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SPEECH

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John Ralston Saul

How to Make Social Cohesion Work

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The megatrends of globalization and digitalization pose challenges for social cohesion. Many people are concerned about their economic future, and right-wing populists are leveraging the internet to spread oversimplified messages and fuel fears. Thought leaders from around the world convened to discuss the future of social cohesion at the Bertelsmann Stiftung's international "Trying Times" conference addressing the issue "Rethinking Social Cohesion" that was held in Berlin from September 4–6, 2019. In his closing speech titled "How to make social cohesion work," Canadian author and President Emeritus of PEN International John Ralston Saul demonstrated that empathy, respect for difference and the willingness to accept the complexity of society rather than exclusion and fear are the factors that pave the way toward a successful future. The social cohesion of the future needs both diversity and community. Read his speech in full [here](#).



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John Ralston Saul

How to Make Social Cohesion Work

Closing speech at the “Trying Times” conference 2019

Social cohesion is a powerful concept that is easily misused. There are a lot of people – particularly in Europe today – who use the term almost as code to suggest that you can only have peace and successful governance if everybody is the same. What they mean by “the same” is vague, but it usually comes down to 19th century concepts of how a nation state is supposed to reflect a single people, a single race, a single mythology, a single religion and so on. The monolithic model.

That is why the definition of social cohesion drafted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung at the “Trying Times” conference matters. Built into their idea is the importance of resilient social relations, the importance of a sense of belonging for all people in society, and a commitment to the common good. The approach they have taken contains ethics and empathy; it assumes diversity and community, the two woven together. This definition is not built on the old monolithic fixed concepts of the Westphalian nation-state.

Here we are invited to embrace ideas of inclusion rather than integration. After all, integration suggests a fixed or static society into which everybody must fit. In other words, it is the model of a dead society. On the other hand, if you have inclusion, then people will figure out quite naturally how to fit in, how to belong. After all, people do want to belong if they are given the opportunity. Integration is a forced idea. Inclusion is a humanist concept.



We ended our day of conversations yesterday with Gal Alon saying that the West had crossed a red line. A dangerous line. He argued that we had crossed that line

as a result of intentional policies. That these had been designed so we would not be able to find our way back to the humanist side of the line. These intentional policies were based on the old monolithic idea of rational progress in which we have no choice but to go together as one in a single direction declared to be forward. As if we were on a narrow-gauge railway track and progress were defined as moving the train straight ahead to some invisible future. There are no other options. This is an ideological or romantic version of how the world really works. In the real world, we're usually going in multiple directions at the same time. These are not necessarily contradictory, but many of them are. Where we end up is largely the result of the actions we take as citizens, whether leaders or not, to produce some sense of meaning out of these contradictory trends.

So today we are in a moment of crisis. A terrible crisis. At the same time, over the last 70 years we have put in place unprecedented public services and social protections. This has been an astonishing period when it comes to the formalizing of protections for human rights, and for humans finding their own way to live. There has been a truly remarkable growth in the acceptance by most of us that other people are not necessarily going to live the same way we do.

What we don't know is whether these multiple trends towards a fairer, more open society, one filled with empathy and respect for the other, will stand firm. Or whether the crises, of which we all talk all the time, will create such an atmosphere of fear that we will set about shutting ourselves down in a defensive manner, undermining these fairly recent protections and reverting back towards an old anti-democratic idea; that one of the main roles of government is to control people's private lives, while leaving interest groups relatively free to do what they want to the public good.

Put another way, our era would have been perfectly understandable to the great Neapolitan philosopher Giamattista Vico and totally incomprehensible to Descartes. In other words, if we can keep ourselves out of the grip of fear, we will be able to develop a complex narrative, a story in which we are all characters.

One of the most complicated problems is that ours is an era of aggressive propaganda. New kinds of propaganda. The use of language in a very destructive way to bring back concepts of racism and exclusion. Today people talk about fake news. They could just as well talk about linguistic chaos.

Let me give you a tiny example. Every day the term “Liberal Democracy” is raised as the battle flag of humanism. But what does this mean? Liberal means almost anything to anyone. It has completely different meanings in Europe versus North America. It moves from quite far to the right to quite far to the left. Besides, why would anybody think that you could strengthen a noun by adding an adjective?

