**Building Community Fabric on a Conceptual Level, its Proponents in the Burnham Center and InclusioNado, and the Practical Case of the Coronado Unified School District**

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**Introduction**

The book *Alienated America*, by Timothy Carney, begins with a description of the sociopolitical conditions across rural America that led to an outpouring of support for Donald Trump as a Presidential candidate in 2016. T rue to his title, Carney illustrates a great division in American society, especially involving those “left behind” by modernization and development in the urban workforce and industry. While many politicians chose to ignore these sparsely populated, geographically isolated, and economically underdeveloped regions and their inhabitants – or blame them for their own situation (Carney, p. 29) – Donald Trump achieved great success by appealing to the frustrations and perceived oppression of these communities. The way in which Trump was able to effectively weaponize both the substantive symptoms and the perception of this alienation serves as a blatant warning for how severe this phenomenon has become in our country. This reality makes our work at the Burnham Center for Community Advancement and that of community organizations like InclusioNado to reverse this alienation through the reparation of community fabric all the more essential.

In 2021, an incident occurred at Coronado High School in San Diego County where students at the high school – predominately affluent, white children – threw tortillas on the court during a basketball game against a mostly Hispanic team from another part of the county. Since this blatant show of racism and the fallout that came in its aftermath, community organizations like the Burnham Center and InclusioNado have been working to strategize the best ways to repair the fabric that has been torn in this process. Throughout this report, I will review, critique, and reference the content of *Alienated America* to provide context and perspective for the work that we as the Burnham Center and our partner InclusioNado have ahead of us in regards to the situation in Coronado. I will also explore the other key issues that have come to the forefront of my consideration within my role at the Burnham Center: specifically, the mistreatment of minority students , the lack of accountability shown in response, and the necessary considerations involved with rebuilding the fabric of the Coronado community in conjunction with InclusioNado.

**Alienated America**

Timothy Carney’s *Alienated America* primarily discusses the departure from civil society and community togetherness that America has seemingly undergone in the past couple decades. Specifically, Carney evaluates Donald Trump’s rise to power through the lens of his followers “alienated” in rural America by traditional politicians with mounting frustration as a symptom of this lack of community. He then goes on to discuss the dissolution of civil society (particularly with regards to religion and church as a facet of community, the dissolution of family as a facet of community with reference to a changing economy and familial roles, over-centralization of government as an enemy of civil society, hyper-individualism as an enemy of community, and finally dives deeper into the divide between the people in “Trump country” and the “Elites” of society that have become so far alienated from each other. Much of the praise for *Alienated America* is for Carney’s reassessment of the causes of Trump’s election and the motives behind his supporters, particularly in connection to a loss of civil society and community in America, and I believe that the former analysis is undoubtedly the strong point of the book. Carney provides a much more blameless, nuanced take on the circumstances experienced by Trump supporters in rural America centered around their alienation from civil society and the nation’s progression away from institutions like the church and traditional marriage. The author provided substantial evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, to this end, and I think that he accurately synthesized much of this evidence in his assessment of Trump supporters.

However, many of Carney’s other points seemed unevidenced, illogical, and severely biased. It is important to consider the context surrounding a book’s author as well as the book itself, and thus it is important to understand that Carney is a Catholic, super conservative political writer employed by right wing think tanks and newspapers and has exhibited strong biases in his previous work. He is the author of a book called “Obamanomics: How Barack Obama is Bankrupting You, and Enriching His Wall Street Friends, Corporate Lobbyists, and Union Bosses”, admits to registering as Democrat to change the makeup of his local government to be more conservative, is an extremely outspoken opponent of abortion and of other womens’ rights, and supported Donald Trump after his election. While Carney’s political affiliation has no impact on the validity of his arguments, his biases seem to severely affect his ability to identify certain phenomena.

For example, Carney spends a significant chunk of the book decrying “big government”, over-centralization, and national social systems – followed by an enthusiastic defense of free market capitalism. Both of these stances, he argues, are in support of civil society, which he believes subsides “when central government grows past a certain point” (Carney, p. 157) and benefits from the individual freedoms of Adam Smith-esque free enterprise. The answers seem to be right in front of Carney, but he is missing them; in reality it is unfettered capitalism, not big government, that has precluded the circumstances that most rural Trump supporters find themselves in. Unlike other sections, Carney’s discussions on the evils of progressive governance and the “satisfying trait[s] of free enterprise” (Carney, p. 179) are distinctly free of data and rely only on anecdotal evidence and out-of-context political references. As a result, the author damages his credibility by making ridiculous assertions such as those that the large profit margins of huge corporations are a result of too much, not too little, government regulation, and that the nature of free market capitalism “keeps businesses, even the titans of the industry, on their toes” because “anyone can undercut them” and “nobody is safe” (Carney, p. 179). Carney’s anti-government regulation bias has clearly blinded him to a modern reality dominated by corporate giants that cannot be undercut because their immense accumulation of wealth has led to complete supply chain and logistical control that precludes any smaller company from undercutting or otherwise competing with them. As their profits continue to balloon, these corporations continue to grow their margins and feed into executive salaries and further expansion, while offering the lowest wages possible to employees. Does the humongous salary gap between workers and executives, the failure of small government to increase minimum wage to a living wage, and the corporate greed allowed and encouraged by unfettered free market capitalism not harm civil society and community? By failing to recognize that capitalism in its current form is a majorly significant detriment to civil society in America, Carney undermines his credibility and misses a key factor involved in the phenomena he discusses.

