# Social Ontologies as Bases for Program Theories

*Comprehensive Theories of Change*

*This document presents nineteen distinctive social ontologies—different answers to the question of what a society fundamentally is and where positive development comes from. Each ontology generates its own theory of change with characteristic mechanisms, assumptions, and blind spots.*

For each ontology, we describe: the fundamental substrate it posits; what it takes society to be; where it sees change as coming from; an elaborated theory of change explaining the mechanisms through which transformation occurs; the program theories it generates; what makes it distinctive; and its characteristic blind spots.

Real-world movements and organizations often combine several ontologies in their work. This typology is designed to make such combinations visible and to reveal possibilities that may be missing in any particular program.

## I. Person-centered ontologies

### 1) Individualist-behavioral ontology

**Substrate:** Individual persons as choice-makers responding to incentives and information.

**Society is:** An aggregate outcome of individual decisions. Social patterns, institutions, and collective outcomes are understood as the cumulative result of many individual choices. There is no irreducible 'social' level—only individuals choosing and acting.

**Change comes from:** Altering incentives, information, skills, or decision environments so that individuals make different choices.

#### *Theory of change*

The individualist-behavioral theory of change rests on a model of humans as decision-makers who respond to the incentive structures and information environments they encounter. Change happens when the calculus of individual choice shifts.

The core mechanisms include:

Incentive modification: By changing the costs and benefits attached to different choices—through prices, taxes, subsidies, rewards, or penalties—individual behavior can be redirected. If sustainable products become cheaper or status-conferring, more people will choose them. If corruption becomes riskier, fewer officials will engage in it.

Information provision: Many suboptimal choices stem from ignorance, misinformation, or cognitive limitations. Providing accurate information, making consequences salient, or simplifying complex choices can shift behavior. Nutrition labels, carbon footprint disclosures, and public health campaigns operate through this mechanism.

Choice architecture and nudges: Drawing on behavioral economics, this approach recognizes that how choices are framed and presented affects outcomes. Default options, simplification, social comparison feedback, and timely prompts can steer behavior without restricting options. The mechanism is not coercion but design of the decision environment.

Skill and capacity building: Sometimes people would choose differently if they had the capabilities to do so. Education, training, and personal development expand the repertoire of possible choices.

Leadership development assumes that equipping individuals with skills will cascade into organizational and social improvement.

The implicit causal model is aggregative: if enough individuals change their behavior, collective outcomes change. A cleaner environment results from millions of greener consumer choices. A healthier society results from millions of better lifestyle decisions. The locus of agency is the individual, and the mechanism is choice modification through environmental design.

This theory tends to assume relatively autonomous individuals responding rationally (or predictably irrationally) to their environment. It is powerful when individual choices genuinely drive outcomes and when incentives can be effectively redesigned. It struggles when outcomes are determined by structural constraints, collective action problems, or power dynamics that individual choice cannot easily shift.

**Program theories:** Nudges, behavior change campaigns, consumer choice activism, education, leadership development, mental health and wellbeing interventions, entrepreneurship promotion, gamification of prosocial behavior, social marketing.

**Distinctive because:** The individual is the explanatory primitive; collective patterns are epiphenomenal. Social outcomes are understood as the sum of individual choices, making personal transformation the key lever for social change.

**Blind spots:** Can underplay power, structure, and collective dynamics. May blame individuals for outcomes shaped by forces beyond their control. Struggles with collective action problems where individual rationality produces collective irrationality.

## 2) Psychological-developmental ontology

**Substrate:** Inner capacities—cognitive, moral, emotional development; consciousness and meaning-making structures.

**Society is:** A collective expression of the developmental stage of its members. Culture, institutions, and politics reflect the prevailing levels of psychological maturity, moral reasoning, and consciousness in a population.

**Change comes from:** Expanding capacities for perspective-taking, complexity-handling, self-regulation, and compassion. As individuals develop, they become capable of more inclusive, nuanced, and wise action.

### *Theory of change*

The psychological-developmental theory of change posits that social evolution depends on the evolution of human consciousness and psychological capacity. Outer transformation follows inner transformation.

The core mechanisms include:

Vertical development: Drawing on stage theories (Piaget, Kohlberg, Kegan, Loevinger, Cook-Greuter), this mechanism emphasizes qualitative shifts in how people make meaning, not just what they know. Moving from egocentric to ethnocentric to worldcentric perspectives expands the circle of moral concern and the capacity to handle complexity. Leaders and citizens operating from later developmental stages can design and sustain more inclusive, adaptive institutions.

Trauma healing and integration: Much individual and collective dysfunction stems from unprocessed trauma that distorts perception, triggers reactive behavior, and perpetuates cycles of harm. Healing trauma—through therapy, somatic practices, or collective processes—frees individuals and groups from compulsive patterns, enabling more conscious choice.

Contemplative and mindfulness practices: Meditation, reflection, and awareness practices cultivate self-regulation, emotional intelligence, and the capacity to respond rather than react. These practices can develop insight into one's own conditioning, reducing automatic behavior and expanding freedom.

Perspective-taking and empathy development: Specific educational and experiential interventions can expand the capacity to understand and feel with others—across difference of identity, experience, or worldview. This expanded empathy is a foundation for solidarity, cooperation, and just institutions.

Collective meaning-making: Groups and societies can engage in developmental processes together—through dialogue, shared inquiry, and reflective practice—that shift collective consciousness. Movements sometimes describe "consciousness-raising" as a core activity.

The implicit causal model is that the quality of outer systems reflects the quality of inner development. A society cannot sustainably operate institutions, technologies, or governance structures that exceed the developmental capacities of its members. Conversely, as more people develop greater cognitive complexity, emotional maturity, and moral inclusivity, they create demand for and capacity to sustain more sophisticated social arrangements.

This theory is powerful when developmental bottlenecks genuinely constrain social possibility—when leaders lack the complexity to navigate challenges, when populations lack the perspective-taking to support pluralistic institutions, or when trauma drives cycles of violence. It struggles when structural constraints operate independently of individual psychology, or when developmental language becomes a way to rank and exclude people.

**Program theories:** Adult development programs, contemplative training, trauma-informed systems, education for empathy and systems thinking, leadership inner work, consciousness-raising, therapeutic and healing modalities, wisdom traditions.

**Distinctive because:** Focuses on qualitative transformation of persons, not just choices or behaviors. Assumes that societal evolution depends on the evolution of human consciousness and psychological maturity.

**Blind spots:** Can individualize what is structurally produced. May become elitist if developmental stages are used to rank people's worth. Can underestimate how structures shape development itself.

# II. Rule- and structure-centered ontologies

## 3) Institutional ontology

**Substrate:** Formal and informal rules—laws, norms, governance arrangements, organizations, bureaucracies, markets.

**Society is:** A set of 'rules of the game' that shape behavior and coordinate expectations. Institutions structure incentives, define rights and obligations, establish procedures, and create predictability.

**Change comes from:** Redesigning rules, accountability mechanisms, rights, and governance structures. Good institutions can produce good outcomes even with imperfect people.

### *Theory of change*

The institutional theory of change holds that the key to social improvement lies in well-designed rules and governance arrangements. Institutions channel behavior, and changing institutions changes outcomes.

The core mechanisms include:

Formal rule change: Laws, regulations, constitutions, and policies establish binding constraints and entitlements. Changing these formal rules directly alters what is permitted, required, and prohibited. Civil rights legislation, environmental regulations, and welfare policies operate through this mechanism.

Incentive restructuring: Institutions create incentive structures that shape rational behavior. Carbon taxes make emissions costly; property rights enable investment; anti-corruption enforcement raises the risks of malfeasance. By redesigning institutional incentives, behavior can be redirected without changing preferences.

Accountability mechanisms: Institutions can create systems of monitoring, reporting, and sanctioning that make actors accountable for their conduct. Transparency requirements, auditing systems, judicial review, and electoral accountability all operate by making consequences more likely.

Rights and entitlements: Establishing rights creates claims that individuals and groups can make against others, backed by institutional enforcement. Human rights, labor rights, and social rights shift the distribution of power and resources by giving subordinate groups enforceable claims.

Organizational design: Within organizations, redesigning structures, processes, and roles can shift outcomes. Participatory governance, merit-based hiring, and clear procedures reduce arbitrariness and improve performance.

Norm formalization: Sometimes informal norms are codified into formal rules, making expectations clearer and enforcement possible. Anti-discrimination policies, professional ethics codes, and transparency standards exemplify this mechanism.

The implicit causal model is that behavior is largely shaped by institutional context. People respond to the rules they face. Well-designed institutions can harness even self-interested behavior for public good (as in market mechanisms) or constrain harmful behavior through accountability. Institutional reformers need not wait for hearts to change—they can design structures that produce good outcomes regardless.

This theory is powerful when institutional design genuinely shapes outcomes and when reformers have access to rule-making processes. It struggles when formal rules are undermined by informal power, when implementation is weak, when institutions reflect and reproduce underlying inequalities, or when the rule-makers themselves are captured by particular interests.

**Program theories:** Policy reform, constitutional design, anti-corruption initiatives, regulatory innovation, participatory governance, welfare systems, civic infrastructure, rights-based legislation, organizational restructuring.

**Distinctive because:** Rules are seen as relatively autonomous causal forces, not mere reflections of power or culture. Well-designed institutions can produce good outcomes even with imperfect people.

**Blind spots:** Can become technocratic, underestimating the role of culture, meaning, and lived experience. May assume implementation follows design. Can neglect how institutions themselves reflect power.

## 4) Structural-material ontology

**Substrate:** Material conditions—ownership, capital, labor, land, infrastructure, resource flows, modes of production.

**Society is:** A structure of material relations, especially class relations and political economy. The organization of production, distribution, and ownership fundamentally shapes life chances, power, and social possibilities.

**Change comes from:** Transforming ownership patterns, redistribution, industrial policy, control over means of production and reproduction. Material base determines superstructure.

### *Theory of change*

The structural-material theory of change holds that the fundamental driver of social organization is the material base—who owns and controls productive resources, how labor is organized, and how the surplus is distributed. Changing this base is the key to social transformation.

The core mechanisms include:

Ownership transformation: Shifting who owns and controls productive assets—land, capital, enterprises, infrastructure—directly changes power relations and life outcomes. Nationalization, collectivization, land reform, worker ownership, and commons-based governance all target ownership structures.

Redistribution: Taxing wealth and income to fund public goods and transfers shifts resources from those with more to those with less. Progressive taxation, inheritance taxes, universal basic income, and social wages operate through redistribution.

Labor organizing and power: Workers organizing collectively can shift the balance of power between capital and labor, winning higher wages, better conditions, and greater voice. Unions, strikes, and labor legislation operate through building worker power.

Public provisioning: The state or community providing essential goods and services—healthcare, education, housing, transportation—removes them from market allocation, ensuring access based on need rather than ability to pay. This mechanism reduces dependence on wage labor and capital.

Infrastructure development: Building physical and social infrastructure shapes what economic activities are possible and who benefits. Transportation networks, energy systems, communication infrastructure, and care infrastructure create the material conditions for different kinds of social organization.

Industrial and economic policy: Strategic state intervention in the economy—directing investment, shaping sectoral development, managing trade—can shift the structure of production and employment. Developmental states have used this mechanism to transform economies.

The implicit causal model is that material relations are primary. Politics, culture, ideology, and institutions are importantly shaped by underlying economic structures. Those who control material resources have power, and that power shapes other domains. Sustainable social change requires changing the material base, not just ideas or formal rules.

This theory is powerful when material deprivation and economic power genuinely drive social problems, and when political conditions allow structural reform. It struggles when cultural, psychological, or political factors operate with relative autonomy from material conditions, or when materialist framing flattens important dimensions of meaning, identity, and agency.

**Program theories:** Labor organizing, public provisioning, land reform, progressive taxation, decarbonizing infrastructure, housing policy, industrial strategy, nationalization, cooperativization, commons-based governance.

**Distinctive because:** The material base is primary; institutions and culture are shaped by material relations. Changing who owns and controls resources is the fundamental lever for social transformation.

**Blind spots:** Can flatten meaning, identity, and agency into 'effects of structure.' May underestimate the independent power of ideas, culture, and institutions. Can become economically reductionist.

# III. Power-centered ontologies

## 5) Power/conflict ontology

**Substrate:** Power relations and domination across multiple axes—class, race, gender, empire, ability, sexuality, and their intersections.

**Society is:** Contested terrain among groups with unequal power. Social order is not neutral but reflects and reproduces patterns of domination. Apparent consensus often masks coercion and manufactured consent.

