance. None are working. Heroic leadership at the “top” is one: Find the person who will resolve the problems, only to discover that so much heroic leadership turns out to be autocratic or impotent. Formidable government planning is another: We have the nonsense of officials elected to four-year terms making decades-long plans to deal with climate change. Perhaps most popular, especially in the failing liberal democracies, are proposals to fix capitalism, what

can be called adjectival capitalism: Progressive Capitalism, Breakthrough Capitalism, Caring Capitalism, Conscious Capitalism, Inclusive Capitalism, Regenerative Capitalism, Sustainable Capitalism, Humanistic Capitalism and, most curious of all, Democratic Capitalism (capitalism being the noun, democracy the adjective).² Fixing capitalism will no more fix our broken societies than would fixing communism have fixed the broken societies of Eastern Europe. It is our societies that need fixing, by acting now to restore their balance. A pathway to restore balance is illustrated in Figure 7.1, leading from rejuvenation to reformation. We now have more social initiatives and social movements for constructive change than probably ever before in human history (Block, 2008), most of them in what I call the *plural sector*. It is just that their efforts are scattered, while the forces for self-interest work in concert. For the cause of balance, plural sector associations will have to get their collective act together.

What is this plural sector? It comprises a wide variety of mostly community associations, owned neither by the state nor by private investors. Some, called cooperatives, are owned by their members, others are owned by no-one, as in many trusts, hospitals, universities and NGOs, as well as the social initiatives and social movements mentioned above.

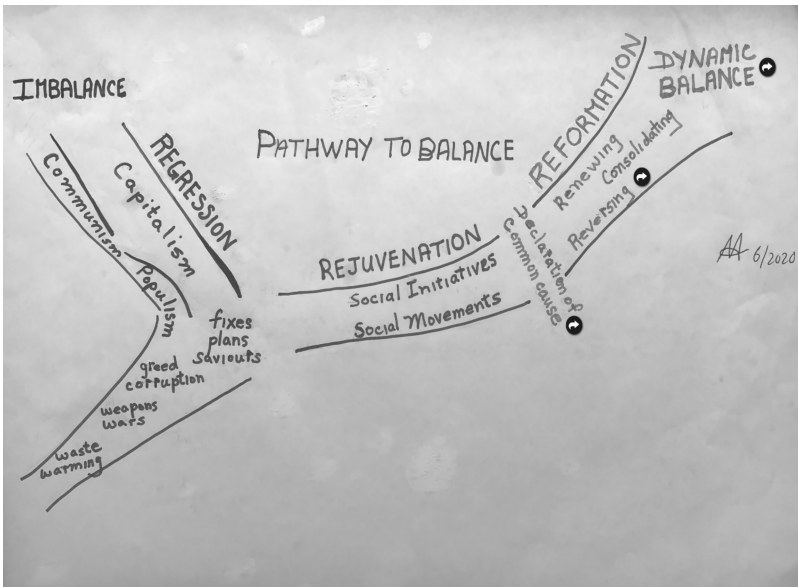


Figure 7.1 Pathway to balance

The sector is vast, yet obscure, having been lost in the century-old debate between left and right, public and private. Calling it *plural*, instead of the usual confusing mixture of inadequate labels (not-for-profit sector, third sector, civil society, etc.) can help it take its place alongside the sectors called *public* and *private*, especially to drive the kind of social change that we require.

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as President of the United States, was asked by an activist to support a social change, he replied: “I agree with you, now go out and make me do it”. It is community groups in the plural sector, acting in concert, that make the authorities do it. These days, people can join together locally, in community groups networked globally, to challenge discredited authority, and offer more balanced alternatives in its place.

Interestingly enough, the most appropriate model for the change we require now may be that which occurred in 16th-century Europe. In 1517, an obscure monk named Martin Luther posted on the door of a church a one-page statement that challenged the corruption of the prevailing religion. This went quite literally viral within weeks, thanks to the new social medium of the time – the printing press: Luther’s students carried the message to surrounding towns. What we now call the Reformation thus began from the ground up.³ Today, likewise, a compelling statement of common cause could be the spark that begins the reformation we require. A group of us has developed a “Declaration of Our Interdependence” (2020) to suggest what form such a statement could take.⁴

Can some equivalent to reformation happen now, on a global scale? The deterioration of our climate is happening now, on that scale, as is rampant corruption, private and public, legal and criminal. Democracy is deteriorating now, far and wide, putting many people at risk from tyrants, and everyone at risk from nuclear weapons under the control of loose cannons. We have no choice but to engage in reformative change now.

We face an unprecedented puzzle, one that has no pat pieces that fit together neatly, nor does it come in a box with a cover that shows the vision to be constructed.⁵ Pat solutions, however common, do not work for unprecedented puzzles. We have to create the pieces in the first place and then learn how to fit them together, one by one, to make an image that we have not seen before. In other words, we have to learn our way to a new vision, for a world where individual, communal and collective needs function in a dynamic balance, a world where universal collaboration will trump global devastation.

After I published *Rebalancing Society* in 2015, readers came back with one question above all: “What can I do?” I began a search for possible answers, and discovered there are so many, alongside some I added myself, that I drew them into a table,⁶ according to what can be done personally,

together in our communities, in our businesses, in our governments and altogether.

The plural sector is not “them”. It is *you*, and *me*, and especially *we*, acting in concert – not as human resources serving the imbalance, but as resourceful human beings in the service of our progeny and our planet.

Notes

- 1 “Democracy Index 2019: A year of democratic setbacks and popular protest”. A report by *The Economist* Intelligence Unit. The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, 2020. www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index.
- 2 “Getting past the adjectival capitalism fix”, <https://mintzberg.org/blog/getting-past-adjectival-capitalism-fix>.
- 3 “Consolidation for Reformation”, <https://mintzberg.org/blog/consolidation-for-reformation>.
- 4 <https://ourinterdependence.org/>.
- 5 “Going public with my puzzle”, <https://mintzberg.org/blog/going-public-with-my-puzzle>.
- 6 A table of activities for rebalancing. <https://ourinterdependence.org/table-of-activities/>.

References

- Block, P. (2008). *Community: The structure of belonging*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler.
- Declaration of Our Interdependence. (2020). *The Declaration of Our Interdependence*. Retrieved from <https://ourinterdependence.org/>
- Mintzberg, H. (2015). *Rebalancing society: Radical renewal beyond left, right, and center*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.