Talk One: Why We Don't Join Institutions Anymore.

by Robert Sweetman

This is the first of two addresses by Bob Sweetman given at the ICS Worldview Conference titled "Another Brick in the Wall" on September 27, 2008 in Oakville, Ontario, Canada.

My privilege today is to provide a number of vivid images and a story of two that will hopefully engineer a discussion about the challenge of being a faithful people of God in a post-ideological world. There is a central mystery that will weave in and out of my images and stories. It is that human creation we name using the weightily Latinate word "institutions." What do we mean by that term?

Here comes the first of our images. If one watches young children on a playground one sees just what is required for them to figure out what they are going to do together. They spend a great deal of time and energy establishing the rules and then challenging, defending and interpreting them. This is especially true the more play is free flowing: when the games are being dreamed up on the fly and do not come with preordained rules and practices.

Once children have decided on the rules, they can actually play the game. As long as they all buy into the rules and the way they are operating in the actual play of the game, all proceeds smoothly and efficiently. However, once the rules are successfully challenged, say, by a new group of kids joining the game, play stops until a new consensus can be achieved or they run out of time. If, on the other hand, a consensus on rules hardens and is sustained over multiple play sessions the time spent figuring out and interpreting rules or defending them from new challenges shrinks almost to nothing. It is then especially that one realizes what an achievement uninterrupted play represents.

I suggest that we think of institutions as something like hardened consensus around the rules for different kinds of social functioning: economic, political, educational, religious, recreational, etc. Without such institutions, without such hardened consensus, the social interactions of people must be ordered on the fly and that takes enormous social energy and time. This is especially so when the interactions persist across human generations because they organize perennial dimensions of human community—child rearing, dispute resolution, skill acquisition and so on.

Institutions, then, pattern social behavior so that groups do not always have to figure out how its participants are to act vis-à-vis each other and the social functions they are to perform together. Institutions preserve default positions with respect to a wide range of social and cultural practices. In so doing they bank social energy that can then be spent on the practices themselves or on exploring new practices when the old ones no longer serve the common good. In this way, institutions are the battery cells of human culture.

This image should let you see that institutions are a social good. It should also suggest that societies really can't do without institutions if they are to act effectively rather than disagree endlessly about how to act. Still, if institutions are in principle instruments of our social good, that is not how we tend to think of or experience our most successful institutions these days.

On the contrary, we live in a culture that suspects its most expansive and successful institutional arrangements. We point our suspicions in many, often conflicting directions: at big government or big business, at the media or big labour, at distanced ecclesiastical hierarchies or ivory tower intellectual establishments. You see, we have noticed a thing or two about these institutions: 1) they are very large; 2) they are very complicated and are therefore hard to negotiate a way in, through or around; 3) they change things quite apart from what we think of the changes, and 4) they are nearly impossible to avoid in the ordinary course of our lives. British band Pink Floyd had a talent for such suspicions when it sang of the things that wall people in. About each one of the expansive institutions we have learned to distrust it could be sung: "All in all, it was just another brick in the wall."

At the same time, we often say that *the world* in which these institutions expand is getting smaller. Certainly the global economy advertises world-shrinking in its very name. And that name points to a vast array of electronic, market, and financial instruments, an internationalized "Western" culture with its ubiquitous media and ever changing yet ever the same style sheets. Maybe the world seems smaller because under the global impact of its most expansive institutions, we human beings all seem to have come to look and sound the same: in the same boat, plying the same glacier fed and rising seas, wearing the same cloths, humming the same pop and praise tunes, speaking the same pidgin or "international" English?

Older, more organic forms of community—extended families, stable and culturally distinctive neighborhoods, traditional faith communities, to name some obvious examples— fade in power and reality. They seem archaic, even when we recognize strengths we dearly wish to preserve in our changing present. It is almost as if the old forms exude an Amish charm to be admired when thought of but generally ignored.   Their place is taken by newer forms of association: e.g., workout gyms and other shared-interest clubs, mall-culture or as its "alternatives," ethnic celebrations and New Age spiritualities. The new forms strive to fill the void opened by the fading of the old and yet seem weightless, somehow lacking the heft to anchor our lives. In addition, the newer forms, because they are globalizable and often globalizing via franchising, become associated with the expanding institutions we are suspicious of and feel ourselves to be largely ineffectual against. It is hard not to feel caught betwixt and between. How are we to understand our dilemma?

