

Society and the Individual: an Irreducible Relationship?

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This paper examines the the relationship between modern society and the individual, which is found to be fundamentally antagonistic. The imposition of power structures - government, law, economy, etc. - that are ideologically, teleologically, and physically separate from the individual create a social clime in which individualism is able to be subordinated. In this way, we observe the alienation of the modern individuals from their society, with observable and tangible losses that manifest themselves in the form of a pervasive "social sickness". This sickness causes the individual to become nothing more than an abstraction. The antagonism, then, as a figure of difference expresses the denial and suppression of an individual nature by societal forces.

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In recent times, we have seen the drive to "modernize" society, to make it ever more efficient in all areas of endeavour. While the machines of economy, bureaucracy, and technological progress march on, where is the individual? Is the individual to be merely a dependant of the "social machine", or is there still room for individual expression and will? What, I ask, is the relationship between modern society and the individual? In posing this question, I argue that it is fundamentally antagonistic. The imposition of power structures - government, law, economy, etc. - that are ideologically, teleologically, and physically separate from the individual creates a social clime in which individualism is able to be subordinated. In this way, we observe the alienation of the modern individual from their society, with observable and tangible losses that manifest themselves in the form of a pervasive "social sickness". This sickness causes the individual to become nothing more than an abstraction; the antagonism, then, is the denial and suppression of an individual nature by societal forces.

To examine this claim, I will consider various social theories; most notably, the theories of Rousseau and Marx will be discussed. As we explore humanity as placed *ex machina*, I will pose this auxiliary question: What are the specific outcomes of the "social sickness" as described above? We will deconstruct the original claim as well as the question itself, demonstrating it as valid and logical from principles both theoretical and experiential. Then, we will consider this concept of "social sickness" from the standpoint of political and moral philosophy; this will, of course, entail an adequate definition thereof. Finally, we will delve briefly into the potential resolution of this "sickness".

Let us first discuss Rousseau for the purpose of observing a particular attempt to reconcile individual freedom and political association. For Rousseau, individuals form society through the creation of a "Social Contract"; this contract is formed of the "General Will" of the people, which is assumed to work in the best interests of the body politic, i.e. of the public as a whole. (Rousseau, 1993) One exigency of this contract is the "total alienation" of the individual to the community; it would seem, then, that Rousseau's philosophy negates the individual altogether in favour of a collective mindset. However, a more careful reading will reveal the importance of individual thought and deliberation to Rousseau:

"If, when the people...held its deliberations, the citizens had no communication one with another, the grand total of the small differences would always give the general will, and the decision would always be good." (Rousseau, 1993)

He argues that, for the "General Will" to accurately reflect the best interests of all, it must take into account individual opinion; the "General Will" is, for him, the consensual medium between all personal differences. Rousseau sees the perils of private association; in subdividing the body politic along faction lines, the diversity of opinion is inevitably reduced. Rousseau equates this reduction with the "contraction" of the State, whereby the power and duty of government is concentrated in the hands of ever fewer people. Of key importance here is the tendency for the political intervention of private interest to increase; for Rousseau, this intervention is the root of societal degeneration. (Rousseau, 1993) To take a modern parallel, consider the existence of political parties; often, people will vote for a certain candidate out of party loyalty - "I will vote for party A, as I have always voted for party A." This is consequent on the standardization of thought; the political realm becomes dominated by rational bureaucracy as the Weberian "ideal-type" (Elwell, Online 9) for the achievement of a specific goal.

The rationalization of politics distils the panoply of disparate opinion into a limited number of organizational arguments, creating a political discourse "stripped of...its capacity for meaning" (Jensen, Online 10) as these arguments are simplified to meet the necessity of efficiency. Simultaneously, individual opinion is subordinated to the organizational values and stances within the political party; in stating affiliation with a given party, we surrender our position in Foucault's "economy of discourse" (Peterson, Online 11) to these organizations. In this sense, we divide votes between a certain number of factions; votation systems that exclude smaller organizations from representation serve to reinforce this division. The argument is given thus: "I would prefer to vote for party X; they have no chance to represent me; therefore, I will not vote for party X." As the variety of opinions is homogenized and distilled to certain mass-marketable 'core values' - as politics is, to borrow a term from Ritzer, subjected to 'McDonaldization' (Jensen, Online 10) - the individual is forced to suppress facets of their own belief that find themselves without sufficiently influential voice. Rousseau himself responds to the problem of factions within society:

"But when factions arise...the will of each of these [factions] becomes general in relation to its members, while it remains particular in relation to the State: it may then be said that there are no longer as many votes as there are men, but only as many as there are associations." (Rousseau, 1993)

As the number of disparate organizations decreases, the ability to express individual opinion is seriously hampered; relative to any given faction, the independent individual has significantly less power insofar as 'power' can be equated with position within the 'economy of discourse'. This is not necessarily limited to power in the political sense; Barry Allen notes that, in any system constructed upon specialized knowledge, "modern ways of pursuing, qualifying, testing and teaching knowledge are not possible apart from reciprocating patterns in the exercise of power." (Peterson, Online 11) These 'reciprocating patterns' come in the form of paradigm, so that the bureaucratic organization constructs another level of systematic belief alongside the societal: organizational paradigm. In the case of modern democratic systems, the faction might compel its constituents to vote *en bloc*; against the force of this organizational paradigm, the individual vote is worth very little indeed.

For joint consideration, mathematician Kenneth Arrow "proved" - by mathematical standards of proof - that "there is no consistent method of making a fair choice among three or more candidates." (Bowen, Online 6) Paraphrased, Arrow's Impossibility Theorem states that it is impossible to construct a voting system that will accurately represent the combination of individual preferences within a society. This could be viewed as supportive of Rousseau's maxim of "maximum strength"; he argued that every State has an optimal size, and that smaller States - smaller, presumably, to be taken in both the demographic and geographic senses - are politically more robust than larger States. How so? If no voting system can fairly represent the people, then it follows that the only way to minimize misrepresentation is to minimize government size. To do so, there are two principal approaches: centralization and decentralization. In the former, the end result is an oligarchy of powerful interests, whereas the latter relies on forming smaller societal units. Through examination of the individual-state separation as outlined in the thesis, we will see that centralization merely serves to aggravate the problem of misrepresentation; it is a 'non-solution'. By

elimination, the implication is that decentralization is the only means by which to overcome this separation.

We tend to think in terms of nation-states today; I live in Oakville, the Greater Toronto Area, the Great Lakes Region, Southern Ontario, and Ontario, to varying degrees of precision. Nevertheless, I am considered a Canadian citizen, rather than an Oakvillian citizen; the term "citizen" is reserved for nations alone. This is a distinction I share with roughly 30 million others, of whom I know but a tiny fraction; the rest, I am effectively isolated from. We will now consider this isolation by means of comparison with the Marxist conception of alienation.

In Marxist social theory, the problem of economic alienation is raised; not only is the worker alienated from that which they produce, but they are also alienated from others through the 'commodification' of time. (Marx, Online 4) The fundamental change in society, one indicative of the transformation into modernity, is the introduction of wage-labour made possible by schemes of industrial-scale production. For Marx, the sale of labour as a commodity produces an equivalency between wage-labour and labour-time, i.e. between money and time. Once the time is given by the labourer, the wage-earner controls neither their productivity nor the "surplus value" created thereby. (Kuhn, Online 1)

I have stated that modern power structures are separate from their subjects in three main ways: ideologically, teleologically, and physically. Let us deal with the last of these first; it is all but evident that someone living in Vancouver, B.C. is physically distant from the federal government in Ottawa. The critic says, "But what of technology? Do advanced communication technologies not make it possible to connect, regardless of distance?" Here, a certain distinction must be made between communication and input, between what I will term "political information" and "political productivity". The former is apparent knowledge of political systems, whereas the latter is the ability to directly influence that system. To take a hypothetical example, I might read the newspaper and learn that, in the country of *Philosophia*, a law has been passed banning philosophers from shaving. Leaving aside questions of *a priori* knowledge, did I influence this result in any empirically observable way? Did I have any "politically productive" input

into this decision? The problem, I would say, is that the legislative and executive power of the Canadian government is tied to the parliamentary buildings. To pass a law, it must be deliberated in the House of Commons. In our terms, the "political productivity" is limited to a specific group of people in a specific location, whereas the "political information" is easily transmissible via various means of communication.

Now, let us tackle the concept of teleological separation, or separation *of* purpose. According to Marxist thought, alienation begins when the individual and societal purposes of work are no longer the same. (Cox, Online 5) The societal purpose of work is to produce a product, whether it be material-based (e.g. computers, books, etc.) or service-based (e.g. police force, maintenance, etc.) In pre-currency societies, the individual also works to produce, and has the means to direct the exchange of that product, so that there is no such teleological removal. In "modern" societies, the individual works to receive a wage, whereas society takes the productive output of that work to meet its purpose; here arises the separation. Extend this consideration to modern society; the purpose of individual vote is to elect a candidate for a given office. The purpose of the political system as a whole, however, is to provide for the administration of the society; the productive output of this system - legislative, infrastructural, judicial, etc. - is removed from the individual, who has no control over these things. In centralizing these structures, we ensure that their purpose must be separate from individual purpose by removing them from the sphere of human scale and thereby creating a separation by purpose.