**Change comes from:** Building counter-power, reducing domination, shifting who controls what, creating accountability for the powerful.

### *Theory of change*

The power/conflict theory of change holds that social order reflects the interests of dominant groups and is maintained through various forms of power. Change requires building the power of subordinate groups and constraining the power of dominant groups.

The core mechanisms include:

Counter-power building: Subordinate groups must organize to build their collective power—through unions, movements, associations, and coalitions. Power is not given but taken through struggle. Mass mobilization, strikes, boycotts, and collective action demonstrate and build power.

Disruption and leverage: Movements gain power by disrupting business as usual and imposing costs on those with power. Strikes withdraw labor; boycotts withdraw consumption; protests create reputational and political costs; civil disobedience clogs the machinery of governance. The mechanism is creating leverage through disruption.

Rights claims and legal contestation: Rights frameworks provide grounds for claims against dominant groups, and legal systems can sometimes be used to enforce those claims. Litigation, rights-based advocacy, and constitutional challenges can constrain power when courts are accessible and responsive.

Consciousness-raising and ideological contestation: Domination is maintained partly through ideology that naturalizes it. Revealing the constructed, contingent, and unjust nature of social arrangements—making the invisible visible—can delegitimize dominant power and motivate resistance. Critical education, counter-narratives, and public testimony operate through this mechanism.

Elite division and alliance-building: Dominant groups are rarely monolithic. Movements can exploit divisions among elites, peel off allies, and build coalitions that shift the balance of power. Strategic framing can appeal to interests or values of potential allies.

Institutionalizing gains: Movement victories must be institutionalized in laws, policies, and organizations to be durable. Otherwise, power reverts when mobilization declines. This mechanism connects power-building to institutional change.

Intersectional solidarity: Recognizing that domination operates through multiple, intersecting axes enables broader coalitions and deeper analysis. Solidarity across lines of difference can build more powerful movements.

The implicit causal model is that power is the key variable. Social problems are not primarily technical failures or coordination problems but reflect the interests of the powerful. Solutions require shifting power—building the power of those harmed and constraining the power of those benefiting. Cooperation and consensus are possible but must be interrogated for hidden power dynamics.

This theory is powerful when power asymmetries genuinely explain social problems and when subordinate groups can organize effectively. It struggles when treating cooperation and trust as merely epiphenomenal, when conflict framing prevents needed collaboration, or when power analysis becomes so totalizing that agency and possibility are obscured.

**Program theories:** Social movements, rights-based advocacy, litigation, decolonial repair, anti-discrimination enforcement, watchdog institutions, solidarity organizing, labor campaigns, intersectional coalition-building.

**Distinctive because:** Conflict and domination are constitutive of social order, not accidental. Cooperation and consensus must be interrogated for hidden power dynamics. Justice requires confronting, not managing, power asymmetries.

**Blind spots:** May treat cooperation and trust as secondary or naive. Can become zero-sum in framing. May underestimate the importance of building alternatives, not just opposing domination.

## 6) Anarchist/horizontalist ontology

**Substrate:** Horizontal cooperation and mutual aid as the natural or preferable form of human coordination; hierarchy as distortion.

**Society is:** Potentially a web of voluntary, non-hierarchical associations. Current society is distorted by imposed hierarchies—state, capitalism, patriarchy—that suppress natural cooperation.

**Change comes from:** Building alternative structures, delegitimizing hierarchical authority, prefiguring new relations in present practice.

***Theory of change***

The anarchist/horizontalist theory of change holds that hierarchy is the core problem and that transformation requires building non-hierarchical alternatives while withdrawing legitimacy and participation from hierarchical institutions.

The core mechanisms include:

Prefigurative politics: The means must embody the ends. Movements and organizations should practice the non-hierarchical, participatory, solidaristic relations they seek in the future. This is not merely strategic but principled: hierarchical means cannot produce liberatory ends. Prefiguration changes participants and demonstrates alternatives.

Mutual aid: Voluntary, reciprocal cooperation to meet needs without state or market mediation both addresses immediate needs and builds the infrastructure of an alternative society. Mutual aid networks, skill-shares, and solidarity economies operate through this mechanism.

Direct action: Rather than petitioning authorities, direct action addresses problems directly—occupying land, blocking pipelines, establishing autonomous zones, creating community defense. The mechanism is exercising power directly rather than requesting it from hierarchical institutions.

Delegitimization: Hierarchical institutions depend on perceived legitimacy. Revealing their violence, corruption, and arbitrariness—through protest, counter-narrative, and non-participation—withdraws the consent that sustains them. When people stop believing in and cooperating with authority, its power erodes.

Dual power: Building alternative institutions alongside existing ones creates a parallel structure that can eventually supplant hierarchical forms. Worker cooperatives, community assemblies, alternative education, and local food systems create the embryo of a new society within the shell of the old.

Contagion and example: Successful horizontal experiments inspire imitation and spread. The mechanism is not seizure of central power but proliferation of alternatives until they become the dominant form.

Consensus and participatory process: Decision-making through genuine consensus—not majority rule or delegation—ensures that no one is dominated. The process is slow but produces decisions that everyone can live with and has invested in.

The implicit causal model is that hierarchy is the root of domination, and replacing hierarchical with horizontal forms will unleash suppressed human capacities for cooperation. The state and capital are not neutral tools that can be captured for good ends—they are inherently dominating forms. Transformation requires building alternatives, not reforming or seizing existing institutions.

This theory is powerful when hierarchical institutions are genuinely corrupted or coopted, when small-scale experiments can proliferate, and when people are ready for self-organization. It struggles with large-scale coordination problems, defense against hostile external forces, and the challenge of scaling horizontal practices without recreating hierarchy.

**Program theories:** Mutual aid networks, consensus governance, prefigurative organizing, direct action, autonomous zones, worker cooperatives, anti-authoritarian education, community assemblies, solidarity economies.

**Distinctive because:** Rejects both state-centered and market-centered solutions. Sees means and ends as inseparable—the way we organize now must embody the world we want. Emphasizes self-organization over representation.

**Blind spots:** May struggle with large-scale coordination and defense. Can underestimate how informal hierarchies emerge within ostensibly flat structures. May become insular or unable to engage with actually existing institutions.

# IV. Meaning- and identity-centered ontologies

## 7) Cultural-symbolic ontology

**Substrate:** Shared meanings, narratives, symbols, rituals, collective imagination.

**Society is:** A web of meaning-making that determines what counts as legitimate, desirable, normal, and possible. Culture provides the categories through which people understand themselves and their world.

**Change comes from:** Shifting stories, norms, cultural codes, public discourse, and collective imagination.

### *Theory of change*

The cultural-symbolic theory of change holds that what people believe to be real, good, and possible shapes what becomes real. Transforming the symbolic order transforms social reality.

The core mechanisms include:

Narrative change: Stories organize experience and define what is imaginable. Changing the dominant narratives—about who we are, how we got here, what is possible—can shift behavior, policy, and identity. Movements often win first in story before they win in policy.

Norm shift: Social norms define what is considered appropriate, expected, and admirable. When norms shift—through modeling, social proof, and changing reference groups—behavior follows. Smoking cessation, marriage equality, and environmental consciousness all involved norm shifts that preceded or accompanied policy change.

Frame contestation: How issues are framed—what is foregrounded, what is taken for granted, what is considered relevant—shapes political possibilities. Reframing an issue can change who supports it, what solutions seem appropriate, and what is politically feasible.

Symbol and ritual: Symbols condense meaning and evoke emotional responses. Rituals create shared experience and mark transitions. Strategic use of symbols and rituals can constitute collective identity, mark change, and mobilize action. Flags, anthems, commemorations, and public performances operate through this mechanism.

Discourse and language: The categories available in language shape what can be thought and communicated. Introducing new concepts (like 'sexual harassment' or 'carbon footprint'), reclaiming stigmatized terms, or revealing the ideology embedded in ordinary language can shift understanding and possibility.

Cultural production: Art, media, literature, and popular culture shape the imaginative landscape. By creating new representations, possibilities, and identifications, cultural producers can shift what seems possible and desirable.

Public spectacle and moral shock: Dramatic events, images, and testimonies can break through habitual perception and create moral shock that catalyzes change. The mechanism is emotional and attentional rather than argumentative.

The implicit causal model is that material reality is mediated by meaning. What people do depends on how they understand their situation, what they value, what they consider possible. Changing the symbolic order—through narrative, norm, frame, and ritual—changes the context of action and thus action itself.

This theory is powerful when cultural barriers constrain possibility, when meaning genuinely mediates behavior, and when cultural producers have access to publics. It struggles when material constraints operate regardless of meaning, when 'storywashing' substitutes for structural change, or when symbolic victories do not translate into institutional or material change.

**Program theories:** Narrative change campaigns, media and arts, norm entrepreneurship, values-based education, truth and reconciliation processes, cultural production, strategic communications, public ritual.

**Distinctive because:** Treats meaning as causally powerful, not just a reflection of material interests. What people believe to be real, good, and possible shapes what becomes real.

**Blind spots:** Can ignore material constraints—'storywashing' instead of structural change. May overestimate the autonomy of culture from power and material interests.

## 8) Religious/theological ontology

**Substrate:** Sacred order, transcendence, divine purpose, spiritual reality underlying material existence.

**Society is:** Embedded in a cosmic moral order; humanity has a vocation within creation or divine purpose. Social life has meaning beyond itself.

**Change comes from:** Spiritual transformation, alignment with divine will, prophetic witness, redemption, fulfilling sacred obligations.

### *Theory of change*

The religious/theological theory of change holds that ultimate transformation comes through alignment with transcendent purpose and that sustainable social change requires spiritual foundation.

The core mechanisms include:

Conversion and spiritual transformation: When individuals undergo genuine spiritual change—conversion, awakening, deepening faith—their orientation to the world shifts. This inner transformation generates new motivation, new values, and new action. Religious revival has historically catalyzed social movements.

Prophetic witness: The prophetic tradition in many religions involves naming injustice, calling society back to its highest values, and bearing witness to truth regardless of consequences. Prophets speak uncomfortable truths to power and summon communities to repentance and change. This mechanism operates through moral authority rather than conventional power.

Covenantal community: Religious communities bound by shared commitment to sacred obligations can model alternative social relations and sustain members in counter-cultural practice. The church, sangha, ummah, or congregation becomes a school for virtue and a base for action.

Sacred obligation and moral motivation: Religious frameworks can provide powerful motivation for costly action. Belief that one is serving divine will, fulfilling sacred duty, or working toward ultimate redemption can sustain effort in the face of obstacles that would defeat purely secular motivation.

Eschatological hope: Many religious traditions include hope for ultimate redemption, justice, or transformation—whether in history or beyond it. This hope can sustain action even when immediate prospects are bleak, and can prevent despair from becoming cynicism or paralysis.

Hospitality, mercy, and service: Religious traditions often mandate care for the vulnerable—the stranger, the poor, the sick. This mandate generates vast networks of service provision, from hospitals to refugee resettlement, often sustained over centuries.

Jubilee and restorative justice: Some religious traditions include practices of periodic restoration—debt forgiveness, return of land, reconciliation. These frameworks provide resources for thinking about systemic transformation and not merely charity.

The implicit causal model is that human action is ultimately grounded in ultimate meaning. Sustainable transformation requires not just new structures or behaviors but new hearts—alignment with transcendent purpose. Secular change efforts may succeed temporarily but lack the deep motivation and meaning that religious grounding provides.

This theory is powerful when religious communities are mobilized, when moral motivation genuinely drives action, and when transcendent framing provides resources unavailable in secular discourse. It struggles when religious communities are complicit in injustice, when theological differences divide potential allies, or when religious framing excludes secular partners.

**Program theories:** Faith-based organizing, liberation theology, religiously grounded hospitality and sanctuary, jubilee economics, stewardship environmentalism, diaconal welfare work, religiously motivated reconciliation, contemplative activism.

**Distinctive because:** Grounds ethics and social commitment in transcendent sources beyond human construction. Provides ultimate meaning, hope, and motivation that secular frameworks may lack. Mobilizes vast institutional resources and community bonds.

**Blind spots:** Can resist secular critique and dialogue. May privilege in-group solidarity over broader justice. Tension between transcendent focus and political strategy. Diversity of theological positions can fragment efforts.

## 9) Nationalist/civilizational ontology

**Substrate:** Peoples, nations, or civilizations as collective subjects with shared identity, history, and destiny.

**Society is:** Fundamentally organized around bounded collective identities—national, ethnic, civilizational—that give meaning, belonging, and political form.

