

# Communities Are All That's Substantial: Kurt Vonnegut's Post-liberal Political Thought

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## ABSTRACT

Rarely considered as a significant political thinker, Kurt Vonnegut is a neglected source of political criticism, theory, and practice. This article explores Vonnegut's perspectives on war, technology, and community to demonstrate that Vonnegut's well-known criticisms of war and technology are founded on deeper concerns surrounding human nature and the need for fellowship and community. Vonnegut comes to reject individualism, which he suggests tends to breed loneliness. For Vonnegut, the solution to many modern social and political ailments is found in the "folk society," an intentional, small group of like-minded individuals pursuing similar goals. Vonnegut's community and family-centered politics can ultimately only be located outside of contemporary political dichotomies and provide a significant contribution to an ongoing conversation about the potential failings of liberalism and practical remedies to them.

I have been a soreheaded occupant of a file drawer labeled "science fiction" . . . and I would like out, particularly since so many serious critics regularly mistake the drawer for a urinal. (Vonnegut 1974/1999, 1)

## INTRODUCTION

Kurt Vonnegut looms as a large figure in the history of American literature. Though improperly labeled a hack science fiction writer early in his career, Vonnegut wrote in a variety of genres, communicating explicit and implicit political themes in his varied acclaimed works throughout his life until his death

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in 2007.<sup>1</sup> Vonnegut is often analyzed for his literary merits, but few scholars have considered him as a political thinker or explored his political ideas, influences, and prescriptions in any significant depth. This leaves room for further exploration of Vonnegut's politics. Vonnegut's perennial popularity among the young; his impressive corpus of novels, short stories, plays, essays, letters, and commencement addresses; and his explicit attempts to determine what a good life for human beings in modern contexts would be all provide plentiful reasons to consider his political ideas seriously. Examining Vonnegut's political thought provides both an explanation for his enduring fame and a more thorough understanding of what particular truths he sought to impart to his readers about the abundant problems he saw with modernity. As he once wrote in a letter to a friend, "A writer is first and foremost a teacher" (Vonnegut 2014a, xiv), and political theorists have thus far largely neglected to consider what Vonnegut taught.

There are important reasons, however, to explore Vonnegut's teachings. Vonnegut's politics presented in his literature show him to be not merely a critic of modernity, though he certainly is, but also more positively a sort of localist or communitarian whose view of man's nature puts him at odds with philosophical liberalism broadly, and whose desire to see intimate communities flourish was primary. With an eye to exploring his critiques and briefly summarizing his proposed solutions to contemporary ailments, this article will examine Vonnegut's thoughts on three different but interrelated topics—war, technology, and the nature of community—in order to demonstrate that Vonnegut's well-known critiques of war and technology are based on and must be understood through the lens of a well-developed concept of human goods, human needs, and what it means to flourish within a community. In other words, Vonnegut's criticism of war is not mere emotive antiwar rhetoric, but rather rests on a deep critique of technological weapons of war. Similarly, Vonnegut's deep critique of technology does not come from a simple distaste for progress, but rather rests on a clearly communicated philosophical anthropology that demands a particular view of human community.

Fully understanding each of these three requires treating them in turn, as each successive topic illuminates the depth of Vonnegut's thought. Vonnegut believes that there is something terribly wrong with modernity and proposes solutions with an emphasis on interpersonal relationships, local community, and place. I ultimately argue that those who seek to criticize liberalism and

1. The trials of Vonnegut's early writing and the criticism he received are chronicled in biographical works (Shields 2011) and Vonnegut's own letters (Vonnegut 2014b), as well as in Vonnegut's fiction and nonfiction. At the turn of the millennium, Donald E. Morse (2000) helpfully collected a range of assessments of Vonnegut throughout his career in his essay "Bringing Chaos to Order: Vonnegut Criticism at Century's End."

propose alternatives going forward would do well to study and incorporate these elements of Vonnegut's political thought into their analyses.

### VONNEGUT, WEAPONS, AND WAR

Before Vonnegut was a writer, he was a soldier. In their book *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial*, Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell note that Vonnegut is “probably the only major fiction writer who personally experienced a near-apocalypse” (Lifton and Mitchell 1996, 378). Vonnegut's unique biographical situation as a POW survivor of the firebombing of Dresden in World War II put him directly in touch with the absurdity of the modern mindset of war, which enables men to create weapons of war uncritically and then use them to decimate cities and feel no guilt.<sup>2</sup> Vonnegut's commentary on war personalizes and humanizes conflicts that are frequently fought and discussed in terms of tactics, objectives, and missions.

Though Vonnegut's best-known work on the subject of war is *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Vonnegut 1969/2005), Patrick Deneen, one of the few theorists to comment significantly on Vonnegut, identifies Vonnegut's 1963 novel *Cat's Cradle* as the clearest example of Vonnegut's distaste for military technology and all the horror it brought to the world. Deneen writes, “[Vonnegut's] notion that humans tend to abuse their technological prowess partly condensed into a hatred of weaponry” (2007). In *Cat's Cradle*, the main character and narrator, who asks to be called Jonah, has set out on a quest to write a book about the atomic bomb. Jonah writes, “When I was a much younger man, I began to collect material for a book to be called *The Day the World Ended*. The book was to be factual. The book was to be an account of what important Americans had done on the day when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan” (Vonnegut 2011, 5). Jonah eventually decides to focus his book on the actions of one of the scientists who developed the atomic bomb, the fictional Dr. Felix Hoenikker.

Hoenikker represents an interesting paradox for Vonnegut. As a humanist, Vonnegut was a proponent of increasing knowledge of all sorts but was simultaneously skeptical of technological progress. Vonnegut once quipped, “I have been called a Luddite. I welcome it. Do you know what a Luddite is? A person who hates newfangled contraptions” (2007, 55). In *Cat's Cradle*, Dr. Hoenikker is a figure with insatiable curiosity. He always desired to learn more about the world, with no particular end in mind. His curiosity is like that of

2. It was to be a full 20 years before Vonnegut could process his experience in Dresden fully enough to pen a full-length book about the event. This book eventually became the semiautobiographical novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Vonnegut 1969/2005), which bears the lesser-known subtitle *The Children's Crusade*, a commentary on the youth and lost innocence of the combatants.

a child. In the novel, the entirety of Hoenikker's Nobel Prize acceptance speech is as follows: "Ladies and Gentlemen. I stand before you now because I never stopped dawdling like an eight-year-old on a spring morning on his way to school. Anything can make me stop and look and wonder, and sometimes learn. I am a very happy man. Thank you" (Vonnegut 2011, 11).