Democracy is the noun, and we know more or less what that means. If you add liberal as an adjective, you weaken the concept of democracy. Negative nationalists like Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Hungarian

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Prime Minister Viktor Orban say, more or less, “We don’t believe in Liberal Democracy, we believe in Democracy.” In other words, by attaching ourselves to a concept weakened by an adjective, we leave the concept itself in the hands of the people we oppose. It is always very dangerous, when you are engaged in public arguments, to abandon the central position in order to hide behind a marginal position. It is certainly the wrong strategy today.

Stephan Vopel from Bertelsmann Stiftung has said that social cohesion is crumbling on two fronts. A loss of trust in institutions and a perception that fairness no longer shapes the public space. This is largely the result of a good half-century of mistaking a very particular economic theory – globalization – for a social project. Yes, of course, what is called globalization has brought some economic advantages. But the lowered levels of unemployment it has produced have left people poor or feeling poor. It has demeaned the concept of the citizen so that individuals are forced to see themselves as mere instruments of economic interest. It has driven the normalization of dehumanization. People can easily identify the tools of this

dehumanization. They have only to look at the unfair tax rates, the return of economic disparities to pre-WWI levels, and the normalization of corruption.

All of this is central to what people perceive as an attack on social cohesion. They feel that social cohesion – the very idea of society – is crumbling. Yesterday, psychiatrist and stress expert Mazda Adli talked eloquently about the terrifying

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growth in loneliness as a major health impediment. Think of our new means of communications and the fact that most of us live very close together in cities. The fact that the outcome is loneliness is startling. It is a comment

not on the cities, but on how we have come to see “work”. How we have promoted a certain view of economics and self-interest over citizenship and the public good. We are now expected to go to work, not as bodies of empathy, but as bodies of self-interest.

When you ask yourself why we’re seeing the return of some of the worst characteristics of the old 19th century and early 20th century nation-states, you have only to work your way back through those issues of dehumanization and the promotion of self-interest as a solution to social needs.

The rise today of negative populism and negative forms of nationalism tells you a great deal about what has been going wrong. For the last half-century, we’ve been constantly told that the power of the nation-state is collapsing. That this collapse is inevitable. It is that inevitability argument which is responsible for much of the negative reaction we’re experiencing today and the return of the negative aspects of the old nation-states. Why?

Well, if the nation-state loses its power, then the positive forces – the forces of citizen power – are undermined. What is left is a vacuum.

After all, the basis of democracy is simple and concrete. It's about citizens living in communities in particular places. That doesn't have to be about race. Or about one group being better than another. It's about people being responsible for each other and for places. If today you are worried, for example, about the environmental crisis, then you have only to look at the central role that communities must play – people taking responsibility for the places in which we live and projecting that responsibility into a larger world. If we ignore the importance of belonging and community and citizenship in favor of some abstract idea of international interests, then the result will be an explosion in the negative forces which we are experiencing today. Real internationalism is about building links between individual citizens and groups of citizens. It is not about the weakening, even destruction of the idea of citizenship and its replacement by some vague, romantic abstraction. And I should add that people like us should be very, very careful when we talk about a borderless world in which everyone is moving around. The reality is that that may be the life of 1.5% of the population of the world – if that. For most people, for 98% or more of the global population, the world is not borderless. Most people are not moving around unless, at one extreme, they are on brief holidays or, at the other extreme, they are driven to do so by instability – political or economic refugees. So, elites have to be incredibly careful not to mistake their way of life for that of the rest of the population.

The reality is that there is only one place in which all citizens can feel fully comfortable. And that is in our communities. From those communities, they – we – emerge as the source of legitimacy. Legitimacy comes out of real communities. And it is an expression of social cohesion. The relationship between citizenship and place is key. People live somewhere. This is not at all meant to be a denial of the importance of the regional or the national or the international. Nor is it a denial of the possibility that we could invent new forms of citizenship. Citizenship is not a romantic idea. It is a practical idea of responsibility coming out of inclusion and belonging. It is entirely possible that we can come up with new methods, partly helped by the constant revolutions going on today in technology. But it's a terrible mistake – as we've seen over the last few years – to believe that people having

brief, technologically enabled relationships with people they don't know actually replaces real people, real places and real relationships.