**Change comes from:** Defending or revitalizing collective identity, sovereignty, cultural continuity, or civilizational renewal.

### *Theory of change*

The nationalist/civilizational theory of change holds that collective identity is a primary social force and that transformation requires engaging with, defending, or renewing the identity of peoples, nations, or civilizations.

The core mechanisms include:

National awakening and consciousness: A people must become conscious of itself as a people—its distinctiveness, its history, its destiny—before it can act collectively. National awakening involves cultural production, historical recovery, and identity articulation that constitute the nation as a political subject.

Sovereignty assertion: Once constituted, a nation or people asserts sovereignty—the right to self-determination, to control its territory and destiny. This may involve independence movements, decolonization, or resistance to external domination. Sovereignty is both a goal and a mechanism of collective empowerment.

Cultural preservation and revival: Maintaining or recovering distinctive language, customs, arts, and practices sustains collective identity across time. Cultural institutions—schools, media, festivals, museums—reproduce and renew identity.

Civilizational dialogue and competition: At a larger scale, civilizations (defined by religious, cultural, or historical commonality) interact, compete, and learn from each other. Some versions emphasize clash; others emphasize dialogue and mutual enrichment. Either way, civilization is a relevant unit of analysis.

Patriotic solidarity and sacrifice: National identity can motivate sacrifice for the common good that narrower identities cannot. Citizens may pay taxes, serve in armies, or subordinate individual interest to national welfare because they identify with the nation.

Welfare nationalism: The nation-state can become a vehicle for solidarity—redistributing resources and providing services to fellow nationals. The welfare state presupposes a bounded community of shared fate within which redistribution is legitimate.

Anti-colonial and post-colonial assertion: For colonized peoples, nationalist mobilization is a mechanism of resistance and reconstruction. Reclaiming control over territory, resources, and institutions requires collective identity and action as a people.

The implicit causal model is that collective identity is a primary social force—not reducible to material interests or individual choices. People act politically as members of groups with shared identity, and political form (especially the nation-state) reflects and constitutes those identities. Social improvement within this frame means ensuring that one's people can flourish according to their own values and self-understanding.

This theory is powerful when collective identity is genuinely mobilizing, when self-determination is at stake, and when bounded solidarity enables collective action that diffuse cosmopolitanism cannot. It struggles when nationalism slides into chauvinism or exclusion, when internal diversity is suppressed, or when national framing obscures class or other divisions.

**Program theories:** National sovereignty movements, cultural preservation, anti-colonial nationalism, indigenous self-determination, civilizational dialogue, patriotic welfare states, diaspora mobilization, historical recovery.

**Distinctive because:** Treats collective identity as a primary reality, not reducible to individual choices or material interests. The nation or people is an actor in history with legitimate claims to self-determination.

**Blind spots:** Can slide toward exclusion or chauvinism. Tension between particular identity and universal ethics. Risk of instrumentalizing culture for power. May suppress internal diversity.

# V. Relation-centered ontologies

## 10) Relational ontology

**Substrate:** Relationships and patterns of interaction; the 'between' as foundational to social existence.

**Society is:** Constituted by the quality of relationships—trust, recognition, mutuality, conflict, coordination. Individuals and groups are formed through relationship.

**Change comes from:** Improving relational quality, building trust, enabling recognition, repair, and reconciliation.

### *Theory of change*

The relational theory of change holds that social problems are fundamentally relational problems—breakdowns in trust, recognition, communication, and mutuality—and that healing relationships heals society.

The core mechanisms include:

Trust-building: Trust is the foundation of cooperation. Building trust—through repeated positive interaction, reliability, and vulnerability—enables coordination that distrust makes impossible. Trust-building processes in divided communities, post-conflict societies, or dysfunctional organizations can unlock cooperative potential.

Recognition and dignity: Much conflict stems from failures of recognition—groups or individuals feeling unseen, disrespected, or dehumanized. Processes that enable genuine recognition—of identity, of suffering, of contribution—can transform relationships. Apology, acknowledgment, and inclusive representation operate through this mechanism.

Dialogue and deliberation: Bringing people into genuine dialogue—where they listen as well as speak, where they seek to understand rather than just persuade—can shift relationships and generate unexpected agreements. Deliberative processes, community dialogues, and structured conversations can build understanding across difference.

Repair and reconciliation: Where relationships have been damaged by harm, repair is possible through processes that acknowledge harm, express remorse, and rebuild trust. Restorative justice, truth and reconciliation processes, and reparations can heal relationships wounded by violence or injustice.

Conflict transformation: Rather than merely resolving or suppressing conflict, transformation addresses underlying relationships, needs, and narratives. Transformed conflict can generate new understanding and stronger relationships. Mediation, facilitation, and peace-building processes can achieve this.

Relational organizing: Organizing that focuses on building relationships—one-on-one conversations, shared meals, collective action that bonds participants—creates relational infrastructure that supports ongoing cooperation. Relationship is both the means and an end.

Presence and accompaniment: Simply being present with people in suffering or struggle—accompaniment—is itself a form of solidarity that changes both parties. Pastoral care, community health workers, and solidarity movements often operate through presence.

The implicit causal model is that the quality of relationships is the key variable. Institutions, policies, and material conditions matter, but their effects are mediated by relationships. Societies with high trust, mutual recognition, and capacity for dialogue can navigate challenges that divide low-trust societies. Investing in relationship is investing in social capacity.

This theory is powerful when relational breakdown genuinely drives problems—in divided communities, post-conflict settings, or dysfunctional organizations. It struggles when structural constraints operate regardless of relationship quality, or when emphasis on relationship obscures the need for justice and structural change.

**Program theories:** Conflict transformation, restorative practice, deliberative democracy, relational leadership, community weaving, dialogue processes, workplace culture change, truth and reconciliation, accompaniment.

**Distinctive because:** Focuses on the quality of connection rather than rules, resources, or identities. Social problems are fundamentally relational problems; healing relationships heals society.

**Blind spots:** May underplay structural violence and resource inequality. Can become therapy-ization that avoids politics. Risk of placing burden of repair on those already harmed.

## 11) Communitarian ontology

**Substrate:** Communities with thick shared identity, traditions, moral bonds, and practices of mutual obligation.

**Society is:** Composed of communities that give life meaning. Individuals are not atomic but embedded in inherited traditions and obligations that form them.

**Change comes from:** Strengthening local communities, reviving civic institutions, resisting atomization from both market and state.

### *Theory of change*

The communitarian theory of change holds that human flourishing depends on strong communities and that social improvement requires revitalizing the communities that form character, provide belonging, and sustain mutual obligation.

The core mechanisms include:

Community strengthening: Investing in the institutions and practices that constitute community—local associations, religious congregations, neighborhood organizations, mutual aid societies—builds the fabric that holds society together. Strengthening these mediating institutions is the primary mechanism.

Civic renewal: Declining civic participation—in associations, local governance, public life—weakens democracy and social cohesion. Reviving civic habits, creating new forums for participation, and rebuilding civic infrastructure can renew democratic community.

Tradition recovery: Communities are constituted by inherited traditions—of practice, story, value. Recovering, transmitting, and renewing these traditions sustains community identity across generations. Education, ritual, and cultural practice operate through this mechanism.

Place-based identity: Attachment to place—neighborhood, town, region—anchors identity and motivates investment. Strengthening place-based identity through local culture, economic localism, and community development can counter the dislocations of globalization.

Subsidiarity: Decisions should be made at the most local level capable of addressing them. This principle distributes power downward, empowers communities, and resists centralization by state or market. Institutional design that respects subsidiarity enables community self-governance.

Moral formation: Communities shape character through the expectations, models, and practices they provide. Strengthening the moral formative capacity of families, schools, and religious communities develops the virtues on which good society depends.

Resistance to atomization: Both market and state can atomize individuals—the market through commodification and mobility, the state through bureaucratic standardization. Communities must resist these atomizing forces to maintain the bonds that sustain meaning.

The implicit causal model is that individuals are formed by communities, and the quality of society reflects the quality of its communities. Atomized individuals cannot sustain democracy, mutual aid, or meaningful life. The goal is not just policy change but community renewal—rebuilding the social fabric that modernity has frayed.

This theory is powerful when community decline genuinely drives social problems and when community institutions can be renewed. It struggles when it romanticizes tradition, when communities are exclusionary, when community norms are oppressive, or when structural forces overwhelm local capacity.

**Program theories:** Community development, local economic self-reliance, civic association renewal, place-based identity work, subsidiarity-based governance, family and neighborhood strengthening, community land trusts.

**Distinctive because:** Emphasizes belonging and tradition rather than abstract relationship quality. Communities are not merely instrumental but constitutive of human flourishing. Roots matter.

**Blind spots:** Can romanticize tradition and resist necessary change. May exclude outsiders or define community narrowly. Tension with individual autonomy and minority rights.

## 12) Care ethics / social reproduction ontology

**Substrate:** Care labor and networks of dependency—mostly invisible, feminized, and systematically undervalued.

**Society is:** Sustained by care work that enables all other social activities but is rarely recognized or fairly compensated. Every productive worker depends on the reproductive labor that made and maintains them.

**Change comes from:** Making care visible, revaluing and redistributing care work, designing systems around interdependence rather than atomistic autonomy.

### *Theory of change*

The care ethics theory of change holds that care is the foundational but invisible labor that makes all other social life possible, and that transformation requires centering care, making it visible, and restructuring society around interdependence.

The core mechanisms include:

Making care visible: Much care work is invisible—unpaid domestic labor, emotional labor, community caregiving. Making this work visible through measurement, naming, and accounting is a precondition for revaluing it. Time-use studies, care audits, and feminist economics operate through visibility.

Revaluing care: Once visible, care work must be revalued—through higher wages for paid care work, social recognition, and restructured status hierarchies. This involves both material compensation and cultural shift in what counts as valuable work.

Redistributing care: Care work is unequally distributed—primarily to women, to low-paid workers, to families without access to services. Redistributing care through universal care services, paid leave, reduced work hours, and changed gender norms is a core mechanism.

Designing for dependency: Dominant frameworks assume autonomous individuals; care ethics starts from universal dependency. Designing institutions, policies, and spaces around the reality that everyone needs care—and that care needs vary across the life course—creates more realistic and humane arrangements.

Care infrastructure: Just as physical infrastructure (roads, utilities) enables economic activity, care infrastructure (childcare, eldercare, health services) enables all other social participation. Investing in care infrastructure is investing in social capacity.

Centering care in policy: Rather than treating care as a residual addressed by welfare policy, centering care means asking of every policy domain: how does this affect care? How does it support or undermine caregivers and care-receivers?

Ethics of care as decision framework: Care ethics provides an alternative moral framework—centered on relationship, context, and response to need rather than abstract principles. Applying this framework to policy and practice generates different priorities and solutions.

The implicit causal model is that care is the hidden foundation of society. Ignore it, and social reproduction fails—people are not raised, sustained, or healed. Center it, and social priorities shift toward what actually matters for human flourishing. Gender justice, economic justice, and ecological sustainability all require rethinking our relationship to care.

This theory is powerful when care deficits are real, when feminist analysis illuminates hidden labor, and when care infrastructure is politically achievable. It struggles when care focus remains within a feminized and undervalued sphere, when care discourse is coopted without material change, or when care framing obscures other dimensions of injustice.

**Program theories:** Care infrastructure investment, wages for care work, parental leave systems, universal basic services, feminist economics, reimagining welfare around dependency and need, care cooperatives.

**Distinctive because:** Centers dependency and care rather than autonomous individuals or reciprocal exchanges. Reveals how much of social life depends on unpaid and undervalued labor, and proposes this as the starting point for social theory.

**Blind spots:** Can focus on care provision without addressing who controls resources. Risk of essentializing gender roles. May not fully engage with power and structural transformation.

## VI. Practice- and order-centered ontologies

### 13) Practice ontology

**Substrate:** Bundles of everyday practices—skills, materials, meanings, routines intertwined in social activities.

**Society is:** Held together by interlocking practices (commuting, cooking, caregiving, meeting, buying) that are stabilized by infrastructure, tools, norms, and competences.

**Change comes from:** Reconfiguring practice elements—skills, infrastructures, and meanings—together rather than separately.

***Theory of change***

The practice theory of change holds that social life is constituted by practices—recognizable, routinized bundles of activity—and that transformation requires changing the elements that hold practices together.