Here is a thesis I would like us to think about for a while: *Our social institutions and habitual arrangements are often ill-fitted to the shape of our present experience. They are habits, practices, and institutions that were forged in a world we increasingly experience as past, to purposes we no longer clearly remember or have learned to feel abashed about.*

Pink Floyd can be heard making a similar point if its "Daddy" is understood to be my "the world experienced as past:" The group sings: "Daddy's flown across the ocean/Leaving just a memory/Snapshot in the family album/Daddy what else did you leave for me?/Daddy, what'd'ja leave behind for me?!?/All in all it was just a brick in the wall./All in all it was all just brinks in the wall."

How did we get to this point? And what have been the implications of getting there? I am a scholarly storyteller. I have a story in five chapters to tell in response to these questions. I

wonder if it might help? Later, we'll try and see by looking briefly at new political patterns before the break and then look at the institutional church in greater detail this afternoon. In the back of our minds we should have this question: Must our institutions always be just more bricks in the wall.

Chapter One: The Establishment of an Ideological Age, 1350-1850

Our story begins in Europe as stories of Western culture do. Europe long understood itself in terms of unity: one king, one church, one faith and baptism. By 1850, however, Europe came to accept, grudgingly and only after much bloodshed, that her societies contained and could be said to be made up of multiple communities. By the later Middle Ages she acknowledged her division into multiple states. The Reformation added competing Christian sects. The French Revolution entrenched competing social classes, while the Industrial Revolution and the failed revolutionary movements of the late 1840s did the same for economic classes. As a result, by the second half of the nineteenth century, Protestants, Catholics, socialists, Marxists, liberals, monarchists increasingly jostled each other about as they competed for attention and allegiance within Europe's many societies. They were going to have to script their interaction and channel it in pacific directions.

Competition between these several human groupings came to centre more or less around distinct and incompatible visions of the flourishing human life. These visions could be drawn from different sources: religious, philosophical, artistic, or scientific. But, for political purposes they were articulated as if they were a vast logical deduction emanating from a single, guiding Idea. This self-consciously conceptual way of presenting a communal vision of life is what I mean by the term "ideology." Ideologies were thought to be able to compete on a level playing field, because they all claimed and looked to have the same rational structure and coherence. Of course, as said, the visions themselves were drawn from various, sometimes incompatible sources. The organization of an ideological vision as a deduction from a single, guiding Idea then involved both a translation and a purifying or rationalizing, i.e., a diminution of the communal vision's mixed and messy resources.

Each ideological community worked to mobilize popular support for its vision so as to extend its sway society-wide via disciplined communal action. Great effort was invested in the construction of institutions. Institution-building was, in fact, understood to be key, for institutions were seen to be the most effective means to organize and deploy communal energy and activity in a wide range of social situations: political parties for politics, school systems and universities for civic formation, labor unions and chambers of commerce for economic life, hospitals for health care, farmer's federations and cooperatives for rural stability, media networks, newspapers, artistic guilds for cultural development.

The institutions they built were made for competition. They were made to defend a community from external threat and thereby endowed with the power to enforce or coerce communal solidarity and a fixed identity. They were also intended to act as jumping-off points for attack. That is, they were structured with a universalizing drive or better a competitive impulse to grow at the expense of the competition until they dominated the whole of the society or social sector within which they existed.

Chapter Two: Ideology, Institutional Transformation and Social Conflict, 1850-1950

After 1850, some institutions of impressive antiquity lost their way in the new ideological situation. They were unable to adjust to the new world and passed away. The duel, for example, long an instrument within the political culture of the European aristocracy was reduced to the fictional world of the adventure novel. Other institutions adapted to the new situation. Many European monarchies, for example, were transformed by constitutional and democratic constraints. As this example illustrates, much older institutions could be brought into play in the new, ideological ethos. They could even play a leading role in the struggles between competing ideologies and the communities that embraced them. For example, churches became the central institution of a number of such ideological communities in the last half of the nineteenth century: the Catholic Church in many parts of Europe and the Reformed Churches in several other parts, most notably The Netherlands.