It's fascinating today that so much of the ugly populism and nationalism which is emerging is based upon a refusal of the ideas of immigration, diversity and inclusion. I say this because it's hard to imagine a greater force for reimagining social cohesion in an entirely positive way than immigration. Yes, the dominant narrative says the opposite. Yes, politicians are increasingly terrified by the idea of immigration and its relationship to the rise of negative populism, negative nationalism and racism. They are terrified by the idea that the Westphalian model might actually be in danger. Of course, with important experiments like Europe there has been the illusion that you could move to a new model simply via administration. But that isn't how it works. People have to be able to imagine themselves as belonging to multifaceted and multileveled societies in order to live their social cohesion.

On the other hand, if they fear losing their position, if they fear being marginalized, then there will be fear. And for people on the extremes there is nothing easier than fear to take advantage of. How? By provoking romanticism for the old monolithic nation-state model. They turn this into what looks like an attractive fallback position. A position of comfort in which people will not merely belong, but will belong by using their local power to exclude others. They will feel better by denying people empathy. The warning signs of all this have been there since the mid-1990s. The mainstream leadership throughout the West has had its head down for decades, hoping desperately that things would work out. Now, when it is clear that fear is spreading and becoming increasingly dangerous, it is very late to respond.

The only way out is to embrace strong arguments in favor of what I would call non-monolithic societies. Complex societies with multiple personalities. The positive tensions of those kinds of societies represent a real answer to the resurgent

monolithic top-down version in which power is meant to produce a simple and certain idea of what belonging and social cohesion might entail. When I talk about using strong arguments in favor of non-monolithic societies, what I'm saying is that diversity and the non-monolithic are fundamentally grassroots. They are all about people getting to know each other, people living together who are not at first glance alike. This is all about embracing complexity and enjoying it, as opposed to being frightened of it.

I mentioned the EU in passing. Yes, it is a great experiment, and it must be developed. But it is still a very abstract and administrative experiment. It has not, as of yet, addressed the idea that legitimacy emerges out of citizenship with all of its responsibilities. When you take a long, calm look at what is described as the immigration crisis today, you can see that it is largely about not having imagined or reimagined what we would do after the Westphalian nation-state. We have not reached into ourselves and thought about what that would look like for citizens, for real people, as opposed to for administrative bodies and regulations.

For example, Western democracies and particularly European democracies have been profoundly unconscious about their own immigration history. Since the end of the last World War, most European countries have been intense immigration societies, year after year, for almost 70 years. Germany and France were heavy immigration nations from the 1930s, with the Poles, Italians and Catalans coming in large numbers. After the horror of the Nazi period, you again find Germany to be an intense immigration country, starting with the arrival after centuries elsewhere of German speakers from all over Europe, and then the arrival of so-called *gastarbeiter*, and then the arrival of so many refugees leading right up to the remarkable acceptance of Syrian refugees.

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The dominant atmosphere of fear today means that people are endlessly talking about or listening to a discourse concentrated on what might not be working. The reality is that in Germany, in France, in Italy, amazing things have been done

Tension can be a creative and positive force.

to include immigrants and refugees, particularly at the community level. People, churches, mayoralities, have put their heart into making this work. The difficulty is that the nations as a whole, and Europe as a whole, have not embraced the truth of their own successful past as immigrant nations. Nor have they embraced the

idea that social cohesion is all about complexity. So, there is an urgent need to focus, for example, on the idea that successful societies are not about passivity or passive comfort. Successful societies are all about what I would call positive tension. You need tension in order to produce happiness. And that tension can be a creative and positive force. It produces enormous energies.

What's more, the newcomers bring with them ambitions, dreams and desires. They want to work. They want to succeed. They want to engage. The meeting between those newcomers and those who are born here can produce a remarkable energy, a remarkable positive tension, if we allow it to.

Yes, of course, there are problems. Why wouldn't there be? There are problems in all societies over major issues. But there are also strong democratic and humanist models of society in place. Yes, there have been attempts to weaken them over the last 70 years, but they are still very much in place. And we need to build on that meeting between the humanist models and the newcomers in order to embrace the positive tension of immigration as a creative force.

