

Carpe Diem: Paul Costello Urges Towns to “Seize the Day”



In *World Historians and Their Goals: Twentieth Century Answers to Modernism* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), author Paul Costello examines seven metahistorians – H. G. Wells, Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, Pitirim Sorokin, Christopher Dawson, Lewis Mumford, and William McNeill – and their often bleak views of the twentieth century.

"Spengler was particularly pessimistic because he saw the declines of civilizations as cyclical," says Costello. But ultimately, people stopped believing in worldwide social and cultural cycles and instead embraced a more modern view of how world history interconnects: "Everyone in the world learns from one another; there are no longer any totally independent civilizations," he says. "They are all part of a progressive civilization, which has its own implications for world organization."

The book was an extension of Costello's PhD research in intellectual history at McGill University. And although he doesn't actively promote the book ("It makes for the most cluttered, dense, Germanic style of writing possible!"), some of its premises presaged his work at the Vermont Council on Rural Development (VCRD), the nonprofit organization where he has for twenty-one years been executive director – and from which he will retire at year's end.

Once world historians began to recognize the significant challenges in their own societies, says Costello, they tried to envisage a future with a renewed sense of community. "You start with 'What do we disagree about? What do we have in common?' Finding ideas you share as a starting point for conversation is the opposite of politics, where you look at what's different and then fight [for your point of view]." He says the process of figuring out how to pragmatically collaborate with people with different opinions went right from his study of history to his work at VCRD.

In 1990, President George Bush issued an Executive Order that established the President's Council on Rural America. The initiative's intent was to build collaborative



councils at the state level, thereby avoiding top-down management issues. These councils took note of which programs worked and which didn't, and this helped integrate state, federal, non-profit, and private sector efforts of community and economic development. The local councils were very modestly subsidized, and when federal funding for them disappeared, so did many of the councils. Those that survived had established deep-rooted missions as either community facilitators or policy boards for rural development.

"VCRD is probably one of the strongest [rural development councils] in the country in that we do both," he says. "We think of the future of our communities as ways to get across political barriers and find what the towns have in common. We're not interested in being a protest movement [laughs] or activating people against each other. We're only interested in what we can all support."

Over the years, he says, VCRD discovered that "really successful communities have momentum, great human capacity, skilled planning people, and an evolved municipal government with community and economic development. ... We help people come together around those issues. We understand that it is important to *not* provide top-down leadership training but rather to coach people and help them build their own skills."

Last year, Costello led the COVID-19 Local Support and Community Action Team, which was part of the governor's Economic Mitigation and Recovery Task Force. "In forums across the state, Vermonters called for change, for seizing this day, for standing together for social justice and economic opportunity, for doing all that is in our power today to respond to the Covid crisis, but also to thinking ahead, and working together toward community and economic renewal in a strong Vermont future." [Costello as quoted in a Nov. 7, 2020, *VtDigger* article]



"We learned a lot from COVID," he says, such as the statewide need for universal child care and broadband systems "and securing and localizing our food systems and energy so we are ready for the next event."

And there *will* be a next event. "World historians have been writing about global pandemic epidemiology for generations, and changes in the disease pool are inevitable," he continues. "Science warns us of cascading catastrophic effects from climate change. To ignore [these issues] would be the greatest folly in world history. To answer them with practical public policy and adaptation is good, but we also have to be very deliberate in changing our economic foundation from one based on internal combustion engines to one that doesn't degrade the environment. It's a no-brainer for us as a species to come to that understanding."

Costello has long respected the work VLCT does in terms of representing local leadership and supporting municipalities, which he calls the backbone of Vermont. "[Executive Director] Ted Brady has been a long-time partner with VCRD as well as a chair of our board," he says. "We've worked with him for more than 15 years. Now he'll be rejoining the VCRD board in his new role, a connection we welcome."

He believes that connecting systemically to the league's work will indeed be healthy. "We'd love to work with the league regarding community leadership and project development. How do we support municipalities in the really different conditions after COVID? What economic and social cultural adjustments are needed as we address racial justice and the changing climate? Issues that may not have been a focus of municipalities in the past are becoming so now."

But he is optimistic. "Municipalities are central to the concept of fundamental human needs," he says. "Beyond our individual behavior we have our cities, we have our regions, we have our states, we have the world. We have to be active at *all* of these levels to successfully address these issues in the future."



"And COVID helped," he continues. "It's a crisis that said 'seize the day.' You're not working to recover to go back to [a former way of life]. You have to go forward from what you've learned to the next challenge that can also be an economic opportunity if seen in the right way."

What does a post-VCRD life look like for Costello? "I don't have a plan," he says. "I may do some consulting. I would like to be useful to people. I could certainly help organizations work to bring people together."

Paul Costello modestly maintains that [*World Historians and Their Goals*](#) ... "is never going to be a *New York Times* best-seller." However, if enough inquisitive readers pony up \$17.99 for a copy (C'mon, that's only four Caramel Flan Lattes at Starbucks!), perhaps we can nudge his tome onto that august book list and give him a *proper* bon voyage as he begins to write – with no publishing advance – the next chapter of his life.

David Gunn

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