One society after another accommodated itself to the simultaneous existence of several ideological communities in its midst by reorganizing to a pattern that achieved its most self-conscious form in The Netherlands of the first half of the twentieth century. Ideological communities were positioned to exist side by side in vertically organized institutional "pillars" that together supported what might be called "the shared roof of the social edifice." By roof, I mean the national political institutions where communal political leaders found ways of accommodating each other in service of societal peace. Interaction between members of the separate pillars was limited, except at the political level where it moved between antithetical polemics against the vision of other communities and backroom compromises in service of governance. Whereas the Dutch developed the most self-conscious form of 'pillarized' society, less explicit forms developed in most other Western European countries, forms that were able to maintain themselves, more or less, into the third quarter of the twentieth century.

But to say that European societies avoided permanent revolution is not to say that the communities did not come into conflict. Rather, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century conflicts between competing ideological communities striving to realize incompatible communal visions of societal flourishing became ever more intense. Indeed, one could say, if rather grandly, that the competition bubbled over into disastrous "world wars" twice in the course of the first half of the twentieth century.

Chapter Three: North American Society and Ideology

While the pattern of the story so far works well for nineteenth-century Europe it works less well for nineteenth-century North America. Two features of the North American experience worked against European patterns in the society of the New World. In the first place, there was a sense that grew very strong by the first half of the nineteenth century that Europe was a tired civilization best kept at bay. This, it seems to me, is the thought behind the proclamation, in the early years of the American Republic, of the so-called Monroe Doctrine committing American administrations to restrict where possible European involvement in New World affairs. In the second place, the sense of North America as a limitless vastness that provided individuals and their immediate loved ones the room to make their own lives tended to work against the formation of the ethnic, religious and class sensitivities that were so important in the European experience. This sense of limitless possibilities and the space for individuals to make their own lives fed what has been termed the Frontier Mentality

within the American and indeed the Western Canadian experience. The point is that features of the North American experience worked against the formation of strong and competing ideological communities *within* the North American polities of the United States and the Dominion of Canada, at least after the conclusion of the American Civil War. Indeed, the North American experience of ideology throughout the period from 1865-1950 was a largely vicarious experience, one fed by immigration, elite cultural Europhilia, and in the Dominion of Canada's case by her post-colonial participation in the British Empire and its European struggles.

The emergence of the United States of America as the leader of the so-called "Free World" in the aftermath of the Second World War forced her to rethink her long habitual isolation and involve herself deeply in the European experience. In response, she successfully transformed her native emphasis upon individual autonomy and opportunity into an ideological attachment to capitalism, the antipode to the communist ideology of its chief political competitor, the Soviet Union of Socialist Republics. What I am suggesting then is that Americans (as opposed to Canadians) joined the ideological struggles of European society late in the game, ironically, just when her European allies were beginning to lose faith in ideology as a positive vehicle for the hopes and dreams of her many communities. In giving herself over to ideology, however, the United States opted for a different pattern. Rather than recognize and choreograph the interaction of multiple ideological communities within its political jurisdiction, the United States attempted to construct the whole of itself as a single ideological community and with the hope that it could extend its community beyond its borders to include the societies represented by its far flung allies and perhaps eventually the world. Two North American Christian communities, however, have tried to work for a recognition of competing ideological communities within the societies of Canada and the United States, I am speaking of reformational Christians within the Reformed world especially in Canada and the Christian Right in the United States. Both of these communities have spent great energy building their church and para-church organizations into the central institutions of respective ideological communities or pillars, the first under the influence of the Reformed experience in The Netherlands that provided them their memory and model, and the second in order to fight the 'Culture Wars' out of a sense that American society enfolds two ideologically divided communities, the one religious and conservative, the other secularizing and liberal. We will return to this a little further on.

