

The Temporary Society

What Is
Happening to
Business & Family
Life in America

Under the Impact
of Accelerating
Change



WARREN BENNIS
PHILIP SLATER

The Temporary Society

Jossey-Bass Publishers
San Francisco



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Revised edition published 1998 by Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers. This book was originally published by Harper & Row, Publishers.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bennis, Warren G.

The temporary society / Warren G. Bennis, Philip E. Slater. —

Rev. ed.

p. cm. — (The Jossey-Bass business & management series)

Includes index.

ISBN 0-7879-4331-2

I. United States—Social conditions—1945– I. Slater, Philip Elliot. II. Title. III. Series.

HN58 .B43 1998

306'.0973—ddc21

98-19731

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface to the Revised Edition

Prediction is a democratic pastime. In authoritarian societies there is little call for it—life is static, change is slow, innovation is tightly controlled, and, on the rare occasions when it occurs, change is announced from above. The wild guesses about the future so popular in our society are meaningless when “the future”—what little there is of it—is funneled through the tiny orifice of centralized authority, which disapproves of attempts to anticipate its leaden decisions.

A democratic society is a complex, confusing, erratic, and continually evolving organism that grows in all directions at once. Making one’s way in it calls for an extraordinary degree of alertness, sensitivity, and flexibility. Predictions are made and altered daily as the evolutionary winds shift.

Authoritarians are not happy with this spinning weather vane we take for granted. They want an iron rooster that points every day in exactly the same direction. They don’t want predictions; they want predictability. They want to control the uncontrollable, which is why they are so obsessed with disciplining the most spontaneous products of nature: children, animals, and all growing things.

In the past this obsession with control had support from science, with its constant search for “predictability,” that is, the certainty that would render “predictions”—guessing the future—unnecessary. But with the advent of the Uncertainty Principle and Chaos Theory, science has now irrevocably committed itself to the democratic camp,

to the realization that life, nature, the world around us, all have an agenda and we are a part of it, not the master of it, and must meet it on its own terms.¹ Democracy is not about control. It is about attunement.

Most of us grew up in bureaucratic organizations that were dominated by a command-and-control orientation. This approach was memorialized by the prose of German writer and sociologist Max Weber, who was the first to bring to the world's attention that this bureaucratic machine model is a genius of social invention, designed to harness the manpower and resources of the nineteenth century. Bureaucracies are characterized by strong divisions of labor, narrow specialization, and hierarchies, with lots of levels. Most organizations today still have that kind of command-and-control, macho mentality.

If there are three words that best describe the mind-set of that paradigm, they would be *control*, *order*, and *predict*. The words yield an interesting acronym: COP.

The organizations of the future will resemble networks or modules. The successful ones will have flattened hierarchies and more cross-functional linkages. The three words that best describe the mind-set of this paradigm are *acknowledge*, *create*, and *empower*. Those words also yield an interesting acronym: ACE. Given the speed and complexity of change in our society, which affects all management environments, we have no alternative but to move away from COP toward ACE.

The predictions we made in the first edition of this book have come to pass. We said that the Soviet Union would collapse and that by 2018 democracy would encompass the globe. We seem to be well on our way to realizing that state. Most of the authoritarian nations that still exist are backward and poor, as we would expect. Those that are not, like China, are being forced to inch toward democracy, though kicking and screaming all the way. The trend cannot be stopped except by war, for war is the primary reason authoritarianism exists.

For us such predictions seem easy and obvious—much like predicting that spring will follow winter. It might not, of course. An asteroid might hit the earth and knock the seasons out of whack. By the same token, diehard authoritarians might manage to create a global war—always the most feared enemy of democracy. But short of this, the movement toward democracy seems inexorable for all the reasons we have given.

One of the reasons some people have trouble grasping this inevitability is that many of them think of authoritarianism as a “natural” state. After all, it has dominated the planet for the past 6,000 years and permeates our myths, religions, languages, and habits. But for millions of years before that, human beings were hunter-gatherers living in small democratic and egalitarian groups. When we take this larger view, authoritarianism is only a little blip in the lifetime of our species. It arose with the advent of large-scale agriculture and animal husbandry, when the need for large tracts of land and the manpower to work them made slavery economic and organized warfare appealing. But with the emergence of global communication, a global economy, rapid technological change, and planetary consciousness, authoritarianism no longer makes sense. Slavery is uneconomical; war merely destructive; and the old habits, values, social systems, and ways of thinking they gave rise to have become obsolete and counterproductive.

