

# The Great Affluence Fallacy

*David Brooks, the New York Times AUG. 9, 2016*

A large crowd of Bernie Sanders supporters in the Bronx, N.Y. Credit Todd Heisler/The New York Times

In 18th-century America, colonial society and Native American society sat side by side. The former was buddingly commercial; the latter was communal and tribal. As time went by, the settlers from Europe noticed something: No Indians were defecting to join colonial society, but many whites were defecting to live in the Native American one.

This struck them as strange. Colonial society was richer and more advanced. And yet people were voting with their feet the other way.

The colonials occasionally tried to welcome Native American children into their midst, but they couldn't persuade them to stay. Benjamin Franklin observed the phenomenon in 1753, writing, "When an Indian child has been brought up among us, taught our language and habituated to our customs, yet if he goes to see his relations and make one Indian ramble with them, there is no persuading him ever to return."

During the wars with the Indians, many European settlers were taken prisoner and held within Indian tribes. After a while, they had plenty of chances to escape and return, and yet they did not. In fact, when they were "rescued," they fled and hid from their rescuers.

Sometimes the Indians tried to forcibly return the colonials in a prisoner swap, and still the colonials refused to go. In one case, the Shawanese Indians were compelled to tie up some European women in order to ship them back. After they were returned, the women escaped the colonial towns and ran back to the Indians.

Even as late as 1782, the pattern was still going strong. Hector de Crèvecoeur wrote, "Thousands of Europeans are Indians, and we have no examples of even one of those aborigines having from choice become European."

I first read about this history several months ago in Sebastian Junger's excellent book "[Tribe](#)." It has haunted me since. It raises the possibility that our culture is built on some fundamental error about what makes people happy and fulfilled.

The native cultures were more communal. As Junger writes, "They would have practiced extremely close and involved child care. And they would have done almost everything in the company of others. They would have almost never been alone."

If colonial culture was relatively atomized, imagine American culture of today. As we've gotten richer, we've used wealth to buy space: bigger homes, bigger yards, separate bedrooms, private

cars, autonomous lifestyles. Each individual choice makes sense, but the overall atomizing trajectory sometimes seems to backfire. According to the World Health Organization, people in wealthy countries suffer depression by as much as eight times the rate as people in poor countries.

There might be a Great Affluence Fallacy going on — we want privacy in individual instances, but often this makes life generally worse.

Every generation faces the challenge of how to reconcile freedom and community — “On the Road” versus “It’s a Wonderful Life.” But I’m not sure any generation has faced it as acutely as millennials.

In the great American tradition, millennials would like to have their cake and eat it, too. A few years ago, Macklemore and Ryan Lewis came out with a song called “Can’t Hold Us,” which contained the couplet: “We came here to live life like nobody was watching/I got my city right behind me, if I fall, they got me.” In the first line they want complete autonomy; in the second, complete community.

But, of course, you can’t really have both in pure form. If millennials are heading anywhere, it seems to be in the direction of community. Politically, millennials have been drawn to the class solidarity of the Bernie Sanders campaign. Hillary Clinton — secretive and a wall-builder — is the quintessence of boomer autonomy. She has trouble with younger voters.

Professionally, millennials are famous for bringing their whole self to work: turning the office into a source of friendships, meaning and social occasions.

I’m meeting more millennials who embrace the mentality expressed in the book “[The Abundant Community](#),” by John McKnight and Peter Block. The authors are notably hostile to consumerism.

They are anti-institutional and anti-systems. “Our institutions can offer only service — not care — for care is the freely given commitment from the heart of one to another,” they write.

Millennials are oriented around neighborhood hospitality, rather than national identity or the borderless digital world. “A neighborhood is the place where you live and sleep.” How many of your physical neighbors know your name?

Maybe we’re on the cusp of some great cracking. Instead of just paying lip service to community while living for autonomy, I get the sense a lot of people are actually about to make the break and immerse themselves in demanding local community movements. It wouldn’t surprise me a bit if the big chance in the coming decades were this: an end to the apotheosis of freedom; more people making the modern equivalent of the Native American leap.