

# AN INTERVIEW WITH DR NICHOLAS OSBALDISTON (MONASH UNIVERSITY)

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**Jean-Paul Gagnon:** What is 'seachange' and where in the world is this happening?

**Nicholas Osbaldiston:** This is an important question and one that deserves teasing out. For one, the phenomenon of seachange involves a type of urban and suburban escapism. In particular, it's the movement of people, across a number of countries in mainly the developed world, who have become disaffected with the environment they live in within the confines of the metropolis into regions traditionally left behind in the progress of modernisation. Now the fundamentals of the movement were once aligned to other collective attempts at alternative styles of consumption and lifestyle, such as voluntary simplicity (Elgin 1981), downshifting (Schor 1998; Hamilton 2003) and some of the slow movements (Parkins and Craig 2006). Seachange was not just a physical shift but also an individual shift in ideas, values and conceptions about the 'good life'. Often people who under-

took a seachange completely transformed careers, consumption habits and social relations. For instance, I have talked through my years researching the topic to people who were once high flyers (career-wise) in major capital cities that in their new regional location started cafes, restaurants, boutiques, life-coaching and bed and breakfast accommodation. The transformation was very much attuned to this idea of 'seachanging' one's entire life through geographical location.

As the movement has grown older however, these foundations have been lost through a process of marketing and mass public interest. Nowadays, at least here in Australia, you often hear of people performing a 'seachange' but it is understood as simply a shift towards the coast; hence why researchers and real estate specialists now refer to the movement towards the country/bush as 'treechange'. The movement was never merely about an escape from the city

to the beach to live the lap of luxury. It was originally designated as a genuine attempt to recover something lost in the messy social world we embrace in urban/suburban social life. Furthermore, it was never something entertained solely by the middle classes. However now, it would seem that seachange is predominantly a middle class phenomenon. This is evident in the work of Michaela Benson (2012) (amongst others) who wrote an exquisite ethnographic account of what the Europeans call 'lifestyle migration' in her book *The British in rural France: Lifestyle migration and the ongoing search for a better way of life*.

**JPG:** What are the major political implications of this shift?



**NO:** This is more difficult to answer because there are really in my view two effects of seachange upon the political landscape. Firstly, there is the broader cultural disaffection with consumption from which the movement was first instigated. The ideas here are not too distinct from downshifting, voluntary simplicity, slow food, slow cities and simple living. It is founded upon not just a disdain for city/suburban life (though that is a major component of it), but also a cultural narrative that speaks to a popular rhetoric of 'there must be something more to life than this'. In particular, there is a narrative that threads through these movements including the first forms of seachanging which makes the argument that a consumption focussed lifestyle is one that does not lead to happiness and success. Rather, consumption practices need to be altered either through food, place, services and travel in order to capture something more meaningful that feeds directly into one's sense of self. I argue in my forthcoming book *Seeking Authenticity in Place, Culture and Self* that such transformation is really an exercise in self-authentication; a process by which the individual can remove themselves from those things which he/she deem to be profaning the self to those activities and environments which enhance the self. Politically speaking, when collectives begin to resist the pull of mass consumerism, this creates a potential for a more ethical and environmentally sustainable future. Indeed others have argued this point such as Kate Soper's (2007) 'alternative hedonism' arguments and Wendy Parkins and Geoffrey Craig's (2006) book *Slow Living*. In both instances, the theoretical position is that through alternative practices of consumption, individuals themselves can in fact choose lifestyle and consumption options that are more sustainable in the long term while also enhancing their own sense of self. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper for instance discuss this in an upcoming chapter in the edited book *The Culture of the Slow* (Osbaldiston, in press) whereby they contend that the relatively fresh reuptake of bicycle transportation provides the State with the opportunity to reduce traffic pollution, congestion and other issues while also delivering a pleasurable experience for the individual. The same tenets potentially apply to slow food, slow travel, slow cities and

even seachange wherein people are able to experience more distinct pleasures than what are found in the general malaise of everyday life.

