

Divided and Conquered

CrimethInc.

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Over a century ago, a famous writer quipped that the industrial worker was “a mere appendage of flesh on a machine of iron.” Today, that description can be applied across the board: each of us is no more than an appendage of flesh on the vast machine that is our society, for our lives and communities are atomized into isolated sectors. If we want to change the whole of life, we must first become whole again.

Separation: the Disintegration of the Self

Modern man’s activity is compartmentalized: it is divided and subdivided into separate components which can only interfere with each other. He experiences life as an ongoing conflict between achievement, romance, social responsibility, fitness, relaxation, adventure, and so on, because all these pursuits seem to be mutually exclusive. He would like to spend more time with his wife, but if he doesn’t stay at the office another hour he won’t be able to advance his career, and then he has to go to the gym to firm up his belly and ward off poor health... and there’s that damn vacation at the beach to plan for, and world news to catch up on, before he even gets to think about being romantic with her. Perhaps he buys that Mozart CD that the advertisements said would relieve stress and help focus his concentration skills—hoping some new medication will serve to fend off the symptoms of a life in which he never does anything for its own sake! Perhaps he would like to get involved with some sort of volunteer social work, but doesn’t know where he would fit it into his schedule; he has a hard enough time just taking the time out to watch his favorite sitcom, and even that doesn’t provide him with much relief from his busy life. *Meaning*, of course, is absent everywhere when life is disjointed; without unity of self in his pursuits, the modern man can find no lasting satisfaction in any one of them.

Compare this with the integrated, holistic life of the “savage” or young adventurer. For her, there is no distinction between working and playing, between spending time with her friends and lovers, taking care of her practical needs, and seeking pleasure. She moves through the world, finding sustenance and getting exercise from the same activities, using her creativity with her friends to weave a daily life that is both challenging and familiar, at once adventure, livelihood, and religious ceremony.

Perhaps you’ve experienced this kind of lifestyle before, when you were doing something that incorporated every aspect of your being into a perfect equilibrium. We all need to find ways to integrate our lives, so that we will not always be trying to make impossible choices between equally necessary pieces of ourselves... and if we want to make this world a better place, we have to find ways of living that are revolutionary in their very nature; for politics, activism, or social responsibility as a separate domain of life, as a hobby or part-time operation, can never outweigh the effects of the rest of life.

Example:

My friend Mark practices Yoga to focus and relax himself. He is also an artist and musician, who often travels around the country with his work. Mark realized one day that when he neglects his exercises on the road, he still feels focused and relaxed in ways that he simply couldn’t at home without Yoga. He concluded that the voyage itself must be a kind of Yoga, perhaps the same kind of Yoga referred to by Ken Kesey in his eulogy for Neil Cassady:

“His life was the yoga of a man driven to the cliff-edge by the grassfire of an entire nation’s burning material madness. Rather than be consumed by this he jumped, choosing to sort things out in the fast-flying but smog-free moments of a life with no retreat. In this commitment he placed himself irrevocably beyond category.”

Specialization: the Sub-Division of Labor

Just as our individual lives are fragmented by compartmentalization, our society is fragmented by ever-increasing specialization. Every sphere of life is relegated to the care of an elite core of specialists, who administer it without consulting the rest of us. Every profession is divided and subdivided: from scientist to chemist, from chemist to biochemist, from biochemist to pharmaceutical neurobiologist until no one outside a handful of experts can understand what is going on. At that point, the division of knowledge itself becomes authoritarian, for it grants small groups of people vast powers over others who cannot even fathom what those powers are.

Becoming a specialist is a self-selecting process: only those willing to concentrate on learning one subject to the exclusion of all else can excel at it. Thus the engineers and computer programmers with the greatest skills are willing to work for the government building weapons of mass destruction and cracking the codes of “subversive” groups, for they have never taken the time to reflect on what the effects of their efforts might be. They simply do what they have been taught to do, for whoever provides the chance to do it.

Each expert in this system of specialization is able to do his job well, in a vacuum, but unable to see the larger whole. Without an analysis of the part he plays in society, he sees it as an external force, acting on him without his participation. And the people who form the various parts of the machine are unable to relate to each other to take action together when they want to change something about the world they are making, separated as they are spatially and socially and psychologically into their individual spheres; in fact, each tends to conceive of problems in terms of its needs versus those of the other components of the machine: the library would get the funding it needed if only it wasn’t going to the linguistics department, etc.

Specialization also discourages the rest of us from being well-rounded and understanding the workings of our society. Painting is left up to artists, the maintenance of our cars to automechanics, social change to professional politicians or amateur activists. The more complicated technologies become, and the more alienating the terminology used by those who work with them, the fewer of us are able to exercise any control over our environments: “Call the repair man,” we chant, waiting in intimidated ignorance and powerlessness. Similarly, all of us but the recognized “artists” miss out on the joys of being creative in the aesthetic world. The true value of a painting cannot be captured by purchasing it in a gallery and hanging it on the wall; it lies in the moment when the painting is conceived, when the artist is comparing sketches with her comrades late one night, arguing about narrative and form, and has a sudden, exhilarating insight. This is something we must all take part in, each with our unique talents. The supposed divinity of artists, and the expert credentials of the art critics who deify them, just like the genius of scientists and the arcane knowledge of locksmiths, have fooled us into denying ourselves this irreplaceable pleasure.

The role of the political activist as authority and expert paralyzes the rest of humanity in correspondingly disastrous ways. Saddest and most absurd of all is the way so many political activists

unconsciously act to alienate others, the very others with whom they hope in theory to find common cause. Conditioned to believe that they need to be superior to others to have value of their own, and believing in the scarcity economy of self which demands that they stake out their identity in contrast to the identities of those around them, today's insecure activists mistakenly presume that they somehow benefit from showing off how much more knowledgeable, more committed, and more ethical they are than everyone else.

Specialization *within* political circles is equally crippling. Oblivious to each other's efforts and the strength they could wield as an alliance, single-issue activists agitate about their chosen topics in parallel ghettos; marginalized into a thousand individual campaigns, they exhaust themselves trying to cure the symptoms of the dominant system, rather than developing a resistance that could undermine the world order that is ultimately responsible.

When being active is no longer an off-putting specialty, and partisans of different struggles are able to find common cause, the world will finally change.

End Segregation! Integrate our lives!

Somewhere across the world there is an underground circus or punk rock band on tour as you read this. Unbeknownst to themselves and others, they carry with them the seeds of a new and yet ancient social structure, which could totally transform the ways all of us live and interact. Within the group, responsibilities are shared and valued equally, and whenever someone wants a break from doing something or is curious to learn about something else, people switch roles. No one member's participation is less important than anyone else's, whatever their individual strengths may be, for the cooperation and contentment of each is crucial to the functioning of the group. Each member's daily activities satisfy her various desires: she feels at home with her friends while she travels through new environments, she makes art that simultaneously entertains and educates others, she gets exercise and learns new things repairing the van, she has adventures collecting food and other supplies through an urban hunting and gathering that does not conflict with her anti-consumerist ethics. Best of all, she no longer has to distinguish between her own needs and those of the people around her, which eliminates the greater part of the stress of human interaction. Together all the participants function as an extended family, and the positive atmosphere is so strong that over time they are able to lose some members and gain others without losing any momentum.

Yes, we'd have to downsize and restructure our whole civilization to follow the lead this merry little band offers, but for the past few centuries we've been struggling to deal with the difficulties of *not* living in such communities—and we haven't had much success. If we're going to struggle anyway, it might as well be towards a utopia in which our lives encompass can everything the cosmos has to offer.

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