**Civil Society and Inequity**

This brings me to what I believe to be the most significant shortcoming in the content of *Alienated America* and in the approach, as I understand it, of many of the organizations involved in Coronado to the situation on their hands. The concept of alienation and the dissolution of community is, in its purest form, a question of inequity. If more of society went to church, our communities would be stronger, according to Carney – this is a shared experience and togetherness that must be shared in some equitable manner by all in order to promote community. The American Dream – for which “civil society and local community are the beating heart” (Carney, 91) – is entirely a matter of equity; specifically, an equitable chance to succeed or make it big. Without so much inequity in the economy, in social practices, and in the range of individual choices involved in things like sexual liberation and gig-based career paths, Carney would undeniably agree that civil society would be stronger and tighter knit. The shortcoming inherent in failing to recognize the so-called dissolution of civil society as a symptom of inequity is the lack of a discussion about *all* inequity in our society, especially that caused by the systemic oppression of marginalized groups. Carney barely mentions race in *Alienated America*. How can a relevant discussion on inequity in America not speak to one of the greatest factors in inequity? An argument that discusses the socioeconomic gaps that lead to alienation in American society while somehow ignoring the massive socioeconomic gaps tied to race cannot be a valid or well-considered argument. How can we discuss the dissolution of community fabric without discussing the racism, discrimination, and prejudice that causes it? When Russia’s counterintelligence attacks targeted the United States during our presidential elections, our own intelligence services identified racism as the primary weakness that could be exploited in the assault against our civil society. How, then, is the systemic oppression and racism that may be the greatest dissolver of community fabric – as evident in the case of the Coronado Unified School District – not one of the foremost considerations in the discussion of community fabric? I firmly believe that our organization in the Burnham Center and the other organizations we collaborate with to address the issues of damaged community relations in Coronado must overcome this key oversight, as Carney failed to do.

**The Work in Coronado & Our Partner InclusioNado**

When Bill Ponder at the Burnham Center first filled me in on his meeting with InclusioNado, a community organization whose mission is to “[empower] students at Coronado Unified School District and [engage] the community to make CUSD a safe place for all students” (InclusioNado.org), I was not surprised to hear of the mistreatment that students of color faced in school in Coronado Unified School District. Given the nature of an ultra-wealthy, ~86% white, and conservative community (Census.gov) where parents of students want to censor the use of words like ‘equity’, ‘diversity’, and ‘inclusion’ (InclusioNado.org), it should come as no surprise to anyone that this is not a safe space for students of other racial backgrounds. It was even comforting to me that at least some teachers and parents reported this mistreatment that occurred, despite the fact that no action was ever taken to hold the perpetrators accountable. In order to fulfill the Burnham Center’s mission of building community fabric in a circumstance such as this, I believe it is important to consider two factors. First, the fabric connecting the majority of the community is as intact as ever – only the racial minorities and the white members of the community who feel aligned with their plight are in a position of dissent. Second, whatever threads of fabric connect the marginalized members of the Coronado population with the majority are fraught with discriminatory tension and thus inherently weakened. Without addressing the root issue of racism and long-harbored biases, rebuilding the fabric that connects these marginalized people to the greater community will be a temporary mend at best. Therefore, while it may seem to damage the fabric of the Coronado community in the short term, anti-racism and equitable policies and changes must be pursued and enacted in the most effective manner possible in order to strengthen the ties of the *whole* community in the long run – not just the white people.

**Conclusion**

As an outsider both to Coronado and to San Diego County at large, I do not pretend to know the Coronado community or the larger local sociopolitical landscape well enough to propose specific, actionable solutions to the challenges at hand. InclusioNado, however, does, and I believe that they should take the lead in any events our coalition of organizations pursues. It is unclear to me based on my limited knowledge whether InclusioNado is entirely led by people of color or just mostly, but either way, those marginalized groups who are most affected by the racism and discrimination that remains pervasive in the school district should be the voices that are given the most merit in ideating and implementing solutions. Moreover, it would be disingenuous and problematic for me as an outsider to try to tell InclusioNado, the experts on their own circumstances, the best ways to proceed, and instead us as the Burnham Center should be receptive to their ideas and be willing to support however they wish to address the issues at hand.

With that being said, I believe it will be key moving forward to attack the situation on two fronts; namely, both through grassroots organizing and radical activism on the part of InclusioNado and students and through political organizing in order to change the makeup of the school board and encourage more incremental change through the bureaucratic process of the school district. I do not have much confidence in the potential of either method alone to bring about the necessary changes, but my hope is that by utilizing the connections and resources of other organizations like our own, the ACLU, and possibly the NCRC, InclusioNado can spearhead a coalition that works both on the activism front and on the political front in order to push the incumbent majority population in Coronado to realize the need for change and pressure them to enact that change. Only by addressing the inequalities and racism rampant in Coronado on this larger scale will we be able to reduce the instances of blatant discrimination and mistreatment that people of color face in the Coronado Unified School District, and eventually serve to rebuild the fabric of the *whole* Coronado community by focusing on the parts which are most frayed.

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