However as I noted earlier, the original motivation of seachange has been lost in part to a relatively subtle commodification. Now what we have across the world is a significant issue at the local political level that was once really unheard of in country and beachside townships. That is the influx of relatively wealthy individuals who have entered and transformed places through development and consumer practices. Across the 'developed nations' this has become a real issue in places of high environmental amenity. In particular, the major issue is that of housing. Relatively speaking, those escaping the city are generally on higher incomes and have more substantial wealth to expend on housing within new regions. Subsequently, what you see is townships that become dotted with expensive looking homes coupled with a high price tag. This then has a real impact upon the local market where the demand for more residential property inflates land values and housing costs. Local municipalities and councils across these areas struggle to cope with this at times, for good reason. Increased values means increased capital for these local governments. Politically, it's a bitter and sweet scenario. On one hand the influx of wealth means more capital for local works and services. But the poisoned chalice is the potential for a more divided community and an emerging gap between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. This is a very real problem that researchers such as Laurence Moss (2006) continue to grapple with today.

So politically, there are two areas of concern within the seachange phenomenon that speak more broadly to the growth of alternative consumptions. We might add also a question of whose authenticity is it anyway? Urban sociologist Sharon Zukin (2010) for instance does a great job in highlighting that in the pursuit of 'supposed' authentic practices, other minority and lower class groups and their lifestyle pursuits are overwhelmed by the middle classes. Classic examples of this occur frequently in the metropolises

where old areas which at times hold cheap housing are gentrified in the name of 'rejuvenation' creating chic and fresh housing that is expensive and ends up accommodating only those with significant incomes. Amongst these new communities you start to see things like food and clothing markets emerge as people seek traditional produce and handmade goods. The critique that Zukin (2008) makes in this regard is that these places often then become hives of consumer activity, such as SoHo in New York City which may from the outside appear as 'authentic' spaces, but inherently do so by excluding other activities and groups from the place. I would contend that within

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seachange we might begin to see such practices emerge within certain communities. Politically, this is class distinction enacted through the notion of 'authenticity'.

**JPG:** What then of local resistance to seachange and community backlash of what you've described here above? Is there evidence of this happening?

**NO:** There are several examples of this occurring throughout the world. I can speak quickly on some of the things we have seen here in Australia though. Firstly, it is quite clear that there is a certain resistance to the seachangers period in many of these towns. Raymond Williams' (1973) work on the *City and the Country* here remains a powerful account of the disjuncture between the two regions in my view. While seachangers seek to discover something 'real' in regards to community – which is perceived not to exist in the city – they often find that their 'new' communities aren't as welcoming as they hoped. In fact, I have heard stories of people feeling as if they still are not accepted as part of the community years after their move. They remain the 'stranger' to use



that famous Simmelian essay. So there is a real resistance first of all to the cultural narrative, if you like, of a country town that has its arms perpetually open to new visitors and migrants.

The second more politically minded sort of resistance emerges in the form of organised collectives against the progress of places. What I mean here is a real disdain for forms of development that for these people appear 'out of place'. This relates more now to the influx of newer forms of 'seachange' rather than the original movers. First generation seachangers for example are often those behind the formation of such resistances towards those developments that are designed to attract the wealthy – potentially even those seeking a nice second home to escape to occasionally for the weekend. Across Australia we have seen this pop-up frequently. Movements like 'Save Hastings Point', 'Save Bells Beach' and the Kuranda Envirocare group are created with the purpose to protect not just environments but just as importantly, the 'local feel' or aesthetic. Quite often these groups use the internet and social networking sites to draw national and international attention to their plight. The resistance is local though, and di-

rected mainly at local councils who are charged with planning responsibility.