This kind of simple, wondrous approach to nature is certainly valuable in the right context. However, in the case of the atomic bomb and other such new weapons, Vonnegut sees in this childish simplicity a lack of moral foresight that is essential for the scientist. A scientist ought to ask not only what he can do with the knowledge he has acquired but also whether he ought to undertake the efforts he is considering.<sup>3</sup> If a scientist approaches the application of his knowledge with the same uncritical innocence with which he approaches his studies of nature, then the scientist ceases to be innocent and, by virtue of his amorality, becomes immoral and malicious.

Vonnegut presents a contrast between Hoenikker and Hoenikker's secretary in the novel that serves to illustrate this point. When Jonah comes to visit the laboratory where Hoenikker worked, he encounters Hoenikker's former secretary, a simple Christian woman. When Jonah arrives, she is hanging a Christmas banner that says, "Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men" (Vonnegut 2011, 28). Later, the secretary tells Jonah that when Hoenikker challenged her to provide him with a fact that was absolutely true, she told him, "God is love," to which Hoenikker replied, "What is God? What is love?" (39). Stanley Schatt identifies this contrast between secretary and scientist as an example of the moral disconnect between people who ask value questions about science and the scientists who simply pursue technological development uncritically (1977, 61).<sup>4</sup>

In the case of Hoenikker, his childlike desire to know facts and create things led not only to the atomic bomb but also to the development of Ice-Nine, a strange type of ice that instantly crystalizes any liquid it touches. Predictably, a piece of this Ice-Nine ends up falling into the ocean, freezing the entire earth. Hoenikker's simple desire to see whether it was possible to create ice that was stable at room temperature and that could subsequently instantly solidify liquid water led to the creation of the piece of technology that would end the world.

3. Werner Heisenberg, for example, suggested that modern scientists would do well to study works of classical antiquity for moral insights before "firing the arrow" of a technological creation. He writes, "Once the arrow has left the bow, it flies on its path, and only a stronger force can divert it; but its original direction was determined by him who aimed, and without the presence of a spiritual being to aim it would never have been able to even start on its flight. In this regard we could do far worse than teach our youth not to rate spiritual values too low" (Heisenberg 1970, 54). Vonnegut reasons similarly.

4. One could also read in this tale a condemnation of the naive Christian secretary who lauds peace while materially aiding those who produce weapons of mass destruction.

It is not difficult to see that Ice-Nine is a stand-in for nuclear weapons, weapons that could hypothetically end the inhabitable world if used in great enough quantities.

In addition to the lack of moral questioning in modern military-technological advancement, Vonnegut uses *Cat's Cradle* to criticize the development of weapons of war that tend to dehumanize and require one to ignore the impact of the weapon on the individuals harmed.<sup>5</sup> As Jonah prepares to visit the laboratory with Dr. Asa Breed, the director of the laboratory, Breed tells Jonah about the history of the town: "There was one man they hanged here in 1782 who had murdered twenty-six people. . . . He sang a song on the scaffold. He sang a song he'd composed for the occasion" (Vonnegut 2011, 23). The song was about how the murderer was sorry for nothing that he had done. "Think of it!" said Dr. Breed. "Twenty-six people he had on his conscience!" To which Jonah responds, "The mind reels" (23).

This scene in *Cat's Cradle* is heavy with absurdity. Jonah is here speaking with one of the several fictional architects of the atomic bomb, a weapon that killed hundreds of thousands of people at the end of the Second World War. Breed is, at least indirectly, responsible for untold death, destruction, and misery. However, Breed, like Hoenikker, has an innocence or ignorance about him, such that he sees no connection between his scientific work, producing weapons, and the destruction of life. His mind reels at the thought of a man who has no regret over 26 murders, but he himself experiences no regret over the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Japanese men, women, and children.<sup>6</sup>

Through this analysis, Vonnegut suggests that there is something impersonal about the atomic bomb, both in its creation and in its use, that requires those who spearheaded its creation and use not to be cognizant of the pain of the individuals who were or will be harmed by the bomb.<sup>7</sup> To contemplate the pain

5. As a humanist, Vonnegut was not holistically pessimistic about the moral capabilities of men and women of science. In an address to the American Physical Society, for instance, he argued, "Younger scientists are extremely sensitive to the moral implications of all they do. My fictitious old-time scientist asked, among other things, this question: 'What is sin?' . . . Young scientists, it seems to me, are fascinated by the idea of sin" (Vonnegut 1974/1999, 97). Based on Vonnegut's later technological commentary, it does not seem that his optimism about the new generation of moral scientists held up in subsequent decades.

6. There is some distinction to be drawn between the moral culpability of the one who creates a weapon and the moral culpability of one who uses it. However, like Heisenberg, Vonnegut appears to assign some sort of moral weight to the action of the inventor who decides to unleash an "arrow" aimed in a particular direction (Heisenberg 1970, 54). This interpretation of Hoenikker in *Cat's Cradle* would suggest that although the architects of the atomic bomb did not detonate it or even make the choice to use it, they share in some part of the blame for introducing such a heinous thing to the world in the first place.

7. Against this understanding of nuclear weapons as particularly dehumanizing compared to older weaponry, some scholars have argued that nuclear weapons are not unique

of each person harmed in the same way that Breed contemplates the pain of each of the murderer's 26 victims would be overwhelming. For someone who values scientific progress as an end unto itself, such contemplation would bring an end to the progress that is so vital to the discovery of truth.

Thus, Vonnegut's commentary on weapons and war aims to personalize the conflict where people and technology have a tendency to depersonalize it. Rather than viewing military campaigns in terms of objectives, targets, and missions, Vonnegut forces those who read his works to think in terms of lives lost and people harmed. In his essay *Wailing Shall Be in All Streets*, Vonnegut laments the sterile way the firebombing of Dresden was reported to those on the home front. He writes,

It is with some regret that I here besmirch the nobility of our airmen, but boys, you killed an appalling lot of women and children. The shelter [*Slaughterhouse-Five*] I have described and innumerable others like it were filled with them. We had to exhume their bodies and carry them to mass funeral pyres in the parks—so I know. The funeral pyre technique was abandoned when it became apparent how great was the toll. There was not enough labor to do it nicely, so a man with a flame-thrower was sent down instead, and he cremated them where they lay. Burned alive, suffocated, crushed—men, women, and children indiscriminately killed. For all the sublimity of the cause for which we fought, we surely created a Belsen of our own. The method was impersonal, but the result was equally cruel and heartless. That, I am afraid, is a sickening truth. (Vonnegut 2011, 800)

Vonnegut shows here that it is not just nuclear weapons that lead to the depersonalization of war. Inhuman depersonalization is a consequence of modern total war generally. He explains, “The atom bomb may represent a fabulous advance, but it is interesting to note that primitive TNT and thermite managed to exterminate in one bloody night more people than died in the whole London blitz” (798).