The core mechanisms include:

Material reconfiguration: Practices depend on materials—tools, infrastructure, objects. Changing the material environment changes what practices are possible and convenient. New bicycle infrastructure makes cycling practical; electric stoves displace gas cooking; digital tools reshape meeting practices. Material change is a powerful lever.

Competence development: Practices require skills and know-how. Developing new competences—through training, education, or supported experimentation—enables new practices. But skills alone are insufficient without supporting materials and meanings.

Meaning shift: Practices carry meanings—what they signify, why they matter, what they say about practitioners. Shifting the meaning of a practice can destabilize or reinforce it. When driving came to signify environmental irresponsibility (for some groups), alternative practices gained appeal.

Bundled intervention: Because practices hold together materials, competences, and meanings, effective change requires intervening in multiple elements simultaneously. Providing infrastructure without skills, or skills without supporting meanings, typically fails. Integrated interventions are more effective.

Practice recruitment and defection: Practices spread as more people are recruited to perform them. Understanding what recruits practitioners—convenience, status, identity, pleasure—enables strategic design. Conversely, making practices inconvenient or low-status can precipitate defection.

Interlocking practice change: Practices are linked to other practices in sequences and bundles. Changing one practice may require or enable change in linked practices. Meal practices are linked to shopping, cooking, and time-use practices; changing one ripples through others.

Default design: Making desired practices the default—the easy, automatic, normal option—is more effective than trying to change individual choices within unchanged practice contexts. Opt-out rather than opt-in, nudges, and infrastructural change operate through defaults.

The implicit causal model is that practices, not individuals or structures, are the unit of analysis. Individuals are 'carriers' of practices, recruited into performance by the elements that practices bundle together. Changing practices requires changing the bundle—not just persuading individuals to choose differently.

This theory is powerful for understanding everyday consumption, mobility, and routine behavior. It is effective when practice elements can be redesigned and when the focus is on 'normal' behavior rather than exceptional choices. It struggles when power and capital resist practice reconfiguration, when structural constraints exceed what practice redesign can address, or when the scale of transformation required exceeds incremental practice change.

**Program theories:** Making sustainable options default, redesigning services, infrastructure plus habit change, new professional routines, circular economy operations, integrated interventions in materials-competence-meaning.

**Distinctive because:** Practices—not individuals or structures—are the unit of analysis. Change happens when the elements that hold practices together (materials, competences, meanings) shift simultaneously.

**Blind spots:** Can feel incremental when power and capital resist. May not address underlying political economy. Can become technocratic if meaning and agency are underweighted.

## 14) Functionalist/social-order ontology

**Substrate:** Interdependent subsystems (economy, family, education, health, law) that must maintain integration and balance.

**Society is:** An organism-like system needing functional coherence. Each institution or subsystem contributes to overall stability. Dysfunction in one area threatens the whole.

**Change comes from:** Repairing dysfunctions, strengthening integration, rebuilding trust in institutions, restoring balance.

### *Theory of change*

The functionalist theory of change holds that societies are integrated systems requiring functional coherence, and that social improvement means repairing dysfunctions, strengthening integration, and restoring trust.

The core mechanisms include:

Dysfunction diagnosis and repair: Problems are diagnosed as dysfunctions—failures of institutions to perform their social functions. Healthcare systems fail to keep people healthy; educational systems fail to transmit skills; families fail to socialize children. Repair means restoring functional performance.

System integration: Different institutions must work together—the economy must produce enough for distribution, education must prepare workers, families must raise capable citizens. When integration breaks down—when institutions work at cross-purposes or leave gaps—dysfunction results. Improving integration is a key mechanism.

Trust restoration: Modern societies depend on trust in institutions—that courts are fair, that money is stable, that expertise is reliable. When trust erodes, social coordination becomes difficult. Rebuilding trust—through transparency, accountability, and demonstrated competence—restores social capacity.

Social safety net strengthening: When primary institutions fail individuals—when they lose jobs, get sick, or face family breakdown—safety nets catch them. Stronger safety nets mean less individual suffering and less social disruption.

Institutional capacity building: Institutions need capacity—resources, personnel, processes—to perform their functions. Capacity building through investment, training, and organizational development strengthens institutional performance.

Cohesion maintenance: Societies need enough shared values, identity, and solidarity to hold together. When cohesion erodes through polarization, fragmentation, or anomie, social problems multiply. Cohesion-building through shared projects, national service, or common institutions can counter fragmentation.

Adaptive adjustment: When circumstances change, institutions must adapt to continue functioning. Adaptive governance, policy learning, and institutional innovation enable systems to maintain function in changing environments.

The implicit causal model is that society is a system requiring integration and balance. The goal is not transformation but restoration and optimization—ensuring that each part performs its function and contributes to the whole. This is a fundamentally conservative framework in the sense of conserving function, though it can support significant reform when current institutions are dysfunctional.

This theory is powerful when dysfunction is real, when institutions can be reformed, and when system integration is indeed the problem. It struggles when it normalizes 'the system as it is' and underplays injustice, when it treats challenges to existing institutions as pathology rather than valid contestation, or when it cannot acknowledge that some institutions function to perpetuate domination.

**Program theories:** Social safety nets, public health capacity building, service delivery improvement, trust-building institutions, community cohesion programs, institutional reform.

**Distinctive because:** Prioritizes system maintenance and cohesion rather than transformation. Stability and integration are valuable; dysfunction anywhere threatens the whole.

**Blind spots:** Can normalize 'the system as it is,' underplaying injustice. May treat dissent as dysfunction rather than valid critique. Can be used to resist needed transformation.

## 15) Libertarian/spontaneous order ontology

**Substrate:** Emergent order arising from decentralized voluntary exchange and coordination, without central design.

**Society is:** A self-organizing system that produces outcomes no one planned. Markets, language, and culture all emerge from countless individual interactions. Best results come from spontaneous order, not design.

**Change comes from:** Removing coercive interference, enabling voluntary association and exchange, letting distributed knowledge coordinate through prices, contracts, and norms.

### *Theory of change*

The libertarian/spontaneous order theory of change holds that complex social coordination emerges best through decentralized voluntary interaction, and that transformation means removing barriers to such emergence.

The core mechanisms include:

Deregulation and barrier removal: Government regulation often prevents beneficial exchanges and innovation. Removing regulations that constrain voluntary action frees individuals and organizations to find better solutions than central planners could design.

Market mechanisms: Markets coordinate through prices, which aggregate dispersed information that no central planner could possess. Allowing markets to function—and extending market mechanisms to new domains—enables efficient coordination. Carbon pricing, for example, uses market mechanisms for environmental goals.

Private ordering: Voluntary contracts, associations, and norms can provide governance without the state. Private communities, contractual arrangements, and self-regulating industries coordinate through mutual agreement rather than coercion.

Entrepreneurship and innovation: When individuals are free to experiment and profit from success, they discover solutions to problems. Entrepreneurship is a mechanism for decentralized problem-solving that mobilizes dispersed knowledge and motivation.

Competition and selection: Competition among providers, organizations, and jurisdictions selects for better solutions. Charter cities, school choice, and regulatory competition allow comparison and selection.

Mutual aid and voluntary association: Before the welfare state, voluntary associations—friendly societies, mutual aid networks, charitable organizations—provided social insurance and support. Reviving voluntary mutual aid can substitute for state provision.

Exit and voice: When exit is possible—leaving a jurisdiction, employer, or association—this disciplines organizations. The threat of exit, and actual exit, operate as decentralized accountability.

The implicit causal model is that central planners cannot know enough to design good outcomes. The knowledge needed for complex coordination is dispersed throughout society and cannot be centralized. Spontaneous order—emerging from countless voluntary interactions—produces better outcomes than design. Intervention should focus on enabling voluntary coordination, not directing it.

This theory is powerful when central planning has genuinely failed, when markets and voluntary association can address problems, and when individual liberty is genuinely threatened. It struggles when market failures, externalities, and power asymmetries require collective action that voluntary coordination cannot achieve, and when spontaneous order reproduces or amplifies inequality.

**Program theories:** Deregulation, mutual aid societies, charter cities, cryptocurrency and decentralized governance, market-based environmentalism, private ordering, voluntary community standards.

**Distinctive because:** Sees unplanned coordination as superior to designed intervention. Central planners cannot possess the knowledge dispersed throughout society; spontaneous order harnesses that knowledge.

**Blind spots:** Can underestimate power asymmetries and market failures. May naturalize existing inequalities. Difficulty coordinating collective goods and addressing externalities.

# VII. Systems- and network-centered ontologies

## 16) Systems/complexity ontology

**Substrate:** Feedback loops, nonlinear dynamics, emergence, tipping points, adaptive systems.

**Society is:** A complex adaptive system with emergent properties irreducible to its parts. Small changes can have large effects; large interventions can fail. The system cannot be fully controlled or predicted.

**Change comes from:** Shifting system conditions—feedback loops, information flows, rules, leverage points, resilience capacities. Working with, not against, system dynamics.

### *Theory of change*

The systems/complexity theory of change holds that social systems exhibit nonlinear dynamics, emergence, and feedback—and that effective intervention requires understanding and working with these dynamics.

The core mechanisms include:

Leverage point identification: In complex systems, some intervention points have far more impact than others. Donella Meadows identified a hierarchy of leverage points—from parameters (low leverage) to paradigms (high leverage). Identifying and targeting high-leverage points can produce outsized effects.

Feedback loop modification: Systems are maintained by feedback loops—balancing loops that resist change and reinforcing loops that amplify it. Changing which feedback loops are active, or their strength, can shift system behavior. Climate policy debates often focus on feedback dynamics.

Tipping point navigation: Complex systems can shift abruptly from one state to another when thresholds are crossed. Understanding where tipping points lie, and either avoiding harmful ones or triggering beneficial ones, is a strategic mechanism.

Resilience building: Rather than optimizing for efficiency, systems thinking often emphasizes resilience—the capacity to absorb disturbance and maintain function. Building resilience through diversity, redundancy, and adaptive capacity prepares systems for shocks.

Adaptive governance: Because complex systems are unpredictable, governance must be adaptive—experimental, learning-oriented, able to adjust. This means rapid iteration, monitoring, and willingness to change course.

Multi-scale intervention: Systems operate at multiple scales—local, regional, global—with interactions across scales. Effective intervention often requires action at multiple scales, and understanding cross-scale dynamics.

Portfolio approaches: Given uncertainty, investing in a portfolio of experiments—rather than a single solution—allows for learning and selection of what works. This matches the variation-and-selection dynamics of complex systems.

Polycentric governance: For complex problems like climate change, no single authority can govern effectively. Polycentric governance—with multiple, overlapping centers of decision-making—may be more adaptive and robust.

The implicit causal model is that simple linear causation does not hold in complex systems. Effects may be delayed, nonlinear, or opposite to expectations. Humility about prediction and control is warranted. But this does not mean giving up on intervention—rather, it means intervening intelligently, with attention to system dynamics and leverage points.

This theory is powerful for understanding environmental systems, global challenges, and situations where linear intervention has failed. It struggles when systemic language obscures agency and responsibility, when complexity becomes an excuse for inaction, or when the political conditions for adaptive governance are absent.

**Program theories:** Leverage-point interventions, adaptive governance, experimentation portfolios, learning ecosystems, polycentric governance, resilience planning, scenario analysis, systems mapping.

**Distinctive because:** Emphasizes emergence and nonlinearity rather than linear cause-effect. Interventions must account for feedback, unintended consequences, and the impossibility of full control.

**Blind spots:** Can become abstract and politically 'neutral' in a way that hides winners and losers. May obscure agency and responsibility. Can be used to counsel patience when action is needed.

## 17) Network ontology

**Substrate:** Connections, flows, nodes, network topologies. Position in the network as constitutive of identity and power.

**Society is:** Constituted by patterns of connection. Network position matters more than intrinsic attributes. Power resides in hubs, bridges, and gatekeepers.

**Change comes from:** Reconfiguring network topology—building bridges, disrupting concentrated hubs, enabling new flows, changing who connects to whom.

### *Theory of change*

The network theory of change holds that social structure is constituted by patterns of connection, and that transformation requires rewiring networks—building new connections, disrupting concentrated power, enabling new flows.

The core mechanisms include:

Bridge-building: Creating connections across previously disconnected groups enables information flow, coordination, and solidarity. Bridging social capital is especially valuable because it spans structural holes. Coalition-building, cross-sector partnerships, and boundary-spanning roles operate through bridging.

Hub disruption: When power is concentrated in network hubs—platforms, gatekeepers, central actors—disrupting or decentralizing those hubs redistributes power. Antitrust action, platform alternatives, and distributed protocols can disrupt concentrated network power.