The third resistance that we at times see is that of a clash of cultures of sorts. In particular, we have seen some instances of where groups founded by seachangers clash with local desires for economic advancement. In one case in Kuranda for instance, a local environmental group that was formed and predominantly run by seachangers clashed openly with local business owners over proposed development of housing in the area. The organised political group wanted to preserve certain sections of the natural surrounds as it fed into their 'sense of place' while also being home to certain endangered species. However, local business owners and other residents of the community were concerned that the denial of this development would mean a missed opportunity for local jobs and increased wealth for their area. In this respect, there is a real clash over what intergenerational equity is and how it should be approached.

**JPG:** What of the prospect of re-sacralising urban spaces? Is there a need to do so in your view in relation to what the seachangers are looking for?



World Trade Memorial in New York City

**NO:** That's a good question and one that I think we should be mindful of. Richard Sennett's work over the years has been cautious in my mind of suggesting that the city will always remain inherently harmful to the human condition. Indeed the city can be the hub of cultural activity and home for the cultural omnivore – though I imagine others might disagree. This might need however significant transformation in the way in which urban planning approaches relatively mundane issues. Sennett thinks we need to be more creative in the ways in which we use our resources in planning cityscapes and surrounding locations. I think we really need to rethink our suburbs as I will get to in a moment. Subsequently, I'm cautious to recount tales of the city as the profane as an absolute. My work into seachange merely states that people within this phenomenon generally view the city as such. Subsequently, I think it is wrong to suggest that urban spaces are inherently not sacred. It is true that most urban spaces are no doubt quite mundane, but within each of our major metropolises across the world, there are those areas that invoke a special type of feeling within people who near them. From the relatively recent World Trade Memorial in New York City to the grand churches of London, there are spaces that hold special narratives in the minds of many. From this viewpoint, we cannot suggest that the city is totally devoid of specialness already. In regards to seachange though, one thing that I have not explored more is the possibility that the rejection of the city for the country is potentially more correctly put as the rejection of the *homogenised suburbia* for the country. In private communication Charles Lindholm from Boston University suggested that to me and I have since wondered if the urban sprawl into the suburbs has created a feeling of disdain for suburbia. Think about it for a moment: how distinct are the suburbs that surround cities? Not very in my view. Sure we have distinction in style of housing but that often relates more to class than aesthetic distinctiveness. In most suburbs you can almost guarantee that you will have a shopping mall (and they get bigger and bigger as George Ritzer (2010) has described for years in his work into the spectacles of consumption), the obligatory park on the street corner, the

schools, the video stores, the sport grounds and so on.

But what we also see with that is increased local traffic congestion, increased pollution (both noise and physical) and an increased social reservedness to our neighbours and communities in general (something that Simmel (1991[1903]) was acutely aware of over 100 years ago). Whereas while the city also has these issues, it continues, I would imagine, exciting people through the distinct opportunities for divergent cultural activities that can be found therein. I think in some regards it's not so much the city places that need rejuvenation for seachangers, but it's the suburban lifestyle. From that perspective, maybe we should be better off talking about a 'great suburban escape' rather than a 'great urban escape'. Politically speaking, this needs to be enacted at the local level from the 'ground' up rather than top down from the State.

**Notes:**

\* **Dr. Jean-Paul Gagnon** is a social and political theorist with a Ph.D. in political science. He completed his doctorate at the Queensland University of Technology under the aegis of Australia's prestigious Endeavour Award.

\*\* **Dr Nicholas Osbaldiston** is a Lecturer of Sociology at Monash University, Australia. He joined the School of Applied Media and Social Sciences in 2012. Prior to this he worked for the University of Melbourne in the School of Resource Management and Geography as a postdoctoral research fellow on an ARC Linkage Project investigating equitable outcomes to climate change adaptation along the Gippsland East coastline.

Nick is a co-convenor of the Australian Cultural Sociology Thematic Group and is also a member of The Australian Sociological Association executive. He is currently the co-editor of Nexus (the newsletter of The Australian Sociological Association) and the general article editor of the journal Social Alternatives.