Vonnegut makes clear that the root of the problem is not one martial technological advancement but rather the uncritical approach to the development and use of technology that is displayed both in his fiction and in his real-world experiences. This means that a full treatment of Vonnegut's political views, and

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in quality but are simply larger-scale versions of older technologies. See Codevilla and Seabury (1989/2006). Vonnegut disagrees, but he does clarify that even so-called conventional weapons can be used in destructive and dehumanizing ways.

indeed a full understanding of his popular antiwar sentiments, requires not only an analysis of violent military technologies but also an analysis of technology broadly and Vonnegut's critiques of what he called newfangled contraptions that change how people view the world and each other.

## VONNEGUT AND TECHNOLOGY

Vonnegut's fiction writing career began with commentary on technology, and his thoroughgoing criticism of technology continued throughout his life's work. Vonnegut's first novel, *Player Piano*, was based loosely on his experience in a General Electric plant in Schenectady, New York. It was this novel that branded Vonnegut as a science fiction writer, which he resented greatly given the disdain with which sci-fi writers were treated in broader literary circles. In his final book, *A Man without a Country*, Vonnegut writes, "Most of our critics are products of English departments and are very suspicious of anyone who takes an interest in technology. . . . I became a so-called science fiction writer when someone decreed that I was a science fiction writer. I did not want to be classified as one, so I wondered in what way I'd offended that I would not get credit for being a serious writer. I decided that it was because I wrote about technology, and most fine American writers know nothing about technology" (2007, 15, 16). In Vonnegut's estimation, he was only writing about life as he saw it, which did not deserve a special derogatory label. Vonnegut quipped, "I think that novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex" (17). Vonnegut's self-proclaimed Luddite critique of modern "contraptions" is threefold: they rob man of his productive abilities, they damage his imagination, and they inhibit the functioning of healthy communities.

Vonnegut's technological commentary in *Player Piano* is straightforward but nonetheless poignant. Vonnegut described it some years after its publication as "a novel about people and machines, and machines frequently got the best of it, as machines will" (1974/1999, 1). *Player Piano* presents a world in which the menial, dangerous jobs of the world have been taken up by automated machines. These machines only respond to the commands of technically proficient engineers and managers. During a Third World War, when most of the people who formerly performed menial tasks were away, "managers and engineers learned to get along without their men and women, who went to fight" (Vonnegut 2012, 7). With their jobs replaced, the menial workers become functionally useless in society, and the engineers and managers live in segmented areas away from the lower classes, who languish not for want of food or shelter but for want of meaningful lives.

In chapter 20 of *Player Piano*, Vonnegut provides an extended discourse on the impact the machines have had on society through the mouth of a barber,

whose job has been preserved only because the “barber machines” haven’t yet been brought to his city. He remarks,

Used to be there was a lot of damn fool things a dumb bastard could do to be great, but the machines fixed that. . . . Now the machines take all the dangerous jobs, and the dumb bastards just get tucked away in big bunches of prefabs that look like the end of a game of Monopoly, or in barracks, and there’s nothing for them to do but set there and kind of hope for a big fire where maybe they can run into a burning building in front of everybody and run out with a baby in their arms. Or maybe hope . . . for another war. (Vonnegut 2012, 188)

The barber recognizes that there are some people who will never be specialists, managers, engineers, or any other profession that requires technical education, but he does not see this as bad. Rather, he laments the fact that these men used to have places made for them where they could work, produce, and find fulfillment. The machines in *Player Piano* have robbed human beings of this essential need. Though the machines brought great prosperity to society, they took “the good jobs where a man could be true to himself and false to nobody else, and left all the silly ones” (188).

Thus, in some cases, automated technology represents an assault on human dignity. This is part of Vonnegut’s fundamental critique.<sup>8</sup> Work is valuable, and to deprive people of their usefulness and ability to work is to rob them of their humanity. Commenting on themes of human dignity in *Player Piano*, Deneen writes, “The practical result of much technology, even when pursued for seemingly good ends, Vonnegut argues, is to render human work increasingly meaningless and human relationships irrelevant. Vonnegut’s critique would remind us that there is a pleasure, a reward to playing a piano with one’s own hands that cannot be captured in the perfect mechanism of a player piano” (2007). Because Vonnegut’s concerns are not solely or even fundamentally economic, the industrial shift making the machine the agent of production rather than man is not the only troublesome thing about modern technology for him.<sup>9</sup> Rather, he is concerned with the impact of technology on the imagination.

8. A complementary argument from a conservative critic of liberalism can be found in the works of George Grant, particularly *Technology and Justice* (Grant 1991).

9. It may be that *Player Piano* is given too great of an emphasis in analysis of Vonnegut’s technological views, for in Vonnegut’s own words, “My mistake in *Player Piano* was my failure as a futurist. I did not foresee transistors, and so imagined that super computers would have to be huge, with bulky vacuum tubes taking up a lot of space” (2014b, 403). On the subject of technology, Vonnegut’s late works should be given weight in light of this self-professed failure of foresight.



The best example of Vonnegut's commentary on the interplay between technology and imagination is found in a story included in his nontraditional novel *Timequake*, his final novel published during his lifetime. In this story, Vonnegut tells of a planet quite like Earth where lives a race of aliens quite like humans. These aliens, or "Booboolings," developed their imaginations by reading and taking in other forms of art and, with input from their parents and teachers, learned to interpret what they read and saw such that they could be entertained by "idiosyncratic arrangements in horizontal lines of twenty-six phonetic symbols, ten numbers, and eight or so punctuation marks, or dabs of pigment on flat surfaces in frames" (Vonnegut 2016, 500).