Our prediction was based on the fact that technological change has accelerated to the point that no rigid autocracy can contain it. War—the principal means of accumulating both public and private wealth in preindustrial times—now serves that function for only a few individuals and consistently weakens societies that embrace it. Centralized systems tend to be rigid; they consistently fail to adapt to changing conditions—often shooting the messenger that warns of their approach. They are like the turn-of-the-century tycoon who locked his luckless heirs into streetcar stock “because people will always need transportation.” Democracies—despite their sloppy appearance—are more efficient in the face of change because they

maximize the impact of those who are not overcommitted to the status quo.

We can predict the spread of democracy but not the direction in which it will lead us. If you think you know where a democracy is heading, you have a fundamental misunderstanding of the form. Democracy continually reinvents itself; it is a process, not a product. Authoritarian systems always have a set goal, a fixed end point, a utopia to be realized, a depot at the end of the track. But democracy is experimental; it proceeds by trial and error. For after all, it is only through errors that we learn, and democracy, if nothing else, is an education.

What follows is essentially unchanged from the original work, except that we have made some of the language more current and added updates at the beginning of each chapter; these reflect our thoughts and reactions to the events of the last three decades. As in the original work, Chapters Two and Four are by Slater; Chapters Three, Five, and Six are by Bennis; the first chapter, like this preface, is a joint effort.

May 1998

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Santa Monica, California

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Preface to the Original Edition

Prediction is a risky, difficult, and unrewarding activity in any time, and forecasting social trends even more so. To engage in such an endeavor in a world of unprecedented complexity during changes of unparalleled rapidity is as absurd as it is necessary.

This book is an attempt to relate a few dimensions of modern society—democratic systems of social organization, chronic change, socialization, and interpersonal behavior—to place them in some temporal perspective and to try to envision future combinations. The theses advanced are both exploratory and circumscribed. We have not tried to put forward a grand overarching and inclusive model, like [Marshall] McLuhan, nor have we tried to analyze exhaustively the vicissitudes of one or two manageable variables. We have tried simply to stretch the boundaries of our knowledge by forcing our available resources into domains of the greatest ambiguity.

The history of our collaboration is reflected in the book itself, but its roots go back somewhat earlier. Bennis's ideas about industrial organization and democratic leadership were developed in the late 1950s. Slater's ideas on the relation between democracy, change, and family patterns stemmed from research on role differentiation and on attitudes toward the aged. These parallel strands were combined in our first collaboration, "Democracy Is Inevitable," which, in revised form, appears here as Chapter One.

The attention attracted by this paper and its frequent reprinting encouraged us to extend further the approach attempted there. Each of us delves more deeply in the following chapters into those areas of the original article that he knows most thoroughly. Chapter Two deals with the impact of change and democratization on the American family, and Chapter Three traces this impact on human organization. Having come together and been informed by the collaboration, we each returned to our initial interest and pursued it more or less independently.

In the last two chapters, we intersect once more. Slater carries forward the ideas first advanced on the family in Chapter Two and widens its relevance to the styles of relationships that will become more dominant—nonpermanent relationships. In Chapter Five, Bennis attempts to outline the agenda for leaders and managers of the new-style organizations (adaptive organizations) and to indicate how these new men of power can reach their goals.

We write this book with one main goal, and that is to force into view certain changes affecting vital aspects of our key institutions: organizational life, family life, interpersonal relationships, and authority. The theme that is common to this interweaving is a serious concern with the nature and future of our society and a desire to free ourselves from the restraints of traditional preconceptions and stereotypes about social institutions. Without this perspective, however distorted, we have no chance at all to will and shape our future; we can only back into it.

February 1968

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The Authors

WARREN BENNIS is University Professor and Distinguished Professor of Business Administration and founding chairman of the Leadership Institute of the University of Southern California. He has written twenty-five books, including the best-selling *Leaders* and *On Becoming a Leader*; both have been translated into nineteen languages. The *Financial Times* recently named *Leaders* as one of the top fifty business books of all time. In 1993 Addison-Wesley published a book of his essays, *An Invented Life: Reflections on Leadership and Change*, and Jossey-Bass republished his path-breaking book *Beyond Bureaucracy*. Over one million copies of his books are in print.