Chapter Four: Losing Faith in Ideology, 1950-2007

As I said earlier, the competition of ideological communities and visions for dominance within European states reached its climax in Europe's two "World Wars." The self-destruction was enormous and unbearable. People of all ideological persuasions began bit by bit to lose faith in the communal visions that had seemed to guide them to such catastrophes. This loss of faith was at first covered over by the outbreak of the "Cold War." The worldwide competition between the United States of America and its allies, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union and its allies on the other lasted, as we know, well into the second half of the twentieth century ending only in the 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union. What must be realized however is that the fall of the Soviet Union was long preceded by a general loss of faith in the communist ideology. Ordinary Soviet citizens ceased to study Marxist theory with any enthusiasm. Party membership became a matter of social advancement rather than conviction. Increasingly, the Soviet leadership was viewed as

corrupt, as power mongers, who used their position to enrich themselves and their dependents at the expense of the public good. The energy and reality granted to the political structures by the allegiance of the populace dissipated, the reality of the Soviet state and the social meaning it gave political form to was hollowed out until only a shell remained that crumbled with shocking swiftness.

The Western world of the United States and its allies declared victory, of course. In the intervening years they have taken on an ever more expansive and imperial demeanor, politically, to be sure, but especially economically. The capitalist ideology that captured the American polity especially in the context of the Cold War has appeared to dominate ever more of the world of the millennial change. Globalization is the name we give to this progressive expansion. The institutions of the one ideology left standing can be seen to expand with little resistance as they were designed to do, were they to emerge from ideological struggle victoriously. And these institutions are, note well, precisely the institutions that we suspect for their size, complexity and difficulty, their coercive force and their unavoidability.

The vigor of capitalist institutions in the post-Cold War years and their triumphant rhetoric has covered over the fact that there has been a subterranean hollowing out of ideological conviction and hence reality in capitalist societies as well. Capitalist habits have become ever harsher and narrower, less obviously human and humane. To cite but one potent symbol: the maximization of profit has come to be interpreted in business practice as the short-term maximization of profit, using globalized markets and their electronic instruments to shift capital at a moment's notice to places and businesses that offer greater profit margins, now, no matter what the cost to the enterprises and human communities suddenly bereft of the resources until that moment invested in them. Capitalism as it is practiced has become ever less a vision of human flourishing and more explicitly a doctrine of self-enrichment—a caricature of capitalism in earlier, more socially oriented formulations. Political leaders of the capitalist world too are increasingly thought of as corrupt and self-serving, eager to enrich themselves at the expense of the public good. Lacking a credible alternative, the citizens of capitalist nations become like their formerly communist counterparts slowly more cynical and disbelieving. Is it impossible to imagine a coming together of circumstances in the capitalist heartland that would expose the hollowness of this last great ideological edifice?

 In short, in the years after 1950, ideology has consistently given ground to other types of social understanding and intention. Slowly the habits of ideological thinking weaken and the communities such thinking made possible fade.

Chapter Five: Ideology, Post-ideological Incredulity and the Modern/Postmodern Divide

In an earlier chapter we noted that institutions had been central to the constructive efforts of ideologically motivated communities. They were thought to be the concrete bearers of people's hopes and dreams. So it is not surprising that attitudes toward institutions and institutional life would change in the wreck of ideological thinking. In many places, as the memory of the original rationale for this or that institution has sunk below the level of public awareness, public disenchantment with the preceding age has come to focus more and more upon institutions themselves. Institutions have come to be viewed as a central social

problem. They are now experienced by many as crude and unresponsive. It is not that the previous age thought of institutions as subtle and responsive. Nevertheless, ideological resentment functioned as a spur either to co-opt the offending institutions or to replace them with new institutions better able to function in light of one's ideological vision. By contrast, today there is a widespread assumption that institutions perpetuate themselves regardless of the concrete needs and wants of flesh-and-blood individuals and groups. Moreover, with the fading of ideological visions, the means of achieving institutional purpose, i.e. power, has come to be felt on a deep level to be the very point of institutional life. One of the most successful social theorists of the late twentieth century, Michel Foucault, bears witness to this new institutional focus. His researches struggle to circumscribe the play of power within our institutional arrangements, the pattern of control imposed on people and the voices muffled and lost in the process. Slowly, we come to suspect that institutions just are soul crushers.

