

Continuity Is Power

Once upon a time, the nation-state and the joint-stock corporation were new and small. The Church, the family, the tribe, the town, the land (kept by farmers), the wilds, and even small businesses (craftsmen) – in short, the things of humanity – were far older.

While this was true, these institutions were more powerful than the state or the corporation. But what remains of these old institutions now?

They have been weakened by a philosophy of newness which insists that people (this an insight from a recent listening to Wendell Berry) leave the family farm, renounce the tribe, live hundreds of miles from their families, forsake the family business. This is considered normal (“small town kid goes to big city”, “man charts his own way” etc.) and even encouraged as part of “chasing dreams” and “pursuing progress.” The old institutions rely on transmission from generation to generation, and if every generation leaves (even if it comes back in old age), what will keep them?

The irony is that the people who leave these human institutions in search of “freedom” go to work for corporations and the state, which seem to be the only entities gaining in resilience and continuity these days. The people staffing these institutions come and go, but in real terms these institutions continue gathering strength.

Continuity is power. Whatever lasts the longest holds the largest sway over the human mind.

Maybe the only reason they are dominating is that we are leaving the other human institutions. Maybe if we returned to “staying” and serving we wouldn’t have to serve the new empires.

We’ve only been a few generations without continuity. It’s still possible to imagine going back, and it’s still possible to return and cling to the communities and institutions and places that make us different, singular, and free. But we have to do it while the memory of a different way of living is still with us.