He has served on the faculty of MIT's Sloan School of Management, where he was Chairman of the Organizational Studies Department. He is a former faculty member of Harvard University and Boston University, former provost and executive vice president of State University of New York at Buffalo, and former president of the University of Cincinnati. He is a recipient of eleven honorary degrees and serves on the boards of Claremont University Center and the Salk Institute. The *Wall Street Journal* named him as one of the top ten speakers on management, and in 1996 *Forbes* magazine referred to him as the "Dean of Leadership Gurus." His latest book is *Organizing Genius: The Secrets of Creative Collaboration*, published in 1997 by Addison-Wesley.

PHILIP SLATER was professor and chairperson of the Department of Sociology at Brandeis University until he left in 1971 to become a freelance writer. He is the author of nine books of nonfiction, including *The Glory of Hera*, *A Dream Deferred*, and the best-seller *The Pursuit of Loneliness*. Although his novel *How I Saved the World* was voted one of the ten best books of 1985 by the San Diego Union, he remains loyal to Northern California.

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Democracy Is Inevitable¹

Today the inevitability of democracy might seem obvious, but in the mid-sixties, when we first argued that democracy would eventually dominate in both the world and the workplace, a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union seemed more likely than a McDonald's in Moscow.

It all started because Bennis had seen a common thread running through the most exciting organizations of that time: as the once absolute power of top management atrophied, a more collegial organization was emerging where good ideas were valued—even if they weren't the boss's ideas. We became convinced that democracy would triumph for a simple but utterly compelling reason: it was working. It was, and is, more effective than autocracy, bureaucracy, or any other nondemocratic form of organization. We went on later to develop these ideas more fully: Bennis through his extensive work on leadership and organization,² and Slater in an exploration of democracy's cultural and psychological underpinnings.³

In international politics democratization is a very recent phenomenon, albeit a profound one. A decade ago Nicolae Ceausescu had the power to ban birth control in Romania and require that every typewriter be registered. The state even regulated the temperature of Romanian households. The collapse of his regime was even more remarkable for being so long in coming.

The democratization of the workplace has made fewer headlines but has been no less dramatic. In the sixties participative management

was considered so radical that some of the Sloan Fellows at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology accused Bennis of being a communist for espousing it. Today most major corporations practice some form of egalitarian management. The pyramid-shaped organization chart is going the way of the Edsel.

The change is pervasive. Self-managed work groups are replacing assembly lines in auto plants. Organizations as disparate as Herman Miller (the manufacturer of office furniture) and Beth Israel in Boston have adopted the democratic management techniques of the late Joseph Scanlon—one of the first to appreciate that employee involvement is crucial for quality control. At Hewlett-Packard's facility in Greeley, Colorado, most decisions are made not by traditional managers but by frontline employees who work in teams on parts of projects. Even project coordination is done by team representatives, working on committees known as "boards of directors."

No longer a monolith, the successful modern corporation is like a Lego set whose parts can be regularly reconfigured as circumstances change. The old paradigm that exalted control, order, and predictability is giving way to a nonhierarchical order in which all employees' contributions are solicited and acknowledged and in which creativity is valued over blind loyalty. Sheer self-interest motivates the change. Organizations that encourage broad participation, even dissent, make better decisions. Rebecca A. Henry, a psychology professor at Purdue University, found that groups are better forecasters than individuals are.⁴ And the more the group disagrees initially, the more accurate the forecast is likely to be.

We said that adaptability would become the most important determinant of an organization's survival and that information would drive the organization of the future. This seems even more true today. The person who has information wields more power than ever before. But although we sensed how important processing technology would be, we didn't fully appreciate the extent to which the new technology would accelerate the pace of change and help create a global corporation if not a global village. New York Life Insurance, for example, processes its claims not in New York or even the United States but in Ireland. And a decade ago, when Bennis invited the Dalai Lama to participate in a seminar for CEOs at the University

of Southern California, the embodiment of thousands of years of Tibetan spiritualism graciously declined by fax.

Our crystal ball let us down in a few other areas. We failed, for example, to foresee the extraordinary role Japan would play in shaping U.S. corporate behavior in the 1980s. The discovery that another nation could challenge U.S. dominance in the marketplace inspired massive self-evaluation and forever disrupted the status quo. Nothing contributed more to the democratization of business than the belief—true or false—that Japanese management was more consensual than U.S. management. To meet Japanese competition, U.S. leaders were willing to try anything—even share their traditional prerogatives with subordinates.