Given what institutions are, the new wisdom goes, we need to restrict our involvement as much as possible. Human flourishing demands the creation of forms of community that are as uninstitutional as possible. And by "uninstitutional" is meant forms of community that are 1) small, 2) simple and transparent, and 3) responsive and undemanding: the very inverse of the most successful and aggressive institutions of our present experience. 'Think global, act local' is an apt summation of the new communal wisdom. No more bricks in the wall.

The story's last chapter marks out I am claiming our present ethos, for better or worse. We get a small confirmation of this when we look at emerging patterns in politics and political engagement. What we see above all is that younger people who are politically engaged are eschewing party politics as never before (though for a moment at least it seemed as if the Barak Obama campaign would give the lie to this part of my analysis). Youth apathy has drawn the attention of the media and other monitors of political behavior; it has become a worry for the leadership of traditional institutions of political life.

Indeed, a great deal of empirical work has been done that suggests Western societies face a civic crisis brought on by the contemporary disengagement of youth from traditional political and civic institutions and activities such as voting, party membership and the like. Many researchers point to high levels of youth political cynicism, a low level of political interest, an underdeveloped sense of civic obligation. Robert Putnam's work has argued forcefully for a pessimistic assessment: "Young people do not just refrain from party politics, but also from civic engagement, membership in voluntary associations and various forms of formal and informal interaction."

Many scholars resist Putnam's conclusions. They have claimed that though the strained relationship between youth and traditional political institutions is undeniable, "this should not be taken to mean that young people have lost interest in politics and public affairs. Rather, they prefer more informal ways of participating in politics, espousing more lifestyle-related and loosely structured forms of civic engagement (Hooghe, 332 summarizing O'Toole 2003)." These researchers argue that Putnam's picture changes if one redefines what constitutes political and civic engagement. A wide number of "new" forms of participation are actually on the increase among persons born after 1970. They point to youth councils, youth hearings, local community actions and boycotts, political consumerism (politicized buttons, clothing etc.), single-issue politics, peer support groups, particularly those that use the new electronic technologies. Indeed recent Canadian studies have noted an inverse

relationship between youth voter turnout and volunteer activity (Bell, 2005, 8). As voter turn out rates fall, participation in alternative modes of politics increases. Indeed, Ellen Quintellier cites a 2004 American study that makes the point in these words: "Scarcely audible amidst the hubbub over piracy and pornography and the clamor of the media marketplace, a low-profile civic upsurge—created for and sometimes by young people—has been taking root on the Net. Hundreds of websites have been created to encourage and facilitate youth civic engagement, part of an emerging genre on the Internet that could loosely be called 'youth civic culture' (2)."

The Canadian researcher, Brandi Bell has surveyed Internet sites and the political culture they express. The sites encourage youth "to think of themselves as citizens of both their local communities and nations, as well as citizens of the globe. Through youth-led projects at the local level, youth engage with their local communities, but also connect with other locally-based projects to create larger national and global networks of youth working with internet technologies." The marks of a post-ideological political behavior with its disengagement from the institutions most profoundly shaped by the needs and tactics of the ideological age, i.e., political parties and the formal franchise, are clearly in evidence. Moreover the most innovative moves being made with an eye to political engagement create structures that look little like those of the age of ideology. Rather they tend to be small, flexible, with a concrete local focus but using technology to tie local activism into a virtual global network. This is of course not only true of the new civic initiatives among western youth but chillingly also those of militant Islam. Think global, act local indeed.

That's the story. If I read youth political culture aright it points to institutional forms that look nothing like the coercive and globalizing forms inspired by modern ideology. Does that have something important to say to us as we face the challenge of institutional life in an increasingly post-ideological age, or are we still just talking about bricks in the wall?