On the planet of the Booboolings, there lived three sisters. The first two sisters were good, but the third was bad. The first sister was a painter, the second a short story writer. The third was different entirely. Vonnegut writes,

The bad sister had an imagination . . . but not in the field of art appreciation. She wouldn't read books or go to art galleries. She spent every spare minute when she was little in the garden of a lunatic asylum next door. The psychos in the garden were believed to be harmless, so her keeping them company was regarded as a laudably compassionate activity. But the nuts taught her thermodynamics and calculus and so on. When the bad sister was a young woman, she and the nuts worked up designs for television cameras and transmitters and receivers. Then she got money from her very rich mom to manufacture these satanic devices, which made imaginations redundant. They were instantly popular because the shows were so attractive and no thinking was involved. (Vonnegut 2016, 501)

A consequence of the third sister's invention of the television was that imaginations were no longer necessary. "Generations of Booboolings grew up without imaginations. . . . Without imaginations, though, they couldn't do what their ancestors had done, which was read interesting, heartwarming stories in the faces of one another. So . . . Booboolings became among the most merciless creatures in the local family of galaxies" (501).

It is constructive to compare the way Vonnegut speaks of the imagination with the concept of the moral imagination as outlined by Edmund Burke and Russel Kirk. Burke uses the term "moral imagination" in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790/2013, 171) but does not provide a detailed explanation of the concept. Kirk expounds,

By this "moral imagination," Burke signifies that power of ethical perception which strides beyond the barriers of private experience and momentary events "especially," as the dictionary has it, "the higher form

of this power exercised in poetry and art.” The moral imagination aspires to the apprehending of right order in the soul and right order in the commonwealth. This moral imagination was the gift and the obsession of Plato and Vergil and Dante. Drawn from centuries of human consciousness, these concepts of the moral imagination—so powerfully if briefly put by Burke—are expressed afresh from age to age. . . . It is the moral imagination which informs us concerning the dignity of human nature, which instructs us that we are more than naked apes. (1981)

If moral imagination is the means by which people apprehend higher law and right order in the soul and commonwealth, then a poorly developed moral imagination would lead to intrinsic disorder.

Vonnegut’s conception of the imagination is similar to Burke’s moral imagination because, for Vonnegut, the imagination is not a simple exercise of mental abilities by which one can be entertained. The imagination certainly includes the capacity to visualize and daydream, but Vonnegut’s cautionary tale of the Booboolings shows that the imagination serves a greater social function. The Booboolings’ imaginations were harmed by the introduction of television and other forms of modern technology. When the Booboolings begin to live without imaginations, they become unimaginably cruel to one another, because they could no longer “read interesting, heartwarming stories in the faces of one another” (Vonnegut 2016, 501), or as Kirk puts it, they could no longer discern “the dignity of human nature, which instructs us that we are more than naked apes” (1981).

Vonnegut’s fanciful tale cannot fully account for the cruelty of the modern world. It was not the television that created the horrors of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, Vonnegut seems to share in aspects of Burke’s and Kirk’s conception of a moral imagination and laments how modern technology has bypassed the traditional means of learning aesthetic and moral truths through education and tradition by replacing the work of the imagination with ready-made images that can be easily consumed without prejudice or critical analysis. In contrast to a process of children being guided through life and trained gradually by their elders, Vonnegut sees television as giving children an unexamined, colorful world to consume but not contemplate.<sup>10</sup>

It is this subtle and gradual tendency of technology to alter human imagination, and thus human interaction and relationships, that troubles Vonnegut.

10. Kirk suggests that there is an additional negative effect of television that Vonnegut did not comment on directly. If there is a moral imagination, which apprehends right order in the soul and guides toward virtue, there is a diabolic imagination, which desires disorder and guides toward vice. Kirk claims that “this ‘diabolic imagination’ dominates most popular fiction today; and on television and in the theaters, too, the diabolic imagination struts and postures” (1981). Thus, not only is television preventing the development of a moral imagination, as Vonnegut suggests, but, for Kirk, it is also fostering a diabolic imagination.

In *A Man without a Country*, Vonnegut (2007) provides an anecdote explaining what progress, in this instance the move from typewriter to computer word processor, did to the writer's daily routine. Vonnegut's writing process consisted of typewriting and hand-correcting his work, after which time he would send it off to his typist. In order to send his written work off to his typist, Vonnegut had to go through a ritualistic process of purchasing envelopes at a corner store, taking them to a post office, and mailing them. In the process, he encountered regular customers at the store, interacted with a regular postal employee behind the counter, and had many small adventures with the people around him.

Granted, even before the advent of computers, this whole process could have been cut short by someone with different priorities. Vonnegut remarked that his wife recommended he buy envelopes in bulk so he wouldn't have to visit the store so often, to which he responded, "hush" (Vonnegut 2007, 58). However, the creation of computers and the internet not only made his typist's job obsolete but also led to the bypassing of all of the normal human interaction that previously went into his process of writing. This was, for Vonnegut, a great tragedy, for after coming home from his ritual, he always would have had "one hell of a good time" (58).

The unthinking march of technological progress seen in *Cat's Cradle*, *Player Piano*, and Vonnegut's own life is reflected in all types of technological developments. From wearable computers to virtual reality software and artificial intelligence, all present technological innovations have potential unintended consequences that deserve careful thought.<sup>11</sup> Vonnegut summarizes his thoughts on the impact "newfangled technology" has had on community as follows: "Electronic communities build nothing. You wind up with nothing. We are dancing animals. How beautiful it is to get up and go out and do something. We are here on Earth to fart around. Don't let anybody tell you any different" (2007, 61, 62). Vonnegut has empathy for the Luddites because both Vonnegut and the Luddites experienced what it means for automated technology to rob people of something that is essential to life as they know it. Vonnegut sees technology as preventing meaningful communal interactions, facilitated by well-developed imaginations,

11. Deneen argues that, in contrast to the unintended consequences portrayed in our technological horror stories, "we embrace and deploy technologies that make us how we imagine ourselves being" (2018, 107, 108). While this is certainly true, if Vonnegut is correct, technology also influences how we imagine ourselves being. The problem is somewhat circular. We turn to technology to more effectively realize our desires. Technology then provides us with new desires, or at least new forms of old desires, that substantively change our approach to the world and to our communities. This reflexive relationship between human desire and technology is explored at length in Nolen Gertz's *Nihilism and Technology* (2018).

from occurring, which in turn hinders the ability of community members to care for one another as dignified human beings.