More surprising is our failure to anticipate the women's movement—a failure reflected in the gender-biased language scattered throughout the original book. For while the women's movement was only embryonic in the sixties, we of all people might have been expected to comment on it since nothing could have been a stronger validation of the points we were making. We said that those who are not overcommitted to the status quo are in the best position to take advantage of change and innovation, and this certainly applies to women, who have pretty much been excluded from the authoritarian hierarchical structures that have dominated human existence for the past 6,000 years. As men were squeezed by authoritarian culture into the emotional corset of macho competitiveness, it fell to women to take care of all other human needs—emotional expression, relationships, cooperation, nurturance, and so on. They were forced to become skilled at diplomacy, mediation, negotiation, compromise, recognition of the needs and rights of others, and so on. But these are precisely the skills that are needed in a democracy. Men who practice democracy tend still to be caught up in the belligerent assumptions of the authoritarian past: they talk constantly of “standing up to” and “not being swayed by” and “not giving in to” and being “firm” or “tough,” as if rigidity were a virtue and problem solving a form of hand-to-hand combat.

Men have committed themselves to an individualistic, linear, competitive, atomistic, and mechanistic conceptual world—one which they now dominate. But ironically, science—once the most

extreme expression of this world—has now rendered it obsolete. Recent advances in physics and biology have opened up an entirely new conceptual universe.⁵ The cosmos, scientists have begun to realize, is not a mechanism constructed of little particles that can be taken apart and put together—it is a gigantic unity of which the significant elements are *relationships*.

In the past men disparaged this way of looking at the world as “magical thinking,” typical of women, children, and the inhabitants of nonliterate societies. But now it has become the accepted conceptual framework as we enter the next century. Nature, it seems, is relentlessly nonlinear, and those who fail to recognize this simple truth are destined to be left behind, mired in an antiquated mind-set.

Women are better adapted to the confusion and chaos that chronic change, democracy, and the new sciences together produce. Their control needs, on average, tend to be less exaggerated than those of men, who like to dominate their environment and make it simple and predictable. Women are more comfortable with the chaos that small children generate and are better able to cope with several different processes at the same time. The traditional housewife trying to cook, clean, and shop while noisy children were racing everywhere received optimum training for democratic living.

Some will object, of course, that women who become corporate managers do not necessarily exhibit these traits but are often more controlling, rigid, competitive, and authoritarian than men. This will be true as long as women are a small minority in a “man’s world,” having to prove they have traits they are not expected to have—having to show they are “tough” enough to do the job. In the same way, blacks who have succeeded in the same situation have often had to be “whiter” than whites—more conservative, uptight, restrained, and so forth. Once a group ceases to be a rarity, this need to over-conform to tradition eases.

In the first edition we predicted that industrial nations would eventually be forced to democratize, and this prediction has been borne out. Democracy movements in satellite states such as Poland and Czechoslovakia, as well as in capitalist countries like South Korea

and South Africa, continue to demonstrate the long-range incompatibility of modern technological innovation and authoritarianism.

We also predicted that dictatorships would characterize developing nations in their early stages, and this, too, has been borne out. While the more viable states of Latin America and Asia are being pushed toward democracy, most third-world countries still find themselves mired in autocratic regimes. Yet even in Africa—plagued in recent decades by war, famine, and poverty—signs of change have been observed: “After decades of trying to impose centralized systems, governments [are beginning to] allow businessmen and villagers to take the lead . . . Democracy has softened dictatorial rule in a score of countries. Although flawed and often fixed, elections allow harsh criticism of leaders who once stifled any hint of dissent.” And in a rare reversal of the macho ethic that has helped keep so much of Africa enslaved and impoverished for so long, Senegalese President Abdou Diouf observed that “women are the key” to this development.⁶

In recent years our understanding of democracy has been enhanced by new data on early civilizations, particularly the work of Riane Eisler.⁷ Drawing on a wealth of archeological data,⁸ Eisler effectively demolishes the popular assumption that authoritarianism and war are somehow “natural” to human beings. She demonstrates that the “Golden Age” so often mentioned by the Greeks refers to an actual period of peace and equality in Europe and the Mediterranean, with a much higher level of culture than previously believed. In Minoan Crete, for example, there were no kings or nobles, and war was almost unknown until Crete’s last days. Yet a level of civilization had been achieved that was not equaled for more than a millennium.

Eisler also lays to rest the notion that authoritarianism and belligerence are somehow part of our primate heritage, pointing to the Bonobos—a species closely related to the chimpanzee, but one in which dominating behavior is absent, conflicts are resolved through sexual seduction, and the least aggressive males are those chosen by the females as partners.⁹ Slater elaborates the relationship between democracy and the women’s movement in *A Dream Deferred*.¹⁰