

How to change the United States of America

Change USA— Research Professor of Global Peace Studies, Howard Richards fielded audience questions in his presentations about cultural economics across California on the heels of the 2004 US Presidential election. Since WW II and, to a lesser degree, the past one hundred years, the global economy has been largely the creature of the USA. Therefore, change must begin here in the economic superpower, which is propped up by its military stick as fed by its ravenous population. Please note that a few of the Q&A here may overlap with that of the [Q&A as...](#) [FAQ](#) document found on the same web site.

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Q. What is it about the USA that needs to be changed?

A. The system as a whole, known also as the social structure and the dominant paradigm, must be restructured by way of a new or existing model that works.

Q. Does calling the USA —America— exclude the rest of the hemisphere in an ethnocentric manner? A. Yes.

Q. Can I obtain a copy of the slide show?

Answer: You can obtain the Power Point presentation via email from [Julie Bruns](#), the Peace Studies secretary at Earlham College. [[Another economic world is possible](#)]

Q. What do you see as wrong with the US system?

A. The following are the inherent flaws of the US as its

1. exclusions that leave many in poverty, in jails, in unsafe neighbourhoods or simple rejected
2. insecurity that makes most people dependent on income that may not continue
3. instability as its addiction to deficit spending as a crutch for an economy always on the verge of collapse from lack of market demand
4. utter physical un-sustainability.

Q. Why did you omit violence from your discussion of the ills afflicting the USA?

A. Because the inability to build a predominant culture of peace is a consequence of the four structural problems as noted.

Q. What prevents the US from solving its internal problems and cease being a rogue state with something less drastic than a system-change, such as changing its foreign policy in the Middle East?

A. Because events such as the war in Iraq and US policy in the Middle East in general do not just happen independent of the context that is systemic structural failure. The main underlying causes of such events are the various systemic corruptions. Intelligent action requires the understanding of causes and effects, which requires moving beyond the tendency of social scientists either to accept mechanistic models of cause or to reject the concept of cause altogether. For more on this read my book, *Understanding the Global Economy*, visit ...

Q. How is famine preventable when we live in a culture that is based on living in excess? —People worldwide have become obsessed with material wealth as power as exemplified by the modern US lifestyle. If the US model of excess, waste and resource-depletion becomes the standard by which the majority of the world seeks, then how is there enough for all people and the Earth's ecology?

A. Part 1: The rational person would choose what Buckminster Fuller called: A world that works for 100% of humanity without ecological damage. A rational person would choose that over the world as it is currently structured by its dominant paradigm. Three keys to building such a world are, in my opinion, bicycles, roommates, brown rice and lentils. Stated in abstract terms as 1) resource-efficient transportation 2) resource-efficient housing and 3) eating low on the food chain from local small farms and in avoidance of food that is too industrial, too hazardous.

Part 2: Sadly, people's choices are often irrational or, if they are rational, they follow what Herbert Marcuse recognized as—irrational rationality. People do not rationally choose to be the change they want to see in order to contribute to a world they want to live in. Instead, they choose one commodity at a time, often guided more by impulse and advertising than by reflection and philosophy, ending up with gross carbon emitters such as SUVs, single family or single person houses in the suburbs, fast food and sugar.

Part 3: Thus, a need exists for social movements to promote conscious consumerism, to educate for rational choices that will lead to a sustainable and healthy world. It just so happens that Dagny Tucker, one of the students in a class I taught at the European Peace University, has just finished a masters thesis—How to promote conscious consumerism, which she likely will forward to you.

Part 4: Sadly, conscious consumerism is in conflict with the systemic imperative of the dominant paradigm. That is why the people promoting—Buy nothing day—are denied national TV ad time. TV executives realize that rational consumer choices would wreck the system. The programming of the hearts and minds of the world's people to be obsessed with material wealth is not just a philosophical error: it is the imperative of a system that must have the accumulation of profits to keep it going. Thus, a paradigm shift to an ethical paradigm is vital. Without the shift (really a transformation) in the systemic imperative of the existing global economy, slogans like — live simply so that others may simply live — would, if widely followed, lead to such phenomena as the collapse of share prices on stock markets, more mass unemployment, more militarism to keep the system going, and likely some form of fascism.

Q. Will some other system work for us? —I do not mean a system as possible in the abstract if we could raze the US and build a new, from scratch. I mean, how can we start from where we are now, as history has formed us, to build a country that is inclusive and secure as stable and sustainable?

