Self-Authorship and Differentiationist Anarchism

Grounding Non-Hierarchical Societies in Theories of Adult Cognitive Development

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Part 1: Social Alienation, Homogenization, and the Suppression of Cognitive Development

While cognitive development is often considered a realm of study for children, understanding the immense and rapid brain growth that occurs from infancy to adolescence to early adulthood, what is not widely known or accepted is that cognitive development is something that continues, or has potential to continue, into adulthood and even throughout the lifetime.

The cultural fetishization of youth, the simultaneous worship and stripping of personhood of young people, is rooted in domination and the allure of exerting of power and influence over a young mind that has not yet clearly defined it's own sense of self, it's own sense of value nor fully understands it's place in the world. This vulnerability is an obvious site of exploitation, and while the passing of time and awareness may make this more obvious to the exploited youth in retrospect as they age and move more firmly into adulthood, we also live in a society that does not encourage the actualization of self quite intentionally. This vulnerability continues to be a site of exploitation, potentially throughout the lifetime.

Western colonial imperialist culture has largely sought to wipe inherent understandings of development and maturation from societies that hold and held such concepts as self-evident. Many cultures have rites of passage to mark developmental stages, and have conceptions of humanity throughout the lifespan that create space for the youngest babies to the oldest elders to have a place of belonging that is largely absent from the modern Western paradigm, absent from an iteration of capitalism that relies on isolation to strengthen it's hold on our sense of self, place, and community. Community is now a hodge podge of social connections spanning our digital social media space to the people we meet at work, the bar, or the gym. Belonging and self now defined by numbers and algorithms, deepening the psychic sway that propaganda holds over us as we seek to prove our worthiness of existence.

One personal experience that has driven this lesson home again and again was my own process of matrescence- my emergence into motherhood. The palpable loss of something I could not quite place- the sense of disorientation taking on such a monumental task as full responsibility

for the life and thriving of a helpless human being- having had no models but only scraps of lore and popular sentiments about lack of sleep and loss of subjecthood and individuality to grant me any semblance of an idea of what to expect, how to emerge and move with the shifting focus of my energy, time, and self. We are creatures born and socialized via observation and modeling, and I did not grow up with models for how to care for a baby, how to breastfeed, nor how to manage the development of a child in a manner that respects their personhood. I did not have people around me to support the smooth functioning of a household with survival needs, no one to support me in getting proper sleep, reassure me that the baby was safe and okay and looked out for and that I was not alone in overseeing this task.

The more my child grew, and the more I grew in my role as mother, the more I saw and the more deeply I felt how a lack of interdepenent community affected my sense of self and place, and the ability for myself and my family to thrive.

In 2016 I read the book The Roots of Empathy which explains in detail a pedagogy developed to teach school children basic empathy (what I personally call compassion as I see empathy as distinct, that is for another article). One of the core tools they use is bringing a mother with a new baby into a classroom throughout the program- using the baby and it's attachment to it's parent as a way to illustrate crucial concepts like diversity of inherent personality, putting oneself in the shoes of another, etc. For instance, observing a baby one can learn about core personality features such as activity level, openness to novel experiences, reaction to stimuli and more. Every baby is different, and children can relate to themselves where they fall on any given trait, and look upon others in a light of acceptance of diversity- understanding that we are each imbued with traits that differ and are no better or worse than any other, and that we all have our place.

In a society that is built upon homogenization, in which certain traits and capacities are valued above others as useful and worthy, appreciating the natural diversity of our fellow humans is hardly an afterthought; it is actively fought against. All around us is messaging on how to be a productive person worthy of climbing the social and economic ladder, showing us that who we are is not enough and that our energy and focus should be spent thriving to be something different and that something different is defined in terms of who upholds existing hierarchies.