We really need to adopt the idea of multiple identities – what I call in a joke, which I think only works in English, a “multiple personality order.” In many ways, those who have power have never liked the idea that people could have multiple personalities, multiple loyalties, multiple identities. The old Westphalian model, the old nationalist model, was about those with power reducing the citizens to the simplest possible model, in which social cohesion represented the removal of complexity. The removal of positive tensions. As I have said, this in the end produces weakness and passivity – a sense of loss of belonging. That's what opens the door to ideologies and ideologues who seek to govern through fear. This is completely different from learning to relax, to feel alive, with the exciting engagement of complexity and positive tension.

I'll give you a simple example of this. There is an almost inescapable discourse at the receiving end when it comes to people arriving as immigrants or refugees. We can't help feeling and saying out loud that these newcomers are lucky and that we are generous. Well, pause for a moment and reimagine that situation. The truth is that nobody wants to leave their own country. They leave because they feel they cannot stay. This may be because of war, violence, disorder. It may be because of inescapable poverty or the conviction that there is no way ahead. And so, when people become immigrants or refugees and arrive in Germany or in Canada or elsewhere, they arrive having already demonstrated an enormous sense of consciousness – the consciousness that's needed in order to change countries, often to bring your whole family to a different civilization. This also demonstrates a capacity for decisiveness. These are difficult, difficult decisions. Whatever the circumstances, it takes enormous courage to leave the civilization you have been brought up in and to change to another. These three characteristics – consciousness, decisiveness, courage – are three of the most important descriptors of an engaged citizen. Most people who have been born in a stable country have never had to prove that they are conscious, decisive or courageous. If you think of it this way, you begin to realize how lucky we are to be receiving people who begin with these strong characteristics – people who have already demonstrated they have the strengths to become engaged citizens.

I would add another simple element. Immigration should be thought in the most noble of terms. A noble status. A noble word. Noble for all the reasons I have been explaining.

Let me take you in another direction on the same subject. All the talk in Europe of a crisis caused by the nearness of Africa and the Middle East could be interpreted in many other ways. What is the nature of this crisis? Are there practical things that could and should have been done long ago to remove the atmosphere of crisis within Europe?

One simple example is that no country in Europe has a proper Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, in spite of long histories of immigration.

This whole area falls under the authority of the Minister of the Interior – the minister who is in charge of public order, of police, of security. How could this do anything but turn immigration into a crisis. I'm not saying that everyone in the Ministry of the Interior is going to act badly. That's not the point. The point is that their job is order, not inclusion or engaged citizenship or positive tension or complexity.

How do you change that situation? How do you create a more interesting and positive political conversation around the subject of immigration, refugees and citizenship?

The obvious first step is that you need a separate, powerful minister at the cabinet table - a Minister of Citizenship and Immigration. Of course, the Minister of the Interior may have an important role to play. Security can be very important. But it is a completely different cabinet conversation when there is a minister of equal power devoted to citizenship – a minister who is part of the inner cabinet along with the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and so on. Someone who is charged with thinking about immigration, refugees and citizenship as their primary topic, not as a subsidiary topic under security. If you have that Minister, you will soon have a large, specialized civil service filled with people who really understand these topics. People who do not fall under the security umbrella. If you have the minister and the civil service, you'll find it is far easier to develop interesting, creative policies when it comes to immigration, refugees and citizenship.

You will then find government in its political and administrative forms capable of entering into conversations with the citizenry at large in a transparent and positive way on this subject. You'll find that the atmosphere of fear will lessen. There are all sorts of fascinating elements that go along with this. For example, some of your mayors are starting to introduce informal celebrations of citizenship. In other words, people still receive their citizenship in the mail, in the old bureaucratic and demeaning way. The mayors are now attempting to make the experience more positive by inviting them to a celebration party at city hall.

This is nice. But it is not what new citizens want and need. And it is not what the country needs. As simple a tool as a public, transparent, formal, legal and obligatory celebration of citizenship – a citizenship ceremony – changes everything. New citizens want to be recognized publicly for having made such an important choice – a choice which changes their lives. They want to be included publicly, and to be seen to be included. They want to swear allegiance publicly, so that everybody knows they have made an important choice. Once you have these legal celebrations, you'll find very quickly that the candidates who are to be sworn in arrive on the day with their families and friends, with their colleagues from the factory or the office. You'll find that all sorts of local citizens will want to come to congratulate them and to get to know them. It's strange how such a simple tool can play such an important role in changing the atmosphere around immigration.