Network weaving: Deliberately cultivating connections within communities—increasing density and multiplexing ties—builds capacity for collective action. Community organizers, convenors, and network weavers strengthen networks from within.

Flow enabling: Networks carry flows—of information, resources, people, influence. Enabling beneficial flows and blocking harmful ones reshapes what the network produces. Open access, free flow of information, and resource transfers operate through flow enabling.

Position change: Individuals and organizations can strategically change their network position—moving toward brokerage positions, building ties to high-status actors, diversifying connections. Network strategy is a form of power-building.

Collective identity through networking: Networks can constitute collective identity—movements, coalitions, fields. Through communication and coordination, networked actors come to see themselves as a collectivity capable of action.

Platform and infrastructure building: Creating new network infrastructures—platforms, protocols, physical infrastructure—shapes what connections are possible. This is a form of network design that enables or constrains future networking.

Contagion and diffusion: Ideas, behaviors, and innovations spread through networks. Understanding network structure helps predict and accelerate diffusion. Seeding adoption among well-connected early adopters can trigger cascades.

The implicit causal model is that network topology shapes outcomes. Who is connected to whom determines what flows where, who has power, and what collective action is possible. Changing networks changes capacity—for coordination, resistance, or innovation.

This theory is powerful for understanding movements, platforms, and diffusion. It provides clear strategic guidance about connections and position. It struggles when it fetishizes connectivity without asking 'connection for what purpose,' when it underplays durability and institutions, or when it ignores the power of those who control network infrastructure.

**Program theories:** Digital activism, platform cooperativism, coalition architecture, network-based organizing, open-source collaboration, mesh governance, network mapping and strategy, diffusion campaigns.

**Distinctive because:** Focuses on topology and flows rather than system dynamics or stable structures. Power resides in network position—hubs, bridges, gatekeepers—and change means rewiring connections.

**Blind spots:** Can fetishize connectivity without asking 'connection to what end?' May underplay durability and institutions. The power of platform owners may be obscured.

## 18) Technological/cybernetic ontology

**Substrate:** Information, communication, sensing, control mechanisms, platforms, algorithms.

**Society is:** An information-processing and coordination system. Social problems are often problems of information flow, feedback, and alignment.

**Change comes from:** Better feedback mechanisms, measurement, transparency, algorithmic alignment, coordination tools.

### *Theory of change*

The technological/cybernetic theory of change holds that society can be understood as an information-processing system, and that improvement comes through better feedback, measurement, and coordination.

The core mechanisms include:

Measurement and visibility: What gets measured gets managed. Creating metrics, indicators, and monitoring systems makes problems visible and enables response. Dashboards, scorecards, and public reporting operate through measurement.

Transparency and information access: Asymmetric information enables exploitation and dysfunction. Transparency—through open data, freedom of information, and disclosure requirements—empowers citizens and enables accountability. Sunlight is the best disinfectant.

Feedback loop creation: When actors don't experience the consequences of their actions—when feedback is delayed, distorted, or absent—they cannot learn and adjust. Creating faster, clearer feedback loops improves behavior. Smart meters, real-time reporting, and accountability mechanisms create feedback.

Coordination tool provision: Many social problems are coordination problems—people would cooperate if they could find each other, commit credibly, and share information. Digital platforms, protocols, and tools can enable coordination at new scales and speeds.

Algorithmic auditing and alignment: Algorithms increasingly shape social outcomes—what we see, what we're offered, how we're evaluated. Auditing algorithms for bias and aligning them with social values is a mechanism for shaping algorithmic governance.

Early warning systems: Sensing and predicting problems before they become crises enables preventive action. Epidemiological surveillance, climate monitoring, and financial risk indicators operate through early warning.

Digital public infrastructure: Just as physical infrastructure enables economic activity, digital infrastructure—identity systems, payment rails, data sharing protocols—enables digital coordination. Building this infrastructure as a public good shapes what coordination is possible.

Platform governance: Platforms are governed spaces where rules shape interaction. Designing platform governance—content moderation, algorithmic curation, economic rules—is a mechanism for shaping digital social life.

The implicit causal model is that information and feedback are key variables. Many social problems result from information failures—we don't see consequences, we can't coordinate, we don't know what's happening. Fix the information system and coordination improves.

This theory is powerful when information problems are real, when measurement is possible, and when coordination tools can be built. It struggles when it drifts into surveillance and optimization at the cost of privacy and dignity, when it treats all problems as information problems, or when measurement itself distorts what it purports to capture.

**Program theories:** Open data initiatives, algorithmic auditing, digital public infrastructure, participatory platforms, early-warning systems, accountability technology, smart city projects, transparency initiatives.

**Distinctive because:** Treats information and control as the key causal layer. If we can measure it, share it, and create feedback loops, we can improve coordination and outcomes.

**Blind spots:** Can drift into surveillance and optimization that ignores meaning and dignity. May reduce complex problems to information problems. Measurement can distort what it captures.

# VIII. Beyond-human ontologies

## 19) Ecological/posthuman ontology

**Substrate:** Human–more-than-human assemblages—ecosystems, animals, climate systems, microbes, technologies, supply chains.

**Society is:** Entangled with nonhuman actors and planetary systems. Humans are not separate from nature but embedded within it. Nonhuman entities have agency.

**Change comes from:** Re-embedding human life within planetary boundaries and multispecies ethics. Recognizing nonhuman agency and standing.

### *Theory of change*

The ecological/posthuman theory of change holds that humans are embedded in more-than-human worlds and that transformation requires reorienting society toward planetary boundaries and multispecies flourishing.

The core mechanisms include:

Planetary boundary respect: Earth systems have limits—in carbon absorption, biodiversity, nutrient cycles. Transgressing these boundaries destabilizes the systems on which all life depends. Governing human activity to respect planetary boundaries is a core mechanism.

Rights of nature: Legal and political recognition of nonhuman entities—rivers, ecosystems, species—as rights-bearing subjects changes how decisions are made. Ecuador's constitutional rights of nature, and legal personhood for rivers in New Zealand and India, exemplify this mechanism.

Multispecies ethics: Expanding moral consideration beyond humans to include other sentient beings, ecosystems, and future generations changes what counts as ethical action. Animal welfare, ecosystem protection, and intergenerational justice follow from expanded moral circles.

Regenerative practice: Rather than merely reducing harm ('sustainability'), regenerative practices actively restore ecosystems, build soil, and enhance biodiversity. Regenerative agriculture, rewilding, and restoration ecology embody this approach.

Circular material flows: Linear economies extract, produce, use, and discard. Circular economies loop materials back, minimizing extraction and waste. Designing for circularity transforms production and consumption systems.

Re-embedding and relocalization: Global supply chains externalize costs and obscure consequences. Relocalization and re-embedding connect production and consumption, making ecological consequences visible and actionable.

Climate adaptation as stewardship: As climate change proceeds, adaptation becomes necessary—but adaptation can be extractive or regenerative. Framing adaptation as stewardship connects human action to ecological responsibility.

Symbiotic design: Designing human systems to work with, rather than against, natural systems—biomimicry, ecosystem services, nature-based solutions—produces better outcomes by leveraging rather than fighting ecological dynamics.

Decentering the human: Intellectually and politically decentering humans—recognizing human dependence on more-than-human systems, challenging anthropocentrism—can shift culture and policy. This is a meaning shift with practical implications.

The implicit causal model is that human society is a subsystem of the biosphere. Ecological systems are not 'environment' external to society but the foundation on which society depends. Social transformation must include ecological reorientation. Power analysis and social justice remain relevant but must be extended to include nonhuman entities and future generations.

This theory is powerful for addressing ecological crisis, for connecting social and environmental justice, and for opening new ethical and political possibilities. It struggles when institutionally hard to implement, when power analysis is neglected, or when ecological discourse is coopted without structural change.

**Program theories:** Regenerative agriculture, rights of nature, doughnut economics, rewilding, circular materials, climate adaptation as stewardship, biodiversity governance, multispecies justice, nature-based solutions.

**Distinctive because:** Decenters humans as sole agents and beneficiaries. Nonhuman entities have agency and moral standing; sustainability requires acknowledging our embeddedness in more-than-human worlds.

**Blind spots:** Can become morally compelling but institutionally hard to implement without power analysis. May romanticize nature. Tension between systems thinking and rights frameworks.

# Strategies, Measures, Practices and Policies

*A Practical Companion to the Nineteen Social Ontologies*

*This document provides comprehensive inventories of concrete strategies, measures, practices, and policies that correspond to each of the nineteen social ontologies. While the companion document elaborates the theoretical foundations and mechanisms of change, this reference focuses on actionable interventions.*

These lists are designed to serve multiple purposes: as a diagnostic tool to identify what approaches a given program theory emphasizes or neglects; as an idea generator for expanding intervention repertoires; and as a framework for understanding how different actors and movements approach social change. Real-world programs typically combine interventions from multiple ontologies.

## I. Person-centered ontologies

### 1) Individualist-behavioral ontology

*Changing choices through incentives, information, and decision environments*

***Incentive-based strategies***

- Carbon taxes and pricing mechanisms that make emissions costly to individuals and households
- Subsidies for sustainable products (electric vehicles, solar panels, plant-based foods)
- Tax deductions for charitable giving, retirement savings, and health investments
- Pay-for-performance schemes in education, healthcare, and public services
- Deposit-refund systems for bottles, electronics, and packaging
- Congestion pricing for urban driving
- Differential insurance premiums based on healthy behaviors
- Micro-incentives and gamification for prosocial behavior (apps rewarding exercise, recycling)
- Conditional cash transfers tied to school attendance, health check-ups, or vaccination
- Green loyalty programs and carbon offset purchasing options

***Information and transparency measures***

- Nutrition labels, calorie counts, and ingredient disclosure requirements
- Energy efficiency ratings on appliances and buildings
- Carbon footprint labeling on products and services
- Public health campaigns on smoking, alcohol, diet, and exercise
- Financial literacy education in schools and workplaces
- Real-time energy consumption feedback (smart meters, home displays)
- Comparison tools showing individual consumption relative to neighbors or averages
- Disclosure requirements for corporate environmental and social performance
- Warning labels on harmful products
- Public databases rating products, companies, and services on sustainability criteria

***Choice architecture and nudges***

- Opt-out (rather than opt-in) organ donation systems
- Automatic enrollment in pension schemes with opt-out option
- Default settings for double-sided printing, energy-saving modes

- Healthy food placement in cafeterias and stores (eye-level, checkout areas)
- Smaller plate sizes in buffets to reduce food waste
- Simplified enrollment forms for beneficial programs
- Pre-commitment devices (scheduled savings transfers, gym contracts)
- Social norm messaging ('most people in your area recycle')
- Timely prompts and reminders for beneficial actions
- Friction reduction for desired behaviors (easy recycling, convenient public transit)

***Education and skill development***

- Financial literacy curricula in schools
- Entrepreneurship training and business incubators
- Leadership development programs for emerging leaders
- Life skills education (decision-making, critical thinking, emotional regulation)
- Vocational training and reskilling programs
- Health education covering nutrition, exercise, mental health, and substance use
- Environmental education and sustainability literacy
- Digital literacy and online safety training
- Parenting education and early childhood development programs
- Civic education on rights, responsibilities, and democratic participation

***Mental health and wellbeing interventions***

- Workplace wellness programs and employee assistance programs
- School-based mental health services and counseling
- Mindfulness and stress reduction programs in schools and workplaces
- Public awareness campaigns to reduce mental health stigma
- Telehealth and digital mental health services expanding access
- Coaching and mentoring programs for personal development
- Resilience training for at-risk populations
- Addiction treatment and harm reduction services
- Grief counseling and trauma support services
- Positive psychology interventions promoting flourishing

## 2) Psychological-developmental ontology

*Expanding human capacities for perspective-taking, complexity, and compassion*

***Adult development programs***

- Constructive developmental coaching for leaders and professionals
- Immunity to Change workshops addressing psychological barriers to growth
- Vertical development programs in organizations
- Deliberately developmental organizations (DDOs) integrating growth into work
- Peer coaching circles for ongoing development
- 360-degree feedback processes fostering self-awareness
- Shadow work and personal inquiry practices
- Developmental assessments (subject-object interviews, sentence completion tests)
- Action learning projects combining real challenges with reflective practice
- Mentoring relationships across developmental stages