## VONNEGUT AND COMMUNITY

In order to fully appreciate Vonnegut's concerns about the way that technology harms community, it is next necessary to properly understand Vonnegut's well-developed conception of community, family, and love. Though these themes are implicit and present in much of his fiction, I here turn primarily to Vonnegut's essays and commencement addresses, as well as the nonfiction works of his self-professed greatest political influence, for their clarity and concision in describing his politics. As Vonnegut says, though he often tried to avoid "moralizing," preferring instead to allow the reader to draw their own conclusions from his stories, "when I speak to students, I do moralize" (1974/1999, 100).<sup>12</sup> Vonnegut believed that modern man in the liberal democratic world faced a severe deficiency of supporting relationships that had previously sustained him and were necessary for human flourishing. This means that many of society's problems can be attributed to a lack of defined community and a resulting loneliness.

Vonnegut's thoughts on community were shaped in large part by Robert Redfield, an anthropologist at the University of Chicago, cofounder of the Committee on Social Thought, and one of Vonnegut's professors during his time at the university. In one of his commencement addresses, Vonnegut remarked that "Dr. Redfield's theory of the Folk Society . . . has been the starting point for my politics, such as they are" (2014a, 97). If Vonnegut's politics have Redfield's folk society as a starting point, as Vonnegut himself says, it is necessary to explore what this folk society is and what its usefulness is as a potential solution to the problems of modernity.<sup>13</sup>

12. In his essay in the edited volume *Democracy's Literature: Politics and Fiction in America*, D. A. Hamlin (2005) uses Vonnegut's graduation speeches as an interpretive key to much of his fiction. I concur with his analysis and hope to provide a similar key for Vonnegut's thoughts on community more broadly. While I here focus on Vonnegut's nonfiction exhortations, scholars such as Todd F. Davis (2006) explore similar themes of community throughout Vonnegut's fiction in some depth but remain primarily literary rather than political in their approach.

13. Redfield's position as an influence on Vonnegut's love of community is acknowledged in literary and biographical scholarship on Vonnegut (Davis 2006; Shields 2011) and is found throughout Vonnegut's corpus. However, deeper analysis of the folk society, particularly in light of Vonnegut's broader criticisms of things like war and technology that break apart community, remains lacking. One exception is Joyce Ann Hancock's unpublished English dissertation (1978), which examines the folk society as a literary theme in Vonnegut's early novels, based on a singular mention of the folk society in Vonnegut's work at the time of her writing.

Redfield wrote extensively of the folk societies, which “have certain features in common which enable us to think of them as a type—a type which contrasts with the society of the modern city” (1962, 231). Vonnegut, in turn, summarizes Redfield’s folk society as a geographically isolated, unique community in which “the break between the living and the dead was indistinct, and bonds of kinship crisscrossed every which way. There was such a general agreement as to what life was all about and how people should behave in every situation that very little was debatable” (1992, 122, 123). This means that life in a folk society was established and predictable. Man had a purpose within a unified whole. As Redfield puts it,

In the folk society conventional behavior is strongly patterned: it tends to conform to a type or a norm . . . the patterns of what people think should be done are closely consistent with what they believe is done. . . . The culture of a folk society is, therefore, one of those wholes which is greater than the sum of its parts. Gaining a livelihood takes support from religion, and the relations of men to men are justified in the conceptions held of the supernatural world or in some other aspect of the culture. Life, for the member of the folk society, is not one activity and then another and different one; it is one large activity out of which one part may not be separated without affecting the rest. (1962, 240)

This means that people in a folk society never find themselves aimless, looking for purpose among a scattered collection of activities. Rather, whatever a person does, whether it be marriage, work, or worship, this person in the folk society sees her action as part of the coherent whole of the broader community. This is something that does not typically exist in the modern city.

If membership in a cohesive whole characterizes primitive man, then what characterizes modern man? Redfield calls the disease of modern man “designless living.” In a commencement address, he commented on the tendency of men in his day, saying,

I, for one, do not like the idea of designless living, and one reason I do not is that I do not like the people who live that way. There are plenty of them all about us; we seem them in the streets and we hear them on the radio. . . . Their imperatives arise out of nothing deeper than the widespread appetites of human nature and are defined by little more than the popular interests of the moment. They collect briefly in the eddies of fashion and fad, and of the ancient cultures in the deeps below them they know nothing. A sort of social plankton, they are interesting to observe and study. But they are also like purple cows; I would rather see than be one. (Redfield 1963, 259, 260)

This designless living stands in stark contrast to the primitive way of life, where one's life is designed and—in a positive, meaning-giving sense—predetermined.

In Vonnegut's estimation, man does not simply have the capacity to exist in folk society but in fact is made for one. People are supposed to exist in small, local communities. They desire these close relationships and have a deep need for them. The study of the folk society for Vonnegut serves two distinct purposes: first, folk societies clearly display that people have intangible needs that go beyond mere physical necessities, and second, the folk society provides a model by which those needs could be fulfilled in the future. In one of his commencement addresses, Vonnegut mused, "Was it possible, I wondered, that certain features common to all [folk societies] not only revealed spiritual needs of all human beings, including those of us in this auditorium? Might not those features also show us methods for satisfying those needs, theatrical performances, if you will, which human beings, by their nature, can ill-afford to do without?" (2014a, 99). Vonnegut reasons that how people tend to live in the folk society shows humanity's deepest desires or felt needs. The emphasis on family, tradition, and place in the folk society means that people, absent the trappings of advanced technology, naturally desire close family relationships, tradition, and a connection to place. It is not difficult to see that such a society is diametrically opposed to modern transient lifestyles. Removed from a folk society, man loses the aforementioned ready-made design for living, so man must now make his own design or remain lonely and aimless.

Vonnegut suggests that if it truly is fundamental to humans to desire the structure and predictability of a folk society, then we can expect to see symptoms of a "folk society deficiency" (1992, 126). For instance, a lack of a cohesive purpose or design for living leads to an unnatural, unthinking individualism that is manifested in various contexts. Whether it is man's tendency to use the earth's resources unthinkingly or to develop new technologies uncritically, Vonnegut sums up the cause succinctly: "I know of very few people who are dreaming of a world for their grandchildren" (2007, 71). In Vonnegut's summary, in the folk society, man is treated as a person. In the modern age, technology has depersonalized the average man. In the folk society, man has a sense of unified purpose. In the modern city, there is no such sense of purpose. In the folk society, man belongs both to a community and to a family. In the modern city, there is no sense of belonging. These basic contrasts between what Vonnegut believes is natural to man and how most people in current first-world urban contexts live contribute to the sense of absurdity felt throughout Vonnegut's literature; his characters are struggling to make a place and a meaning for themselves in a world that offers no sense of place or meaning.

