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The Pendulum Swings

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To state the perfectly obvious, the 21st century will be very different from the 20th. The 20th century was characterized by resource abundance (or so it seemed at the time); value was added in transactions, business was stable and predictable, clear boundaries existed between industries, markets went from businesses to consumers, and information was somewhat limited.

But the pendulum of commerce is clearly swinging in the other direction now. Resources are constrained (energy and capital today; human resources tomorrow), value is in relationships rather than raw materials, everything is in a state of flux, entire industries disappear and new ones emerge, markets are networks, and we are flooded with information.

There is a curious (but totally understandable) phenomenon in which political and social groups try to hold back the swinging pendulum, calling up the fear of the unknown. But if history is any guide those efforts are as fruitless as trying to cling to feudalism was in the 15th century. The forces of social economics are stronger than any group's desire to maintain the status quo, or—more to the point—its power and status.

What we think is even more interesting, however, is the corresponding shift in power and influence from “institutions” to “community” that we are witnessing today.

Let us explain that a bit. An entire set of social institutions grew up during the 20th-century economy. We had public schools for education, government bureaucrats for control, armies for protection, churches for our spiritual life, and regulated (or so we thought) markets for commerce. Today, in contrast, people don't trust those institutions as far as they can throw them—highlighted of course by the social/economic meltdown of 2008-2010 (which we humbly suggest represented an almost complete failure of those very institutions).

We're not going to trot out page after page of data to support that contention, but if you want to pursue it on your own, you might want to start with these two websites:

- ◆ [The Municipal Research Services Center of Washington: Trust in Government](#)
- ◆ [CBS News: Trust in Government Nears All-Time Low \(February 16, 2010\)](#)

“The Google” is indeed a marvelous research assistant.

But back to community organizations as the most important 21st-century social organizing force. People are increasingly turning to community groups, from Charter Schools to local Chambers of Commerce and neighborhood associations to virtual communities of like-minded folks, to gain control of their lives and bring some degree of structure to an

otherwise confusing, ineffective, seemingly unjust, and highly uncertain world around them. The incredible self-organizing force that the Internet played in the last U.S. national election cycle is probably *the* harbinger of this phenomenon, followed closely by the rise of extremism and even violence in public discourse.

That's what is all a-twitter (pardon the pun) about "social media." Simply put, humans are now (finally) learning how to use technology to organize themselves to get things done and make life more tolerable. The institutions that we created for the 20th century no longer work. Think about that the next time you see a dinosaur.

[Please send your comments directly to us.](#) We look forward to learning from you.

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