***Contemplative and mindfulness practices***

- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs in healthcare and workplaces
- Meditation training in schools (Mindful Schools, Inner Explorer)
- Contemplative pedagogy in higher education
- Retreat centers offering extended practice periods
- Secular mindfulness apps and digital training (Headspace, Calm, Waking Up)
- Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression and anxiety
- Body-based awareness practices (yoga, tai chi, qigong)
- Contemplative practices integrated into professional training (law, medicine, business)
- Inquiry practices (self-inquiry, journaling, reflective writing)
- Nature-based contemplative practices and forest bathing

***Trauma healing approaches***

- Trauma-informed care training for schools, healthcare, and social services
- EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) therapy
- Somatic experiencing and body-based trauma therapies
- Internal Family Systems therapy
- Trauma-sensitive yoga and movement practices
- Collective trauma healing processes for communities
- Intergenerational trauma work addressing historical wounds
- Psychedelic-assisted therapy for treatment-resistant trauma (where legal)
- Peer support programs for trauma survivors
- Restorative practices addressing trauma in justice settings

***Empathy and perspective-taking education***

- Social-emotional learning curricula in schools (CASEL framework)
- Roots of Empathy programs bringing infants into classrooms
- Perspective-taking exercises and role-plays
- Intergroup dialogue programs across identity differences
- Virtual reality experiences fostering empathy across difference
- Literature and arts education developing imaginative empathy
- Service learning connecting students with diverse communities
- Exchange programs and immersive cross-cultural experiences
- Nonviolent Communication training
- Compassion cultivation training programs

***Systems thinking and complexity education***

- Systems thinking curricula in schools (Waters Foundation, Creative Learning Exchange)
- System dynamics modeling and simulation exercises
- Case-based learning using complex real-world challenges
- Design thinking and human-centered design training
- Scenario planning and futures literacy education
- Interdisciplinary problem-solving programs
- Complexity leadership development for managers
- Game-based learning for systems understanding
- Mapping and visualization tools for systemic issues
- Action research methods combining inquiry and intervention

## II. Rule- and structure-centered ontologies

## 3) Institutional ontology

*Redesigning rules, governance, and accountability mechanisms*

### *Constitutional and legal reform*

- Constitutional amendments enshrining rights (environmental rights, digital rights)
- Judicial review mechanisms ensuring constitutional compliance
- Administrative law reform improving regulatory quality
- Sunset clauses requiring periodic review of legislation
- Regulatory impact assessment requirements for new rules
- Plain language requirements for laws and regulations
- Codification and simplification of complex legal frameworks
- Standing rules enabling citizens to challenge unlawful government action
- Constitutional courts and independent judicial institutions
- International treaty incorporation into domestic law

### *Governance and public administration reform*

- Merit-based civil service systems with competitive recruitment
- Performance management systems for public agencies
- E-government and digital service delivery
- One-stop shops reducing bureaucratic complexity for citizens
- Decentralization transferring powers to local governments
- Independent regulatory agencies insulated from political interference
- Public-private partnerships with clear accountability frameworks
- Citizen charters specifying service standards and redress mechanisms
- Open government initiatives (transparency, participation, accountability)
- Agile and adaptive governance approaches in public administration

### *Anti-corruption measures*

- Independent anti-corruption agencies with investigative powers
- Asset declaration requirements for public officials
- Whistleblower protection legislation
- Conflict of interest rules and cooling-off periods
- Public procurement transparency and competitive bidding requirements
- Beneficial ownership registries for companies
- Anti-money laundering regulations and enforcement
- Political finance regulations limiting donations and requiring disclosure
- Integrity testing and ethics training for public servants
- International anti-corruption conventions and mutual legal assistance

### *Rights-based frameworks*

- Human rights legislation and national human rights institutions
- Anti-discrimination laws covering employment, housing, services
- Freedom of information legislation
- Data protection and privacy regulations (GDPR-style)
- Consumer protection laws and enforcement agencies
- Labor rights legislation (minimum wage, working conditions, collective bargaining)
- Environmental rights frameworks and environmental courts
- Children's rights implementation and monitoring

- Disability rights legislation and accessibility requirements
- Indigenous rights recognition and treaty implementation

***Participatory governance mechanisms***

- Participatory budgeting allowing citizens to allocate public funds
- Citizens' assemblies and deliberative mini-publics
- Public consultation requirements for major decisions
- Citizen advisory committees for government agencies
- Referendum and initiative mechanisms for direct democracy
- Community benefit agreements for major development projects
- Multi-stakeholder governance bodies for complex issues
- Town hall meetings and public forums
- Online participation platforms for policy input
- Collaborative policy design with affected communities

## 4) Structural-material ontology

*Transforming ownership, redistribution, and political economy*

***Ownership transformation***

- Worker cooperative development and support
- Employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs) and profit-sharing
- Community land trusts removing land from speculation
- Public banking and municipal financial institutions
- Nationalization or public ownership of natural monopolies and utilities
- Social housing development and expansion
- Commons-based resource governance (fisheries, forests, water)
- Platform cooperatives as alternatives to extractive platforms
- Community development finance institutions (CDFIs)
- Sovereign wealth funds investing for public benefit

***Progressive taxation and redistribution***

- Progressive income tax with higher rates on top earners
- Wealth taxes on net worth above thresholds
- Inheritance and estate taxes limiting dynastic wealth
- Capital gains taxes at rates comparable to income taxes
- Financial transaction taxes on speculation
- Land value taxes capturing publicly created value
- Corporate tax reform including minimum taxes and anti-avoidance measures
- Carbon taxes with revenue recycled as dividends
- Closing tax havens and offshore loopholes
- Universal basic income or guaranteed income programs

***Labor rights and worker power***

- Collective bargaining rights and sectoral bargaining
- Union organizing protections and anti-retaliation rules
- Living wage requirements above poverty thresholds
- Portable benefits not tied to single employers
- Just cause termination protections

- Works councils and worker representation on boards
- Gig worker classification and protections
- Reduced working hours and right to disconnect
- Occupational health and safety enforcement
- Anti-union busting regulations and penalties

***Public provisioning and services***

- Universal healthcare systems (single-payer, national health service)
- Free public education from early childhood through higher education
- Public childcare and eldercare services
- Social housing as a right
- Public transportation expansion and fare-free transit
- Universal basic services (utilities, internet, banking)
- Public pharmaceutical production and generic drug access
- Job guarantee programs providing employment of last resort
- Public pension systems with adequate replacement rates
- Food security programs and public food systems

***Industrial and infrastructure policy***

- Green industrial policy directing investment to sustainable sectors
- Public investment banks for strategic industries
- Infrastructure programs for renewable energy, transit, broadband
- Regional development policy addressing geographic inequality
- Trade policy protecting domestic production and workers
- Antitrust enforcement breaking up concentrated industries
- Research and development funding for public priorities
- Procurement policy favoring local, sustainable, worker-friendly suppliers
- Managed trade agreements with labor and environmental standards
- Technology policy ensuring public benefit from publicly funded research

# III. Power-centered ontologies

## 5) Power/conflict ontology

*Building counter-power and reducing domination*

***Movement building and organizing***

- Base-building through door-to-door organizing and one-on-ones
- Issue campaigns targeting specific policy changes
- Coalition-building across movements and identity groups
- Leadership development pipelines for marginalized communities
- Political education and popular education programs
- Digital organizing and online mobilization
- Cultural organizing through arts, music, and storytelling
- Workplace organizing and union drives
- Tenant organizing and housing movements
- Student organizing and youth movements

***Direct action and disruption***

- Strikes and work stoppages
- Boycotts and divestment campaigns
- Protests, marches, and demonstrations
- Civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance
- Blockades and occupation tactics
- Shareholder activism and proxy campaigns
- Naming and shaming campaigns targeting corporate and political actors
- Economic disruption targeting profit flows
- Sanctuary and protection actions
- Solidarity actions supporting other movements

***Legal and rights-based strategies***

- Strategic litigation advancing rights claims
- Class action lawsuits against corporate harm
- Human rights documentation and reporting
- Legal observer programs protecting protesters
- Know Your Rights trainings for affected communities
- Amicus briefs supporting progressive legal arguments
- International human rights mechanisms and treaty bodies
- Legal defense funds for activists and movements
- Police accountability litigation and consent decrees
- Environmental justice litigation

***Political power strategies***

- Electoral organizing and voter mobilization
- Candidate recruitment from movement backgrounds
- Primary challenges to incumbent politicians
- Ballot initiatives and referendums on key issues
- Lobbying and legislative advocacy
- Political action committees and independent expenditures
- Grassroots lobbying mobilizing constituents
- Inside-outside strategies combining electoral and movement work
- Political education on voting and civic participation
- Redistricting reform and anti-gerrymandering campaigns

***Accountability and watchdog functions***

- Investigative journalism exposing abuse and corruption
- Corporate campaign research and exposure
- Government transparency and FOIA requests
- Police monitoring and copwatch programs
- Corporate accountability campaigns
- Human rights monitoring and documentation
- Environmental monitoring and pollution tracking
- Wage theft documentation and worker centers
- Immigration enforcement monitoring
- Prison and detention monitoring

## 6) Anarchist/horizontalist ontology

*Building non-hierarchical alternatives and prefiguring new relations*

### *Mutual aid and solidarity economy*

- Mutual aid networks providing direct support (food, housing, healthcare)
- Community fridges and food sharing programs
- Solidarity funds for community emergencies
- Tool libraries and sharing cooperatives
- Time banks exchanging services without money
- Really Really Free Markets and gift economies
- Disaster relief mutual aid networks
- Bail funds and legal support collectives
- Community defense and safety patrols
- Skill shares and free schools

### *Worker and producer cooperatives*

- Worker-owned cooperatives in all sectors
- Cooperative incubators and development organizations
- Cooperative federations for mutual support and resources
- Platform cooperatives for digital services
- Producer cooperatives for farmers and artisans
- Cooperative housing and community land trusts
- Credit unions and cooperative finance
- Cooperative childcare and eldercare
- Cooperative media and journalism
- Conversion of conventional businesses to cooperatives

### *Horizontal governance practices*

- Consensus decision-making processes
- Spokescouncils and federated assemblies
- Rotating facilitation and leadership roles
- Working groups with delegated autonomy
- Transparent information sharing and open meetings
- Conflict resolution without hierarchy (mediation, transformative justice)
- Accountability processes that don't rely on punishment
- Anti-oppression practices within organizations
- Collective budgeting and resource allocation
- Regular rotation of tasks and roles to prevent power concentration

### *Autonomous spaces and institutions*

- Social centers and autonomous community spaces
- Squatted buildings and land occupations
- Infoshops and radical libraries
- Free schools and popular education spaces
- Community gardens and urban farms
- Independent media centers and radical media
- Hackerspaces and maker spaces
- Collective houses and intentional communities
- Zine distros and DIY publishing
- Underground cultural venues and all-ages spaces

***Direct action and prefigurative politics***

- Food Not Bombs serving free meals in public
- Really Really Free Markets
- Critical Mass and bike advocacy through action
- Copwatch and community accountability patrols
- Sanctuary and rapid response networks
- Prison abolition and transformative justice projects
- Counter-recruitment and anti-militarism
- Animal liberation and hunt sabotage
- Environmental direct action and blockades
- Anti-fascist organizing and community defense

# IV. Meaning- and identity-centered ontologies

## 7) Cultural-symbolic ontology

*Shifting narratives, norms, and collective imagination*

***Strategic narrative change***

- Message testing and framing research
- Narrative infrastructure development (story banks, spokespeople, talking points)
- Deep narrative work shifting underlying worldviews
- Counter-narrative campaigns challenging dominant stories
- Origin story and identity narrative development for movements
- Future visioning and utopian imagination projects
- Metaphor research and strategic metaphor deployment
- Narrative training for advocates and organizers
- Long-term narrative campaigns (years-long efforts to shift discourse)
- Bridging narratives connecting different constituencies

***Media and communications***

- Earned media strategies generating news coverage
- Social media campaigns and viral content creation
- Documentary filmmaking and video production
- Podcast production and audio storytelling
- Op-ed placement and opinion leadership
- Advertising campaigns for social change
- Media monitoring and rapid response
- Alternative and independent media development
- Media literacy education
- Platform accountability campaigns

***Arts and culture strategies***

- Socially engaged art and activist art projects
- Theater and performance for social change (Theater of the Oppressed)
- Music and cultural events as organizing spaces
- Public art and murals in communities
- Film festivals and screenings with discussion

- Literary activism and storytelling projects
- Culture jamming and subvertising
- Fashion and design for social messages
- Museums and exhibitions addressing social issues
- Cultural strategy integration in campaigns