Additionally, over and above all these other individual-level concerns, Vonnegut sees harm done to the family as the preeminent problem in the dissolution of functioning community. Both Vonnegut and Redfield see the family as foun-

dational to any well-functioning society. However, advances in technology have tended to dissipate extended families that, prior to the invention and widespread adoption of automobiles and airplanes, had a tendency to remain together by necessity. While “families” in the sense of a romantically joined couple and occasional children still persist, in Redfield’s folk society and Vonnegut’s ideal world, a family is much more than immediate family. Rather, a true family consists of an extended network of relatives, a sort of clan, that all provide support and aid to one another. This is the basic unit of the folk society that helps provide a sense of belonging: one belongs first to a family.

Vonnegut suggests that it is this dissolution of the extended family that has led to many of the problems today, including divorce. He writes,

Why are so many people getting divorced today? It’s because most of us don’t have extended families anymore. It used to be that when a man and a woman got married, the bride got a lot more people to talk to about everything. The groom got a lot more pals to tell dumb jokes to. A few Americans, but very few, still have extended families. . . . When a couple has an argument nowadays, they may think it’s about money or power or sex or how to raise the kids or whatever. What they’re really saying to each other, though without realizing it, is this: “You are not enough people!” (Vonnegut 2007, 47, 48)

If large, extended families living in close proximity are natural to man, and these families offer necessary built-in emotional support that staves off loneliness, a lack of this support leads to obvious problems that Vonnegut highlights.

Another manifestation of “folk society deficiency” is the tendency of people to be disappointed with individualism and to seek out a substitute membership or a place of belonging, whether that membership takes the form of a fraternal society or a dangerous cult. Vonnegut variously identifies the Manson family, Reverend Jim Jones’s cult, and the neoconservative movement as examples of people who are looking for a place to belong (1992, 126, 127). Vonnegut reasons that such obviously unhealthy expressions of “folk society deficiency” could be avoided if replaced with the real thing or a healthy substitute.

If the problem of folk society deficiency can be diagnosed, it is possible that it can be addressed and practically remedied. One possible solution is to fully embrace the concept of a folk society and seek the kind of isolation and tradition offered by it. This would require geographic isolationism and a radical rejection of modern amenities, a sort of contemporary monasticism. Redfield rejects this nostalgic extremism. Vonnegut writes that Redfield “denounced sentimentality about life in Folk Societies” in his annual lectures (1992, 123). In one of his commencement addresses, Redfield explicitly attempts to discour-



age romanticism on the topic. He reasons that, for all its usefulness as a model for study, the folk society in its strict form is actually a rather dismal place for the man of scientific and intellectual pursuits, as primitive men have no concept of structural learning or science. Redfield remarked, "Few of us, in exchange for a ready-made design for living, would give up science and a free and bold intellectual life" (1963, 260). Despite Redfield's warnings, Vonnegut ached for the idealistic sense of belonging offered in the folk society, saying, "I still find myself daydreaming of an isolated little gang of likeminded people in a temperate climate, in a clearing in a woodland near a lake" (1992, 123).

It is clear, in spite of the appeal of the folk society in theory, that creating an actual folk society today is impractical and somewhat unachievable. Instead, both Vonnegut and Redfield sought to determine what contemporary cultures can learn from folk societies and the things they value and to use that information to develop practical solutions to contemporary problems. Vonnegut recognizes the impracticality of establishing a strict folk society but affirms the potential existence and definite desirability of a looser sort of folk society, an intentional community within the broader city or nation, among like-minded people who share common goals and aspirations. Reflecting on all of the aforementioned problems that arise from a lack of folk societies, Vonnegut questions, "Is it conceivable that we are suffering from a cultural deficiency which we can remedy? Friends and neighbors, I say YES to that" (2014a, 100).

Vonnegut's solution to folk society deficiency is based in a belief that some order is better than no order, that people can and will create order for themselves, and that each person can or should at least try to bring order to a small part of the world in a very intentional fashion. This was no doubt based on the teaching of Redfield, who once remarked,

No, society is not going to provide us again with a fixed design for living, and I would not want it to do so if it could. There is nothing that can or should provide each man of us with a design for living, but that man himself. You may build yourself such a design in terms of which to live your life, or you may go without. Nowadays life does not hand you a program; it throws you on to the middle of a stage where a great number of people are trying to write a great number of plays all at once. . . . It seems to me better to try to write one's own play—to know in terms of what unities of action and good conduct one will say one's brief lines—than to abandon oneself to the vagaries of those who live without design. (1963, 260, 261)

Redfield further cautioned, "I have no sureness that a man may make his own design for living. I only assert that life is worth making the attempt and that without making it, it is worth little" (261). In other words, Redfield cautions



his listeners not to attempt to bring about a premodern society but instead to work together to try to create their own design for living in whatever way they can with the friends and family they have around them.

Vonnegut carries on this suggestion in his words to students later in his life. In another commencement address, Vonnegut explained, “As I read the book of Genesis, God didn’t give Adam and Eve a whole planet. He gave them a manageable piece of property. . . . I suggest to you Adams and Eves that you set as your goals the putting of some small part of the planet into something like safe and sane and decent order” (2014a, 116). How practically can this be accomplished? As starting points, Vonnegut offers three simple first steps.

Vonnegut first suggests providing a ritualistic, traditional “totem” to everyone at birth, to place him or her into membership in a particular society. He sees the tendency to latch onto “nonsensical, arbitrary symbols” like astrological signs as manifestations of the fundamental need humans have for such symbols to “relate them to other people and the Earth and the Universe” (Vonnegut 2014a, 100). Without a folk society to orient man and show him his place in the world, Vonnegut suggests that symbolic totems can help ground man to a place and a people.

Second, Vonnegut charges, “Let’s find a way to get ourselves and others extended families again. A husband and a wife and some kids aren’t a family, any more than a Diet Pepsi and three Oreos is a breakfast. Twenty, thirty, forty people—that’s a family” (2016, 100). Vonnegut does not offer a clear, particular means by which this can be accomplished. In his novel *Slapstick*, Vonnegut (1976/1999) satirically suggests that the government could provide everyone a cousin to cure the disease of loneliness. In reality, it does not appear that Vonnegut was sure how the expansion and unification of the family could be accomplished. At the very least, it would require a drastic reordering of priorities. People would need to value place and proximity to family over and above the economic gains that could be made through a transient lifestyle.