It is truly remarkable what Germany did with Syrian refugees. Frankly, the country does not give itself nearly enough credit for how courageous it was to take such an important leap forward. I hear from many people that at the grassroots level this has produced enormous community engagement. Why then, is there to some extent a sour taste, with people focused on what hasn't worked? A lot of that comes from the absence of the essential structures I've been describing. It can't work in the long run for individual citizens or isolated civil society groups to attempt to support immigrants. This public engagement is essential, but it has to be part of a much larger organization.

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In other words, it will take real work to clarify what citizen engagement looks like. For example, volunteerism is not charity. This must be clear. Volunteerism is citizen engagement. What I've seen work, certainly in Canada where we take a million people every three years – that is to say approximately 1% of the population per year – is that immigration is a positive force if you think of it as dependent on two

large supporting elements. On one side you have government, policy and experts. The Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship that I've been describing, and all the policies which will emerge from that. On the other side, you have an enormous pool of well-organized citizens engaged in this area. Some of them will be in small or large NGOs. Some of them will be in churches, synagogues or mosques. But there will be a sense that they are all part of a policy which reaches from the smallest village to the national government. And you'll suddenly realize, when you have this, that you can't make it work simply with government policy. Nor can you make it work simply with civil society, particularly if it is not well structured. You need both. A half which is government; another half made up of citizen engagement. Then you can hope for social cohesion at its strongest.

There is much talk that one of the ways to strengthen social cohesion is by scaling up some of the civil society programs which already exist. Or scaling up some of the technical breakthroughs which are already happening. The trouble is, the humanists will never beat the fear mongers and the negative populists when it comes to scaling up. It's far easier to scale up fear and exclusion in any society, anywhere, anything. The false populists are the masters of the techniques of easy scaling up.

And there's a lot of talk about the role of the internet in all of this. There are many mentions of Tunisia, the Arab Spring, MeToo. But when you look at these experiences, you find that the internet played a positive role in a very simple and short-term way. More as an enabling force.

Democracy is built on societies which are complicated and grassroots.

And we already see that the forces of fear are using the internet with far greater ease in order to develop long-term content and organization. It's easy for them. They are not limited by complexity, or positive tension, or belonging, or inclusion, or multiple personalities or honesty or ethics. They are selling the simplest of comforting lies. And they are skipping around the reality of democracy – that democracy is built

on societies which are complicated and grassroots, and that real social cohesion is an expression of that complexity.

So yes, there are some scaling up possibilities. But this is secondary to the heavy lifting of real people in real societies learning every day how to live together, getting to know each other, learning how difference can be a strength, not a weakness. As individual citizens learn these things, they also learn that they are all part of pulling their humanist ideas into a larger picture of a larger society.

In other words, you have to build social cohesion. You have to reinvent public libraries as active public spaces. You need hiring agencies specialized in refugees so that they can get that first jump up into the dignity of mainstream employment. You need hundreds of thousands of inclusion projects. Projects which have to be developed, and talked about, and shared, and moved about within a big country like Germany, but also between countries. You need to work out how to put culture at the very centre of this whole concept of complexity. That doesn't mean bringing people into museums and art galleries in order to tell them that this is the culture they are now part of. It means encouraging them to come into those places in order to say "Look, here's what we've done so far. A lot of it is really wonderful. Now that you're here, what are you going to add to it? What are you going to try to change? What's your vision?"

It is inevitable that any immigrant or group of immigrants is going to bring a fresh eye and an inventive spirit, a cutting-edge courage, to thinking about the culture of the country they are joining. I think I've mentioned to some of you that the Institute for Canadian Citizenship, which I co-chair, has a cultural program called CANOO, which involves all new citizens being offered a free one-year membership starting on the day of their citizenship ceremony. This means that they become members of virtually every museum and art gallery in the country. Increasingly, it involves them being offered free tickets for everything from operas and symphonies to plays and comic performances. Again, the idea is that, as they come into these established public institutions by the tens of thousands, and then the hundreds of

thousands, they need to be welcomed and met and told about what it is they are inheriting as new citizens. But that is only a first step. They also need to know that their ideas and their contributions will be important. You can imagine any mother or father going around a public gallery thinking, “If my daughter were an artist, she could create something new and exciting that might find a place in these palaces of culture; something that might bring a new vision; that might change the way people imagine, see, act.” Culture itself and these institutions belong at the very centre of the concept of social cohesion as a form of complexity, of learning to live with complexity.