***Norm entrepreneurship and social proof***

- Public commitments and pledges (organizational, individual)
- Certification and labeling systems signaling compliance with norms
- Awards and recognition for norm-compliant behavior
- Norm cascades starting with early adopters
- Celebrity and influencer endorsement of new norms
- Publicizing adoption rates ('X% of companies now do Y')
- Peer accountability mechanisms
- Professional standards and codes of conduct
- Industry initiatives and voluntary commitments
- Social norming campaigns using descriptive norms

***Values and meaning-making***

- Values-based education and curriculum
- Dialogue processes exploring values across difference
- Ritual and ceremony marking transitions and commitments
- Sacred or secular spaces for reflection and meaning
- Heritage and tradition interpretation connecting to current values
- Holidays and commemorations establishing shared meaning
- Truth and reconciliation processes creating shared historical narrative
- Ethical frameworks and principles for emerging issues
- Interfaith and cross-worldview dialogue
- Philosophy and ethics education for public engagement

## 8) Religious/theological ontology

*Spiritual transformation and prophetic witness for justice*

***Faith-based organizing***

- Congregation-based community organizing (IAF, PICO, Gamaliel)
- Interfaith coalitions on social issues
- Clergy and religious leader mobilization
- Prophetic preaching addressing justice issues
- Religious voter engagement and civic participation
- Faith-based advocacy and lobbying
- Religious civil disobedience and witness
- Pulpit exchanges and interfaith solidarity
- Faith-based media and communications
- Denominational resolutions and statements on social issues

***Service and hospitality ministries***

- Soup kitchens and food pantries
- Homeless shelters and transitional housing

- Refugee resettlement and immigrant services
- Prison ministry and reentry support
- Hospital and healthcare chaplaincy
- Disaster relief and recovery services
- Addiction recovery programs (faith-based)
- Youth programs and mentoring
- Eldercare and senior services
- International development and mission work

***Theological education and formation***

- Seminary education incorporating social justice
- Lay theological education and Bible study
- Liberation theology study groups
- Social teaching education (Catholic social teaching, etc.)
- Contemplative formation and spiritual direction
- Ethical discernment processes in congregations
- Youth faith formation with justice emphasis
- Theological reflection on current events
- Interfaith learning and dialogue
- Popular religious education and base communities

***Economic alternatives and jubilee***

- Jubilee campaigns for debt cancellation
- Faith-based community development corporations
- Congregation-based lending circles and microcredit
- Ethical investment and divestment campaigns
- Fair trade purchasing and promotion
- Living wage campaigns from religious perspective
- Solidarity economy initiatives rooted in faith
- Sabbath economics and alternatives to consumerism
- Tithing and charitable giving promotion
- Faith-based credit unions and community finance

***Environmental stewardship***

- Creation care theology and education
- Greening congregations (energy efficiency, solar, gardens)
- Faith-based climate advocacy
- Eco-spirituality and nature-based worship
- Land conservation by religious communities
- Environmental justice from theological perspective
- Divestment from fossil fuels
- Sustainable practices in religious institutions
- Interfaith climate coalitions
- Prayers and rituals for ecological healing

## 9) Nationalist/civilizational ontology

*Defending and revitalizing collective identity and sovereignty*

***Sovereignty and self-determination***

- Independence movements and referendums
- Autonomy arrangements within existing states
- Treaty rights assertion and implementation
- Indigenous sovereignty and nation-building
- Border control and migration policy
- Trade policy protecting domestic industries
- Currency sovereignty and monetary policy independence
- Defense and security self-reliance
- International institution reform for national representation
- Resistance to external intervention and imperialism

***Cultural preservation and revival***

- Language revitalization programs
- Cultural heritage preservation and UNESCO designation
- Traditional arts and crafts support
- Folklore and oral tradition documentation
- Museums and cultural centers
- Traditional knowledge protection and intellectual property
- Cultural festivals and celebrations
- Traditional food and cuisine promotion
- Sacred site protection
- Intangible heritage preservation

***Education and historical memory***

- National curriculum emphasizing history and identity
- Native language education and immersion schools
- Historical memory projects and documentation
- National museums and memorials
- Textbook content reflecting national perspective
- Diaspora education and heritage programs
- Oral history collection and preservation
- Commemorations and national holidays
- Historical sites preservation and interpretation
- Counter-narratives to colonial historiography

***Economic nationalism***

- Buy local and national campaigns
- Domestic industry protection and industrial policy
- National champions in strategic sectors
- Resource nationalism and sovereign control over natural resources
- Food sovereignty and agricultural self-reliance
- Technology sovereignty and domestic capacity
- National banking and financial institutions
- Supply chain localization
- Economic patriotism messaging
- Resistance to foreign acquisition of strategic assets

***Civic nationalism and solidarity***

- National service programs (military or civilian)
- Patriotic welfare states providing for citizens
- Citizenship education and naturalization programs
- National symbols, anthems, and ceremonies
- Sports and national teams building identity
- Public broadcasting and national media
- Infrastructure projects as national achievements
- Disaster response demonstrating national solidarity
- Integration programs for immigrants into national identity
- Civic rituals and public celebrations

# V. Relation-centered ontologies

## 10) Relational ontology

*Building trust, recognition, and relational repair*

### *Dialogue and deliberation*

- Sustained dialogue programs across difference
- Deliberative forums and citizens' assemblies
- World Café and other participatory dialogue methods
- Intergroup dialogue in universities and communities
- Community conversations on divisive issues
- Listening projects gathering diverse perspectives
- Deep canvassing conversations changing minds
- Fishbowl discussions and public dialogue events
- Online deliberation platforms
- Dialogue journalism and media-hosted conversations

### *Conflict transformation*

- Mediation services for interpersonal and community conflict
- Restorative conferences bringing together harmed and responsible parties
- Peace circles and peacemaking circles
- Victim-offender mediation and dialogue
- Community mediation centers
- Track II diplomacy and unofficial dialogue
- Trauma-informed conflict resolution
- Conflict coaching and consulting
- Transformative mediation approaches
- Peace education and conflict resolution training

### *Restorative and transitional justice*

- Restorative justice programs in criminal justice
- School-based restorative practices
- Workplace restorative approaches
- Truth and reconciliation commissions
- Community accountability processes
- Reparations programs addressing historical harm
- Reintegration programs for returning citizens

- Victim services and support
- Memorial and acknowledgment of historical wrongs
- Institutional apologies and accountability

***Community weaving and connection***

- Community weaver and connector programs
- Neighborhood associations and block clubs
- Welcome programs for new community members
- Intergenerational programming connecting ages
- Third places and gathering spaces
- Community events and festivals
- Shared meals and potlucks
- Community asset mapping
- Storytelling projects building community narrative
- Time banks and neighborly exchange

***Organizational and workplace relations***

- Team-building and trust-building exercises
- Relational coordination in organizations
- Appreciative inquiry organizational development
- Feedback cultures emphasizing psychological safety
- Mentoring and sponsorship relationships
- Cross-functional collaboration structures
- Organizational culture assessment and change
- Leadership development emphasizing relational skills
- Conflict resolution systems in workplaces
- Recognition and appreciation practices

## 11) Communitarian ontology

*Strengthening local communities and civic institutions*

***Civic association revival***

- Service club revitalization (Rotary, Lions, etc.)
- Fraternal organization renewal
- Parent-teacher organization strengthening
- Neighborhood watch and safety programs
- Community gardens and shared spaces
- Local historical societies and heritage groups
- Youth organizations (Scouts, 4-H, etc.)
- Veterans organizations and support
- Alumni associations and school communities
- Professional associations with local chapters

***Local economic development***

- Buy local campaigns and local business support
- Community development corporations
- Main street revitalization programs
- Local currency and community exchange systems

- Community-supported agriculture (CSA)
- Local food systems and farmers markets
- Community investment funds
- Local hiring and procurement preferences
- Small business incubators and support
- Economic gardening for local business growth

***Place-based initiatives***

- Comprehensive community initiatives
- Promise Neighborhoods and place-based education
- Community schools integrating services
- Anchor institution strategies (hospitals, universities)
- Community land trusts preserving affordability
- Historic preservation and adaptive reuse
- Placemaking and public space improvement
- Local planning and zoning for community benefit
- Environmental cleanup and greening
- Community broadband and infrastructure

***Family and neighborhood strengthening***

- Family support programs and home visiting
- Marriage and relationship education
- Parenting education and support groups
- Fatherhood initiatives and responsible fatherhood programs
- Extended family and kinship support
- Neighborhood-based family services
- After-school and youth development programs
- Intergenerational living and programming
- Family-friendly workplace policies
- Community-based child welfare approaches

***Subsidiarity and local governance***

- Decentralization of government functions to local level
- Neighborhood councils and advisory bodies
- Community policing with local accountability
- Local control over schools and education
- Municipal home rule and local authority
- Town meetings and direct local democracy
- Local option policies allowing community choice
- Regional cooperation among local governments
- Community benefit agreements for development
- Participatory planning and zoning

## 12) Care ethics / social reproduction ontology

*Making care visible and designing for interdependence*

***Care infrastructure investment***

- Universal childcare and early childhood education

- Public eldercare services and long-term care
- Home and community-based care expansion
- Respite care for family caregivers
- After-school and summer programs
- Disability services and personal assistance
- Mental health and counseling services
- Public health nursing and community health workers
- Hospice and palliative care
- Care coordination and navigation services

***Recognizing and compensating care work***

- Wages for care work campaigns
- Domestic worker organizing and labor standards
- Caregiver tax credits and allowances
- Social security credits for caregiving years
- Living wages for paid care workers
- Professionalization and career ladders in care
- Time-use studies making unpaid work visible
- GDP and economic accounting including care
- Care worker unions and collective bargaining
- Portable benefits for care workers

***Work-family policies***

- Paid family and medical leave
- Paid sick leave
- Flexible work arrangements and right to request
- Reduced working hours and work-time reduction
- Part-time work with pro-rata benefits
- Job-protected caregiving leave
- Breastfeeding support and lactation accommodation
- Dependent care flexible spending accounts
- Family-friendly scheduling practices
- Right to disconnect from work

***Designing for dependency***

- Universal design in built environment
- Accessible public transportation
- Age-friendly and dementia-friendly communities
- Intergenerational housing and cohousing
- Care-centered urban planning
- Technology supporting care and independence
- Aging in place infrastructure
- Community-based care alternatives to institutions
- End-of-life planning and advance directives
- Mutual aid and care collectives

***Feminist economic policy***

- Gender budgeting analyzing care impacts
- Universal basic services covering care needs

- Public pension reforms valuing care work
- Divorce and family law recognizing care contributions
- Anti-discrimination in employment for caregivers
- Health insurance not tied to employment
- Housing policy supporting diverse family forms
- Immigration policy for care workers with rights
- Development policy centering care
- Social protection floors including care

# VI. Practice- and order-centered ontologies

## 13) Practice ontology

*Reconfiguring the materials, competences, and meanings of everyday practices*

### *Infrastructure for sustainable practices*

- Bicycle infrastructure (lanes, parking, bike-share)
- Public transit investment and service improvement
- Electric vehicle charging infrastructure
- District heating and cooling systems
- Building retrofits for energy efficiency
- Renewable energy grid infrastructure
- Water-efficient fixtures and greywater systems
- Waste separation and recycling infrastructure
- Urban form supporting walking and transit
- Digital infrastructure reducing need for travel

### *Default and convenience redesign*

- Sustainable options as default (double-sided printing, green energy)
- Plant-based options as default in catering
- Opt-out rather than opt-in for beneficial programs
- Convenient recycling and composting systems
- Car-free zones and pedestrianization
- Meal planning services and healthy food delivery
- Product-service systems replacing ownership with access
- Reusable packaging and container systems
- Repair cafés and right-to-repair policies
- Library of things for infrequent-use items

### *Professional practice change*

- Clinical practice guidelines in healthcare
- Sustainable design standards in architecture
- Green building certification (LEED, BREEAM)
- Sustainable procurement standards
- Professional continuing education requirements
- Practice benchmarking and peer comparison
- Quality improvement collaboratives
- Evidence-based practice implementation
- Professional community of practice development

- Demonstration projects and pilots

***Skills and competence development***

- Cooking and food preparation skills
- Home repair and maintenance training
- Energy literacy and efficiency skills
- Bicycle repair and maintenance
- Gardening and food growing skills
- Digital skills for remote work and services
- Sewing, mending, and clothing repair
- Financial management and budgeting
- Health self-management skills
- Sustainable living education