Third and finally, Vonnegut recommends reestablishing coming-of-age ceremonies to bring young people from childhood into adulthood.<sup>14</sup> This is yet again something that the folk society has that Vonnegut believes modern culture has lost. As part of the cohesive unity seen in the folk society, each person has a clear understanding of their duties and responsibilities when they are a child or an adult, a man or a woman, a husband or a wife. If people could be properly situated and have clear lines of demarcation representing their

14. Vonnegut remarks, for example, “Yes, and let’s make sure every American gets a puberty ceremony, an impressive welcome to the rights and duties of grown-ups. As matters now stand, only practicing Jews get those. The only way the rest of us can feel like grown-ups is to get pregnant or get somebody else pregnant or commit a felony or go to war and then come back again” (2014a, 101).

passage from childhood into adulthood, then, Vonnegut reasons, society might be able to get somewhere.

None of these suggestions are enough to cure the ills of the modern situation. However, they are parts of what Redfield called making one's own design for living, and they are clues as to the broader practical solutions Vonnegut wanted people to pursue in response to his teachings. Vonnegut had a deep desire to see people pursue this project and was confident that such a project was at least part of the cure for systemic loneliness. As he remarked in another of his many commencement addresses, "Communities are all that's substantial about the world. The rest is hoop-la" (Vonnegut 2016, 37).

### VONNEGUT AS A POST-LIBERAL THINKER

It is difficult to place Vonnegut on a contemporary political spectrum because his politics, grounded in Redfield's work, are distinctively informed by pre-modern—or perhaps antimodern—conceptions of human nature and community. Vonnegut was certainly no fan of the Republican Party; he spent much of his later nonfiction work criticizing the neoconservative movement, the Bush family, and the like (see esp. Vonnegut 1992). Further, Vonnegut personally identified as an atheist and a socialist in the tradition of Eugene Debs. In an interview with the *Progressive* late in his life, Vonnegut once remarked, "Socialism is, in fact, a form of Christianity, people wishing to imitate Christ" (Barsamian 2003). Vonnegut greatly admired the teachings of Christ as contained in the gospels and saw socialism as the proper political application of Christ's commands. Though he rejected Christ's claim to divinity, Vonnegut said, "If Christ hadn't delivered the Sermon on the Mount, with its message of mercy and pity, I wouldn't want to be a human being" (2014a, 20).

By virtue of his self-proclaimed socialism and irreligious adherence to the social teachings of Jesus, Vonnegut rejected the American Republican, *laissez-faire* approach to poverty and social justice, and thus he did not identify as a "conservative" in the American political sense. However, Vonnegut also seems to reject the principles that define liberalism as a broad political philosophy. Liberalism, as Deneen (2018) defines it in his criticism, is rooted in thought at least as far back as the social contract thinkers. In brief, contrary to classical philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, who saw man as fitted for society by nature, a claim Vonnegut shares, the social contract thinkers saw man as existing independently in a state of nature prior to the creation of society. Society is the product of a contract made for various possible reasons. In any case, as George Grant, another critic of liberalism, writes, "[Liberalism's] theoretical founders asserted that justice was neither a natural nor supernatural virtue, but arose from the calculations necessary to our acceptance of the social contract" (1998,

11). Similarly, Deneen writes, “Human beings are thus, [according to liberalism,] by nature, nonrelational creatures, separate and autonomous. Liberalism begins a project by which the legitimacy of all human relationships—beginning with, but not limited to, political bonds—becomes increasingly dependent on whether those relationships have been chosen, and chosen on the basis of their service to rational self-interest” (2018, 32). Society is, on this view, a product of a voluntary choice, which itself is only accepted because of a calculation of self-interest. This liberal philosophical anthropology means that man is first and foremost an individual with no inherent duties or natural communal commitments. As Deneen writes, “Liberal philosophy is based on the theoretical construct that humans are by nature autonomous, free and independent, and that it is the role and function of the State to realize personal, national, or even globalized individualism (2016, 3, 4).

Defecting from this tradition, Vonnegut rejects individualism wholesale. Rather than seeing man as fundamentally or naturally free of responsibility, duty, and society, Vonnegut believes that these individualistic tendencies and institutions are inhuman and lead to loneliness. The problems Vonnegut perceives in modernity are directly tied to embracing a liberal view of man that sees man’s individuality and freedom as primary, rather than seeing man as naturally connected to a place and a people. In the same way that Grant sees “the current concentration on private life, and the retreat from the public realm” (1998, 11) as an example of the practical failings of liberalism, what Redfield calls designless living and what Vonnegut identifies as loneliness also appear to be products of this liberal philosophical anthropology.

Though much criticism of liberalism comes from people who might be called conservative, it would be disingenuous to label as “conservative” a man who so strongly identified with left-wing policies and social positions. At the very least, however, Vonnegut appears to reject liberalism’s view of man and affirm instead that man is by nature suited to society, family, and community. Rather than being an autonomous, self-determining individual, man has non-contractual duties toward other people by virtue of their common humanity. Deneen suggests in his essay “After Liberalism” that an alternative to liberalism must be found if his own diagnosis of the fatal flaws of liberalism is correct (2016, 196–207). Vonnegut, as an atheistic humanist, is in his own way suggesting something similar and proposing his own alternative to liberalism: the modified folk society. Thus, though Vonnegut may not precisely agree with each of the criticisms and solutions offered by conservative critics of liberalism like Deneen and Grant, their definition of liberalism allows Vonnegut to emerge as a thorough critic of liberal individualism from an alternative tradition.

The applied nature of Vonnegut’s view of community is best seen in the complex character of Eliot Rosewater in Vonnegut’s novel *God Bless You,*

*Mr. Rosewater*. Eliot is the inheritor of a large, Rockefeller-like family fortune. However, rather than fulfilling the expectations of his father and becoming a politician or business executive with eyes on the US Senate or the presidency, Eliot chooses instead to make a pilgrimage to Rosewater County in Indiana, the traditional home of the Rosewater family. There, Eliot uses his riches to establish the Rosewater Foundation to assist the local poor and needy through whatever means he can. When Eliot's father questions his daughter-in-law regarding her husband's behavior, he demands, "Tell me one good thing about those [poor] people Eliot helps," to which she responds, "It's a secret thing. . . . The secret is that they're human" (Vonnegut 2011, 229). But Eliot could not truly love humans as a politician; he had to establish himself in a local community. Eliot, by his actions and choices, affirms Vonnegut's understanding of the content of Christ's earthly ministry. Humans have fundamental value, which implies by extension that people have a fundamental duty to be kind to one another and to love their neighbors in local communities.