A. The possible alternative in the US is a patchwork social democracy as stitched together from the legacy of Roosevelt's New Deal, the evangelical liberating philosophy of Dr. King, the American penchant for voluntary associations noted and praised by Alexis de Tocqueville and the pioneer spirit as currently manifested in a series of post-materialistic counter-cultures. Think of FDR in a fireside chat broadcast live from the "Little House on the Prairie" announcing that Oprah Winfrey has been named Rotarian of the Year.

Q. What specific work for change do you think we should focus on? How can we change the system soon enough to live at peace as responsible members of a global security community, before we are bankrupted and/or nuked because of our nation's present effort to fight violence with violence?

A. We do not have to wait until 2008 to start. Systemic-change will be largely other than a government project as the initiative of civil society. If we work hard to build a series of visible counter-cultural movements, then maybe as conditions gets worse the majority of Americans will see the need for constructive change. On my web site, you can see a list of thirteen specific things each of us can do every day for peace and justice. We need some regulations to implement this paradigm shift. We need group concerted efforts with commitment and purpose. Since Kerry lost, people may be willing to consider a progressive alternative because they will blame Bush for the hard times that would have come anyway no matter who was elected.

Q. Why is a patchwork of social democracy a system-change and not just the same old capitalism that is making us insecure at home and a menace to the rest of the world?

A. The reason is that a social democracy, in principle, will meet human needs. Markets, profit making and property rights are means, not the ends assumed by the mindset of the unbridled growth imperative. Social democracy revises and supplements markets, profit and property as needed. The principle of it is thinking outside the box, the opposite of rigidity. It leads to a crazy quilt of public and private cooperation as the pragmatic dynamic—whatever works. Labor unions are strong and wages are high, but business is not threatened because it either can afford to pay good wages, because of administered prices or an ethic of equity, or it can serenely file Chapter 11 bankruptcy and reorganize, or in some other way it can get a

fresh start with public help. Structural employment is accepted—the illusion of full employment in high wage economy created by Keynesian macroeconomics is outdated—but there are numerous nonprofit groups and state and local agencies, which see to it that the lives of the structurally unemployed, are dignified and enjoyable. Life-long education is the name of the game. Losing your job means retraining and a shot at a possibly better and more interesting job somewhere down the line. Everybody is included and cared-for, not by one giant federal agency, but by many public and private institutions, for example, the most famous of the old-fashioned institutions: the family.

In a social democracy, the quest for rent is not anathema; instead, rents are captured by charities and public agencies and channelled to valid ethical uses. Every corporate charter and mission statement commits the corporation to serving set of responsible social and ecological objectives. Everybody recycles. There is no need to import oil because we managed a transition to a world where millions do not need to commute in cars on freeways every day to get to work. There is a substantially reduced and manageable systemic imperative to prevent unemployment from soaring, because when unemployment soars the unemployed will fly through the sky for a while and then enjoy a soft landing in civil society.

In a social democracy, taxes are not out of sight because when we no longer depend on war and domination to stabilize our economy we can make peace with the rest of the world. Private sector business happily does what it has always done, trying to make a buck while paying the wages and taxes it has to pay. Now we know how to solve in other ways the problems that are left over after private business has made its contributions: through the public sector and the nonprofit sector and a myriad of hybrid social inventions.

Q. Why is this freewheeling feeding at the public trough and multiplication of public-private partnerships and charitable foundations not a recipe for a kleptocracy and inefficiency? What is to keep it from ending up like the former Soviet Union—mired in nepotism, influence peddling, organized crime, empty rhetoric that few believe, featherbedding, bribery, cynicism, laziness and endless subsidies to businesses that neither make profits nor achieve any worthwhile goal?

A. It will work only with spiritual ideals and moral education as consciousness is raised. Fortunately, the moral education movement is gaining ground every day in our school systems. We have three ways to stave off the corrupt-ocracy and inefficiency:

- a high level of practice of Rotarian ideals—honesty, goodwill, fairness to all concerned and service to others.
- The iron rule of discipline as regulation, civil and criminal action upon competitive markets;
- Plans that are efficiently administered by technocrats. The possible alternative to the disastrous course we are now on is an ad hoc learn-as-you-go synthesis of all three, with the emphasis upon the first.

Q. How do we start bringing forth the needed revamping of our system?

A. At this point [2005] the task is mainly educational, as the USA is now becoming more polarized. The radical right is in charge, leading the country to disaster. The progressive left has no tangible concept of a feasible alternative.

Q. What do we do after we are educated?

A. Identify needs and mobilize resources to meet them.

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