Ideological separation, then, is exacerbated by the other two; its expression lies in particular modes of thought, made peculiar to the individual and to the society. The individual thinks, "I want to have my personal views and opinions voiced." The society thinks, "I want to be maintained." We have seen that, by Arrow's Impossibility Theorem, it is impossible to represent fairly all individuals; therefore, there will certainly be some group of individuals inadequately represented by any given voting system. The real problem, however, is when the societal thought is separate even from prevailing thoughts. Let us consider an example. The public might prefer that food-producing companies be required to clearly label foods containing genetically modified by-products as such. In fact, repeated polls have

indicated that 70-80% of Canadians are in favour of this proposal. (Milani, Online 8) However, to the best of my "political information", no such law exists in Canada. When the government is physically separated from the vast majority of its subjects, it hardly comes as a surprise that it is not aware of all individual opinions; perhaps, it is not even aware of certain prevailing opinions. Teleological separation provides the appearance of necessity to whatever ideological separation is created; if a law is passed against the will of the people, the government can say, "You have elected us; it is our job to pass laws; we must pass this law to protect society; therefore, this law is an extension of your will!" Centralized structures are the "General Will" of our social paradigm; to them, we confer more or less absolute power to decide. We reinforce the separation between the individual and modern society by attaching to these structures the 'justifiability' of legal and social support.

Having established the existence of the individual-society separation, we will now examine the idea of "social sickness". A regular sickness, we say, is one where the living body exists in an adverse condition; we diagnose it via observation of certain symptoms. The adverse condition of modern society is alienation, this being rooted in separation from its constituent individuals. Rationalist society becomes an extension of the technological apparatus as described by Heidegger; it is part of the '*herausfordern*', of the imposition upon the individual from without. (Xuanmeng, Online 13) It serves to perpetuate itself by adding the weight of apparent necessity to the paradigm of 'centralism' and 'bureaucratism'. What, then, are its symptoms? Dehumanization and loss of community are among the most evident; we will discuss those here.

The individual-society separation makes it effectively impossible to deal with the individual on a human scale; in a system where time is money, it is economically unfeasible to account for millions of citizens without reducing them to mere identifiers. The name itself becomes an identifier, a way to track and store information within a heavily centralized system. I am identified by, among other things, a Social Insurance Number, a passport number, and a driver's permit number; the bank knows me as a credit card number, an account number; my employer knows me as an employee number. Whereas it might be argued that this constitutes a new identity for the modern individual, I charge that it neglects

the aspects of 'uniqueness' implicit to identity. Any person can see that I am a 5' 9" male weighing about 180 pounds and, with some effort, can access many of the particulars listed above; having done so, however, they will have perfectly failed to deduce anything of my individual nature. These numbers and data are disconnected from my personal identity; if I had applied for my Ontario Health Card perhaps three seconds after I did, I might have received a different number, so that the specific number is attached to me by formality alone. As the scale of society increases, its ability to relate to the individual decreases; an ever-increasing amount of time must be spent organizing, delegating, administrating. Then, as these activities are determined to require money, the society becomes increasingly dependent on economic activity, to the virtual exclusion of all else. From this is produced a vicious circle of sorts, whereby societal alienation contributes to economic isolation and vice versa.

I argue, then, that the loss of community - or, rather, of the sense of *communitas* - is but a product of this alienation. Let us define community as society on a human scale, confined to a limited and clearly definable area. This is much like the concept of "neighbourhood" in that the community is here limited in geographical size, except that the social dimension is here made explicit. As the individual becomes isolated from their society and perceives their dehumanization by that society, so they begin to feel isolated even from fellow individuals; they become unable to conceive the concept of community, unable to create society on this human scale. Society comes to be viewed as something that must be distant and removed from the individual, something that must have certain standards of legislative and economic power. In response to these societal paradigms, the individual creates something to stand in between themselves and a society with which their identity and individual nature cannot interface, a sort of meta-individual. Mills demonstrates the 'rational' extension of the meta-individual within an extreme social paradigm:

"The atrocities of our time are done by men as "functions" of social machinery-men possessed by an abstracted view that hides from them the human beings who are their victims and, as well, their own humanity." (Elwell, Online 9)

In seeking to always standardize and centralize, we create a society bereft of its

"social capital".