Let me finish with a story which links six countries. In the late 1970s, we all know there was a refugee crisis involving the Vietnamese boat people. They came to many parts of the world. In Canada, the government said they would take 25,000. Citizens groups said this was not nearly enough. The government said, “All right, in that case you pay.” What followed was a complex negotiation between government and civil society. The government put legal structures in place as well as standards. And the outcome was that families, churches, synagogues, mosques, unions, offices could sponsor refugees. Yes, there was a fixed amount of money they had to guarantee in order to cover the family’s first year in the country – which included such things as rent and furniture and food. But the money was secondary. The real point is that those who sponsored the immigrants/refugees became like godparents. It was their job to introduce the newcomers to society, to the community, to how it worked. Some of them would drive them around, some of them would help them work out which were the best schools for the kids. They would help get their kids involved in sports. Help them with the public healthcare system, with language classes, with government requirements, with job applications and so on. And the result, almost inevitably, was that the new citizens and those who sponsored them become friends for life.

The practical outcome was that this initiative tripled the number of Vietnamese boat people brought in. The program continues to this day and has constantly improved. So far, it has sponsored about 300,000 people.

Then came the Syrian crisis. So far, we have taken in about 75,000. Half of these people were sponsored by citizen groups. We have now learned that a single family is not nearly enough to sponsor a refugee family. It takes about five families to do it well. The churches, synagogues and mosques work very well together. And the fact is that those refugees who are sponsored by citizens and citizen groups do better faster than those who are simply government-sponsored. There is now a general acceptance – in both the very large Ministry of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship and within civil society as a whole -- that we need to expand the system.

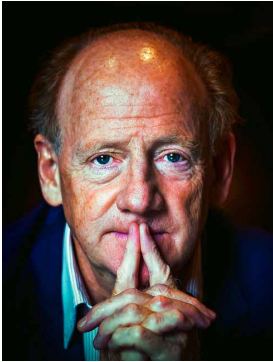
The end of the story is that in 2016, delegations from the United Kingdom, Germany, New Zealand, the United States and Australia came to Canada to have a look at this system and to work out how to adopt it to their own particular conditions. The United Kingdom now has a functioning pilot project. Germany is starting a pilot program this year with 125 families. The Bertelsmann Stiftung has been a central driving force in this project. It's called Neustart im Team (NesT) (New Start in a Team). My own belief is that it will grow very fast in Germany and be a big success here. I think that German society will find it an amazing tool for bringing together established citizens and those who will become new citizens.

*Immigration is perhaps
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This is a perfect example of how immigration is perhaps the key new force in building social cohesion. The concepts of fear which produce a feeling that assimilation and integration is the way to go can slowly disappear and be replaced by a system of natural inclusion based on community. A beautiful story.



John Ralston Saul



*John Ralston Saul is an award-winning essayist and novelist, considered Canada's leading public intellectual. In *The Collapse of Globalism*, Saul predicted the 2007–2008 economic crisis years before it happened, as well as the current rise of populism and xenophobia. Declared a “prophet” by TIME magazine, his fourteen works have been translated into twenty-eight languages in thirty-seven countries.*

*Many of his novels and essays have been translated into German, including two of his essays *Der Markt frisst seine Kinder: Wider die Ökonomisierung der Gesellschaft* and *Von Erdbeeren, Wirtschaftsgipfeln und anderen Zumutungen des 21. Jahrhunderts* (*The Unconscious Civilization* and *The Doubter's Companion*).*

Saul is the Co-Founder and Co-Chair of both 6 Degrees, the Global Forum for Inclusion, and the Institute for Canadian Citizenship (ICC), a national organization promoting the inclusion of new citizens. He is a leading voice in the international movement supporting immigrants and refugees. A longtime champion of freedom of expression, Saul was the elected President of PEN International from 2009 to 2015, the only Canadian writer elected to this position in 97 years.

Address | Contact

Bertelsmann Stiftung
Carl-Bertelsmann-Straße 256
33311 Gütersloh
Germany
Phone +49 5241 81-0

Dr. Ulrike Spohn
Project Manager
Program Living Values
Phone +49 5241 81-81398
ulrike.spohn@bertelsmann-stiftung.de

www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/tryingtimes