***Meaning and social significance shift***

- Status redefinition (experience over ownership, sustainable as aspirational)
- Social norms around consumption and display
- Identity narratives around sustainable practices
- Celebration and recognition of sustainable living
- Counter-advertising challenging consumption norms
- Reframing convenience and good life
- Community narratives around self-sufficiency
- Professional identity around sustainable practice
- Quality and craft versus disposability
- Sufficiency and enough as positive values

## 14) Functionalist/social-order ontology

*Repairing dysfunction and strengthening institutional integration*

***Social safety net strengthening***

- Unemployment insurance with adequate replacement rates
- Social assistance for those not covered by insurance
- Food assistance programs (food stamps, school meals)
- Housing assistance and homelessness prevention
- Healthcare coverage for uninsured and underinsured
- Disability insurance and support services
- Child support enforcement and assistance
- Emergency assistance for crisis situations
- Utility assistance preventing shutoffs
- Legal aid for civil legal needs

***Service delivery improvement***

- One-stop service centers reducing bureaucratic complexity
- Case management coordinating multiple services
- Service integration across agencies
- Customer service standards and measurement
- Wait time reduction and service accessibility
- Language access and cultural competence

- Technology improving service delivery
- Outreach to underserved populations
- Quality assurance and continuous improvement
- Client feedback and satisfaction measurement

***Public health capacity***

- Public health infrastructure and workforce
- Disease surveillance and early warning systems
- Immunization programs and vaccine distribution
- Health education and promotion
- Environmental health inspection and enforcement
- Emergency preparedness and response capacity
- Mental health and substance abuse services
- Maternal and child health programs
- Chronic disease prevention and management
- Health equity initiatives addressing disparities

***Trust-building institutions***

- Independent judiciary and rule of law
- Professional and accountable civil service
- Independent media and journalism
- Scientific institutions with integrity
- Electoral institutions ensuring fair elections
- Regulatory agencies with expertise and independence
- Ombudsman offices handling complaints
- Audit institutions ensuring accountability
- Standards bodies and certification systems
- Professional licensing and self-regulation

***Social cohesion programs***

- National service programs building shared experience
- Community cohesion initiatives in diverse areas
- Integration programs for immigrants
- Anti-extremism and deradicalization programs
- Intergroup contact programs
- Shared public spaces and facilities
- Public events and celebrations
- Civic education building shared values
- Media literacy reducing polarization
- Bridging programs across social divisions

## 15) Libertarian/spontaneous order ontology

*Enabling voluntary coordination and removing coercive interference*

***Deregulation and liberalization***

- Occupational licensing reform reducing barriers
- Zoning reform enabling housing construction
- Regulatory review and sunset provisions

- Permitting simplification and streamlining
- Trade liberalization and tariff reduction
- Financial deregulation enabling innovation
- Labor market flexibility
- School choice and education deregulation
- Healthcare market liberalization
- Energy market deregulation

***Market-based mechanisms***

- Carbon pricing through cap-and-trade or taxes
- Tradable permits for pollution
- Road pricing and congestion charges
- Water markets and tradable water rights
- Spectrum auctions for wireless
- Fishing quotas and catch shares
- Development rights markets
- Pay-for-success contracts
- Private certification competing with regulation
- Prediction markets for policy decisions

***Voluntary association and mutual aid***

- Fraternal societies and mutual benefit organizations
- Voluntary insurance and friendly societies
- Private charity and philanthropy
- Religious and faith-based assistance
- Professional associations and self-regulation
- Private arbitration and dispute resolution
- Voluntary product standards and certification
- Community covenants and private governance
- Neighborhood associations
- Private conservation and land trusts

***Decentralization and competition***

- Federalism and state/local experimentation
- Charter cities and special economic zones
- Competitive federalism allowing exit and choice
- School choice (vouchers, charters, homeschooling)
- Healthcare competition and consumer choice
- Private cities and proprietary communities
- Seasteading and new jurisdictions
- Polycentric governance arrangements
- Competitive currency and free banking
- Jurisdictional arbitrage and competition

***Digital and decentralized systems***

- Cryptocurrency and blockchain governance
- Decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs)
- Smart contracts replacing legal enforcement
- Reputation systems enabling trust without institutions

- Peer-to-peer platforms and sharing economy
- Open source and commons-based peer production
- Encrypted communication and privacy tools
- Decentralized identity systems
- Distributed ledgers for record-keeping
- Algorithmic governance and automated rules

# VII. Systems- and network-centered ontologies

## 16) Systems/complexity ontology

*Working with feedback, leverage points, and adaptive dynamics*

***Leverage point interventions***

- Paradigm and mindset shift work (highest leverage)
- Goal and purpose redefinition for systems
- Rule-changing interventions (constitutional, legislative)
- Information flow restructuring and transparency
- Feedback loop strengthening or weakening
- Buffer and reserve capacity building
- Material stock and flow management
- Parameter adjustment (taxes, standards, limits)
- Delay reduction in feedback
- System boundary redefinition

***Adaptive governance***

- Experimental policy with built-in learning
- Pilot programs and demonstration projects
- Adaptive management in natural resources
- Policy labs and innovation units
- Rapid iteration and feedback cycles
- Real-time monitoring and adjustment
- Fail-fast approaches and safe-to-fail experiments
- Learning-oriented evaluation
- Flexible regulatory frameworks
- Responsive regulation adjusting to context

***Resilience building***

- Diversity preservation in systems (ecological, economic, social)
- Redundancy in critical systems
- Modularity reducing cascading failure
- Adaptive capacity building
- Social-ecological resilience assessment
- Critical infrastructure protection
- Supply chain resilience and localization
- Financial system resilience (buffers, circuit breakers)
- Community resilience planning
- Scenario planning for multiple futures

***Systems mapping and analysis***

- Causal loop diagramming
- System dynamics modeling
- Social network analysis
- Agent-based modeling
- Scenario development and planning
- Systems archetypes identification
- Stakeholder mapping and analysis
- Iceberg model analysis (events, patterns, structures, mental models)
- Boundary critique and system boundary choices
- Participatory systems mapping

***Polycentric and multi-level governance***

- Nested governance at multiple scales
- Coordination mechanisms across jurisdictions
- Transboundary resource management
- Multi-stakeholder governance platforms
- Regional cooperation and compacts
- International regime coordination
- Subsidiarity with coordination
- Peer learning networks across jurisdictions
- Soft law and voluntary frameworks
- Regime complexes for global issues

## 17) Network ontology

*Reconfiguring connections, flows, and network topology*

***Network building and weaving***

- Intentional network design for movements
- Boundary-spanning roles and bridge organizations
- Cross-sector partnership platforms
- Coalition infrastructure and coordination
- Network mapping and strategic connection
- Convenor organizations and backbone support
- Peer networks and learning communities
- Alumni and diaspora networks
- Professional networks and associations
- Network orchestration and stewardship

***Platform and infrastructure development***

- Digital platforms for coordination
- Open protocols enabling interoperability
- Platform cooperatives with democratic governance
- Public digital infrastructure
- Data commons and shared data infrastructure
- Communication infrastructure for movements
- Logistics and physical network infrastructure
- Financial infrastructure for network flows

- Identity infrastructure enabling trust
- Knowledge infrastructure (wikis, repositories)

***Decentralization and hub disruption***

- Antitrust enforcement against platform monopolies
- Data portability enabling switching
- Interoperability requirements for dominant platforms
- Decentralized protocols and federated systems
- Alternative platforms challenging incumbents
- Mesh networks and distributed infrastructure
- Local and regional alternatives to global platforms
- Community ownership of network infrastructure
- Breaking up concentrated media ownership
- Open standards preventing lock-in

***Diffusion and contagion strategies***

- Identifying and activating influential nodes
- Seeding innovations with well-connected early adopters
- Viral content and message design
- Network-based social marketing
- Cascade and tipping point strategies
- Ambassador and champion programs
- Peer influence and social proof activation
- Train-the-trainer and multiplier approaches
- Knowledge broker and translator roles
- Conference and gathering strategies for diffusion

***Coalition and alliance architecture***

- Table-setting and coalition formation
- Big tent versus narrow coalition choices
- Coalition governance and decision-making
- Resource sharing across organizations
- Joint campaigns and collective action
- Complementary diversity in coalitions
- Network-centric organizing models
- Solidarity networks across movements
- Strategic alignment without merger
- Exit and defection management in coalitions

## 18) Technological/cybernetic ontology

*Improving feedback, measurement, transparency, and coordination*

***Measurement and monitoring***

- Real-time environmental monitoring (air, water quality)
- Satellite observation and remote sensing
- IoT sensors in infrastructure and environment
- Health surveillance and disease tracking
- Economic indicators and dashboards

- Social indicators and wellbeing measurement
- Outcome measurement in programs
- Impact measurement and management
- Citizen science and participatory monitoring
- Early warning systems for risks

***Transparency and open data***

- Open government data portals
- Freedom of information implementation
- Beneficial ownership transparency
- Government spending transparency
- Aid transparency and IATI standard
- Corporate disclosure requirements
- Extractive industries transparency
- Open contracting and procurement
- Campaign finance disclosure
- Environmental disclosure requirements

***Feedback and accountability systems***

- Citizen feedback mechanisms for services
- Grievance redress mechanisms
- Rating and review systems
- Scorecards and league tables
- Audit and evaluation systems
- Algorithmic impact assessments
- Social auditing and community monitoring
- Whistleblower systems and hotlines
- Participatory auditing
- Real-time performance dashboards

***Digital public infrastructure***

- Digital identity systems
- Digital payment infrastructure
- Data exchange and interoperability layers
- Digital registries (land, business, civil)
- E-government service delivery platforms
- Digital health infrastructure
- Open APIs and integration standards
- Cloud infrastructure for government
- Cybersecurity infrastructure
- Digital public goods and open source

***Algorithmic governance***

- Algorithm auditing and testing for bias
- Algorithmic impact assessments
- Explainability requirements for AI decisions
- Human-in-the-loop requirements
- Algorithm registries and transparency
- Fairness constraints in algorithmic systems

- Contestability and appeal mechanisms
- Participatory algorithm design
- Algorithmic recourse and remediation
- AI safety and alignment research

# VIII. Beyond-human ontologies

## 19) Ecological/posthuman ontology

*Re-embedding human life within planetary boundaries and multispecies ethics*

***Planetary boundary governance***

- Science-based targets aligned with planetary boundaries
- Carbon budgets and emission pathways
- Nitrogen and phosphorus cycle management
- Biodiversity targets and conservation planning
- Freshwater allocation within limits
- Land system change governance
- Ocean acidification monitoring and response
- Ozone layer protection (Montreal Protocol)
- Novel entities governance (chemicals, plastics, GMOs)
- Aerosol loading management

***Rights of nature and legal standing***

- Constitutional rights of nature (Ecuador model)
- Legal personhood for rivers and ecosystems
- Standing to sue on behalf of nature
- Environmental courts and tribunals
- Ecocide as international crime
- Animal welfare and rights legislation
- Future generations commissioners and ombudsmen
- Environmental defenders protection
- Nature representation in governance
- Biocultural rights of indigenous peoples

***Regenerative practices***

- Regenerative agriculture (no-till, cover crops, rotational grazing)
- Agroforestry and silvopasture
- Permaculture design
- Rewilding and ecosystem restoration
- Watershed restoration and natural water retention
- Soil carbon sequestration
- Native species reintroduction
- Coral reef restoration
- Forest landscape restoration
- Urban greening and nature-based solutions

***Circular economy***

- Extended producer responsibility

- Product-as-service and leasing models
- Design for disassembly and recycling
- Industrial symbiosis and waste exchange
- Reuse and refurbishment systems
- Organic waste composting and biogas
- Material passports and tracking
- Closed-loop supply chains
- Urban mining and resource recovery
- Biomimicry in product design

***Multispecies and ecological ethics***

- Animal welfare standards and enforcement
- Factory farming phase-out and alternatives
- Wildlife corridor and connectivity conservation
- Marine protected areas and no-take zones
- Invasive species management
- Human-wildlife conflict mitigation
- Pollinator protection programs
- Ecological education and nature connection
- Traditional ecological knowledge integration
- Interspecies ethics and moral circle expansion

***Climate adaptation as stewardship***

- Ecosystem-based adaptation
- Nature-based solutions for coastal protection
- Climate-resilient agriculture
- Assisted migration of species
- Green infrastructure in cities
- Climate-adaptive building and planning
- Community-based adaptation
- Indigenous knowledge in adaptation
- Managed retreat from high-risk areas
- Climate refugia protection