Claiming Vonnegut as a critic of liberalism is not altogether new. D. A. Hamlin interprets Vonnegut's sardonic and moralizing commencement addresses as demonstrating that Vonnegut "is pessimistic about liberalism" (2005, 194). Hamlin rests this argument both on Vonnegut's own words and on an earlier essay by Michael J. Gargas McGrath (1982) that positions Vonnegut as a critic of liberal democracy by virtue of his pessimism toward education and scientific progress in *Player Piano*. However, despite these passing acknowledgments in the literature, Vonnegut's politics remain obscure and infrequently examined. These two analyses are fairly narrowly tailored and do not represent complete studies of Vonnegut's politics. One can be a critic of liberal democracy without developing a politics that is deeply opposed to it, something Vonnegut appears to attempt. Ultimately, Vonnegut is perhaps best identified as post-postmodern, or even post-liberal. He rejects liberal individualism wholesale and simultaneously attempts to present an alternative that is neither hopelessly nostalgic nor ruthlessly pragmatic but rather is based on a full understanding of what it means to be human. Vonnegut calls on his readers and intellectual inheritors to become countercultural by embracing the unchangeable facets of their human nature, looking to the past to discern what those facets are. Having learned those things by carefully studying both the virtues of the past and the ills of the present, Vonnegut urges his audience to seek after the things that will make them well again.

## CONCLUSION

If Vonnegut is correct that a writer is first and foremost a teacher, Vonnegut's works must be viewed as the means by which Vonnegut was attempting to

teach humanity about themselves and the world that they live in. He was a moralist, an essayist, and a social critic as much as he was a science fiction novelist. He sought to teach his readers, not simply to entertain. Given his abiding popularity and the depth and breadth of his thought, what precisely Vonnegut is teaching is a worthy subject of study.

Vonnegut certainly resented being branded as a science fiction writer but saw the virtues of the genre itself. In *God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater*, Eliot's drinking problem leads him to do several strange things. In one scene, Eliot interrupts a sci-fi writers' convention and exclaims,

I love you sons of bitches. . . . You're all I read any more. You're the only ones who'll talk about the *really* terrific changes going on, the only ones crazy enough to know that life is a space voyage and not a short one, either, but one that'll last for billions of years. You're the only ones with guts enough to *really* care about the future, who *really* notice what machines do to us, what wars do to us, what cities do to us, what big, simple ideas do to us, what tremendous misunderstandings, mistakes, accidents, and catastrophes do to us. (Vonnegut 2011, 201)

Vonnegut goes on to say, "Eliot admitted later that science-fiction writers couldn't write for sour apples, but he declared that it didn't matter. He said they were poets just the same, since they were more sensitive to important changes than anybody who was writing well" (202). Vonnegut, properly understood, belongs in the same category as the science fiction writers who care about the future, reflect on the past, and attempt to understand what is happening to humans in their own time. His critique of technology is not based in a grouchy antiquarian romanticism. Rather, Vonnegut lived through many changes caused by technology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and clearly saw the negative influence "newfangled contraptions" had on human interaction and relationships. These changes were gravely concerning to him, and he sought to explicate the dangers of uncritical technological advancement in his literature, hopeful that some reader would take note and adjust his or her lifestyle accordingly.

In a similar vein, Vonnegut's opposition to war and weapons of mass destruction did not come from an idealistic notion of a happy reality without war or conflict. Rather, he is concerned with what such weapons said about the people who created them and what they did to the people who possessed them. Perhaps, he reasoned, the desire to create weapons to more effectively destroy enemy civilians is fundamentally improper and springs from a corrupted imagination. Perhaps a refined imagination leads to an appreciation of beauty, and the ability to read beautiful stories in the faces of fellow humans, while a

damaged imagination leads to a desire to reduce human contact, even by cruel means.

When considering where to locate Vonnegut on the spectrum of ideas, it seems improper to place him in any contemporary American political box. He and his thoughts do not fit neatly into party lines. Rather, his critique of modernity was thoroughgoing, attacking war, technology, and the very foundations of liberal individualism as altogether insufficient to meet the felt needs of humans who desire to live and love in community. To be clear, war and technology are not equivalents to liberalism. War and dehumanizing technology are parts of liberal modernity, and perhaps contributors to widespread loneliness, but they are not “liberalism” proper. However, Vonnegut criticizes all three on the grounds that they are opposed to human dignity and the natural communities for which humans are fitted. Vonnegut displayed both a backward-looking admiration for preliberal society and a forward-looking desire to create and maintain a good world for one’s grandchildren. This multi-generational vision runs contrary to the individualism that Vonnegut criticizes and seems to place him squarely in the conversation Deneen and others are currently advancing surrounding similar subjects; Vonnegut provides additional criticisms of modern “ailments” that are parallel and perhaps complementary, though not precisely identical, to criticisms offered by conservative thinkers.

Vonnegut’s proposed solutions to the problems he sees are multifaceted but ultimately center around an increased emphasis on relationship, community, and place. Vonnegut took seriously the commands of Christ to love one’s neighbor and forgive the trespasses of fellow men. Through characters like Eliot Rosewater, Vonnegut showed that a soft love of the world or “love” of generic humanity, as displayed by distant philanthropists and politicians, safely disconnected from the real world, is ultimately meaningless. True love, on this view, is displayed through particular, personal acts of service to real, present people. As Mark T. Mitchell writes, “Because we are embodied creatures, our love is properly conceived in terms of particular places and people. To claim to love the whole world but to lack commitment to a particular place is a false and bloodless version of love. For love must be rooted in particular places and people and only makes sense in light of these basic and concrete commitments” (2013). Vonnegut agrees wholeheartedly.

For these reasons, it seems most proper to assign Vonnegut a place in the ongoing conversation about how a love of community and place can combat the modern disease of loneliness and to label his politics as post-liberal, localist, or communitarian. Vonnegut’s preliminary suggestions to remedy the failings of liberalism are exceedingly applicable and practical, if perhaps incomplete. Get up, go out, have a family, build a community, embrace what makes you

human. These simplistic, explicit injunctions are mere heuristic summaries of the themes developed throughout his work; further political analyses of Vonnegut should seek to interpret the breadth of his literature in light of these summaries and explore further his proposals for flourishing human community.

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