

Vermont's Genetic Code

Toward a Decentralist Manifesto

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In his 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, author Robert Putnam ranked Vermont above all other states on his scale of “tolerance for gender, racial, and civil liberties.” At about the same time, political scientist Tom Rice ranked Vermont first among states on a “civil society” measure published in *Publius*, the leading professional journal of American federalism.

Such rankings are not new. Praise for Vermont’s unique civic virtue has been extensively documented. Vermont is an exceptional place regarding values most dear to those who appreciate humankind’s need for a living nexus between liberty and community. Why is this?

The answer is critical to all those patriots committed to navigating Vermont’s independence from the federal government. The answer rationalizes our instincts, electrifies our commitment, and sustains our courage. The answer lies deep in our sinews, our genetic code. Established by the Republic of Vermont in 1777, it arose from the first English constitution to outlaw slavery and to allow people without property to vote. The code was evident when Ethan Allen issued America’s first Emancipation Proclamation—a “writ of freedom” for two African Americans (mother and daughter) found at Fort Ticonderoga, when it was captured by Allen in 1775, while gunfire from Lexington and Concord still echoed through the hardwood hills of northern New England. The code was recognized a year later by General John Burgoyne, who wrote in his diary while sailing down Lake Champlain to defeat at a place called Saratoga: “Vermont abounds with the most rebellious race on the continent and hangs like a gathering storm on my left.”

This genetic code is called human-scale democracy.

But how was this code sustained over the two centuries that have since passed? How did it survive the second half of the industrial revolution—the two most vicious centuries the world has ever known, ending with the hierarchical, totalitarian industrial horrors of Hitler and Stalin? Vermont escaped hierarchy and its attendant authoritarianism because of geography and climate. We were born cold, rocky, and isolated (the only New England state without an opening to the sea). The historian Arnold Toynbee, in his *Study of History*, dismissed Vermont as being above the optimal climatic area of the continent. He had a point.

During the heyday of urban industrialism, no American state had more people scrambling to leave than Vermont. This period is called Vermont’s “dark age” by historians. In 1950, Vermont was the most rural state in America. We had a tiny state capital, the population of our largest city was less than 35,000, and a greater percentage of Vermont’s citizens lived in places of fewer than 2,500 people than any other state. Vermont had been “left behind.” This turned out to be a blessing.

In *The Vermont Papers: Re-creating Democracy on a Human Scale*, John McClaughry and I explained what we called the “leapfrog theory.”

Vermont never had what most Americans are longing to be rid of. [We] developed a unique set of historical circumstances that pivot around one critical event: the state leapfrogged urban-industrialism, ignoring the astounding transformation of American society that took place in

the years between 1830 and 1960. The result is a state that is already free and clear of the twentieth century.

In short, the Dark Age “cocooned” Vermont. When the state entered the postwar period, it did so with its land green, its civil society preserved, its communities small, its democracy secure. Most important, its human-scale karma, its genetic code (while worn and tattered here and there) is still fundamentally intact. Vermont was the United States’ best civil society because the variables that shaped it originally survived the twentieth century.

Why Vermont? The reasons abound. But fundamental to them all is this: None of the world’s political structures (unitary states like France or federal states like America and its subunits, like Vermont) is more democratically governed at its roots than Vermont. Why is this so? Two words: town meeting. A bold claim to be sure. But true. Consider the words of Ferdinand Lundberg in his *The Myth of Democracy*, an exhaustive historical review of the absence of democracy in the world’s great nations from ancient Athens to modern America. “Here [in the town meeting] more than anywhere else one finds democracy at work.” In fact Lundberg notes that the town meeting is the only case of real democracy he has found, saying that when the Old World transplants in colonial New England created town meeting, it was “the first time ever in the history of the world” democracy was systematically practiced. And he might have said as well (with a tip of the hat to Maine and New Hampshire): no New England state still practices town meeting democracy—the real democracy the Greeks attempted but failed to realize in Athens—as well or as thoroughly as Vermont.

Thus it is that the fundamental reason many of us are joining together to discuss and promote the peaceful separation of Vermont from the United States is because of what we already are. We are at the core a real democracy and it is this grassroots democracy that now sustains the best representative democracy in America—featuring one of only two governors that must seek reelection every two years and a legislative body of 180 members representing less than 650,000 people. If the United States were comprised of fifty “Vermonts,” the American Republic would be alive and well, not sinking into an abyss of disgusting politics, inhumane public policy, and increasingly authoritarian governance. And we would not be secessionists.

But it is equally true that the Second Vermont Republic will not survive as a republic (a representative democracy) without the strong foundation of real democracy that has sustained it for over two centuries. Vermont without town meeting might in some ways still be a good place. But it would never be Vermont.

Let us therefore, as the first (albeit “unofficial”) act of the Second Vermont Republic, agree to make sure that the Second Vermont Republic emerges with the single most important institution of the first Vermont Republic intact—alive, well, and growing in influence. It is what Jefferson called “the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government.” Town meeting.