What is "social capital"? It is the will and ability of the individuals that comprise a society to participate in its "political productivity", and to benefit thereof. (Online 7) It is an inverse measure of the separation between individual and society; as this separation decreases, the "social capital" simultaneously increases. Why is "social capital" desirable? From a utilitarian moral principle, one could argue that an individual is happiest in society when they feel that their needs, wants, opinions, beliefs, etc. are addressed. To allow them the means to ensure this, then, must surely increase both individual and overall pleasure, thus meeting the "Greatest Happiness Principle" referred to by Mill and Bentham (Zamaros, 2004); this fits also the consequentialist moral principle. Consider also Foucault's concept of power:

"Power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress...power is strong...because, as we are beginning to realise, it produces effects at the level of desire - and also at the level of knowledge." (Quel Corps?, Online 12)

Foucault argues that power need not be conceived by the individual in the negative. The individual desires to participate in the 'political productivity' of their society because of the power that this confers, a power to have direct input upon decisions that affect them. The danger of power arises from Weberian "formal rationalization" (Elwell, Online 9), wherein all aspects outside of the organizational goal to which that power is applied are ignored. When the meta-individual is constructed, aspects of the individual are lost, and "substantive rationalization" becomes impossible in that those lost aspects lie outside the subsequent rational construct. 'Social capital' depends upon the capacity to consider both community and individual, and thus cannot be adequately dealt with by 'formal rationalization'.

At the same time, the displeasure of the individual is seen to stem partly from alienation; perceiving the three modes of separation previously discussed, the individual comes to understand themselves as inconsequential to the society. This is reflected in the downward trend of voter turnout in elections at all levels (Milani, Online 8); on the federal level, it is not uncommon to have fewer than

half of eligible voters placing ballots. The average citizen of the modern nation-state is in a state of perpetual discontent with their political leaders; having no means of bridging the separation of physical and mental distance, they become disaffected with the political system. Then, by mitigating this 'between-ness', we must necessarily decrease the displeasure of the individual; by giving them the means to participate more directly in society, we build the will to do so. Sadly, this is not the case in most "modern" representative democracies, where the individual's only chance for "political productivity" comes once every few years. We are caught in the divisive nature of this 'between-ness', and neglect to embrace its possibilities for connection.

How, then, can we bring about an increase in "social capital"? We must reverse the centralizing tendencies of modern society. Despite Rousseau's adamant belief in the impossibility of this reversal - he argues that it is the nature of society to degenerate power onto the few (Rousseau, 1993) - I believe that it is possible. The essence of decentralization lies in the formation of smaller social units or, within the context of modern society, the subdivision of larger existing units. We thus return to the Rousseau-ian concept of "optimal size"; what is the best size for these units? To this, I apply the criterion of human scale; they must be sufficiently large so as to be effective and diverse, yet small enough to allow each individual to deal with all others on a human scale. Attaching a precise size limit to this is counterproductive; it may be something that can only be determined in practice, something unique to various sets of individuals and various circumstances. This philosophy of political decentralization is adamantly supported by many within the environmental movement, as it coincides with the aims of sustainability theory. (Roberts; Bacher, 1995) David Suzuki and Robert Hunter have both stood in the defence of decentralization, and it is among the stated policies of the worldwide Green Party. To eliminate distance and separation is to eliminate bureaucratic sources of inefficiency and abstraction, so that the citizen is once more able to become aware of certain aspects - social and natural environment, socioeconomic problems, human concerns within society - on an experiential level. Once this experiential link is established, the impetus to sustain the 'positive' aspects gains a certain rationality; removing the abstraction of large-scale economy from consideration, there is no longer any reason for, say, the exploitation of human and natural resources.

We have seen here that the relationship between modern society and the individual is, indeed, characterized by *irreducible difference*; the two are seen as opposites of a spectrum, however related, wherein the individual existence and will is denied by societal forces that tend to centralize, standardize, and automate the structures of society. To this, we have added the concepts of "social sickness" and of "social capital", posing the latter as a remedy to the former. It has been demonstrated that "social capital" can be increased by the reversal of those societal forces that suppress individualism. What is the reader to derive from all this? This is a philosophy of hope in human nature; I believe that, once we learn to recognize what is lost by dehumanizing society, we can once more search for the humanity within society. In a society of human scale, the separation of individual and society will be minimized, if not altogether eliminated; this should be seen as desirable, and should never be neglected as impossibility.

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