In my own explorations of alternative schooling options for my child, a friend shared their observation of their own unschooled children- that homeschooled and unschooled children tend not to develop as strict of hierarchies based on age or grade. They typically spend their time in age-diverse settings, watching parents tend to children of all ages, and understand that different ages come with varied developmental stages and adapt accordingly. Rather than a 6th grader looking down upon a 3rd grader, the 6th grader inherently understands through regular observation and interaction that they are at different stages of development and therefor have different dispositions, needs, and motivations. A sense of diversity and development as a part of the natural order of life is instilled in such an environment. The Roots of Empathy Program seeks to bring this understanding into classrooms by bringing the same babies back for students to observe the natural process of growth and development, and to base one's understanding of others in context of who they are as well as where they are in their process of personal development.

This shifting framework in how I saw how diversity, inclusion, and mutual understanding in the realm of childhood has altered my understanding of the same in adulthood. My first introduction to the idea that cognitive development is something that continues beyond adulthood was through David Schnarch's book Passionate Marriage. Schnarch frames adult cognitive development through the lens of differentiation which he further extrapolates on via his framework

of the Crucible Four Points of Balance (solid flexible self, quiet mind and calm heart, grounded responding, and meaningful endurance). In his book Intimacy and Desire, he extrapolates on the scientific underpinning and an evolutionary model for human cognitive development, positing that the growth of the human prefrontal cortex gave us abiilties to make meaning of our experiences. He hypothesizes that relational dysfunctions that naturally arise in all intimate human relationships serve as a grounds of struggle for the purpose of cognitive growth. He makes an unusual and groundbreaking assertion that the most satisfying and meaningful intimacy happens as we age, because as we age we come to know ourselves better, have more of a self to reveal, and are challenged to show ourselves in vulnerable ways while maintaining solidity.

As an individual who is socially coded as and was socialized as a woman, the process of becoming a mother, aging, and having a changing body in many ways has forced me to confront the ways that a lack of an interdependent intergenerational community impacts our sense of self, and robs us of the knowledge that we would otherwise have access to about aging bodies and developing minds and selves throughout the stages of life. We feel guilty for gaining weight and developing wrinkles, for not purchasing or using diligently enough the many products and labors we are offered to stave off these inevitabilities. We do not have the role models of mothers who's children have moved on to adulthood leaving us to grapple with a shifting role in our families and society all alone.

Instead parents hold on to their children for dear life for a sense of purpose, demeaning and degrading, engaging in emotional abuse and domination tactics (including neglect) to suppress the autonomous functioning of their children to instill a sense of dependence or obligation to them, or to emotionally distance themselves to pre-empt their inevitable growing independence.

The proliferation of familial dysfunction, the suppression of children's autonomy, the prevalence of domestic abuse, all circle back to one missing piece: the suppression of differentiation and adult cognitive growth, and this suppression is the underpinning of a society of imbalanced distributions of power.

Part 2: Adult Development, Self-Authorship, and Differentiationism

Developmental psychologist Robert Kegan articulated a theory of adult development with five clear stages. Stage one is the impulsive mind, typical of early childhood. Stage two is the imperial mind, which is typical of most adolescents though it can include adults as some (hypothesized to be around 6% of the population) do not outgrow this stage. Stage three is the socialized mind which makes up the vast majority of the adult population at 58%. Stage four is the self-authoring mind, making up 35% of the population. Finally stage five is the self-transforming mind, making up just 1% of the population.

Core to Kegan's theory is that development is based in what he calls the subject-object shift. Subject is rooted in one's developmental stage and is what comprises one's sense or self or "I am". Object is what one "has" and has been externalized, as an object, rather than a definition of who one inherently is. The shift occurs when one is able to take a broader perspective on oneself and begin to externalize what was taken for granted as "subject" or self, and turn it into "object" or what one has.

Critically, the realm of subject and object define one's locus of control. What is "subject" controls us, controls our capacities by limiting our sense of self and place. What is "object" enters the realm of our control, where we enter into a relationship with these facets of our lives, bodies, and relationships where we suddenly have power, choice, and agency. These developmental shifts create space where growth occurs and one's ability to relate to oneself and other undergoes

monumental changes, changes that I believe are essential for the ability to cultivate societies based in equitable divisions of power.

Let us review stages two through four (which pertain to adults, stage one is limited to children) to see some examples of how this growth plays out. I will review these briefly to focus my attention more on the broader societal implications of this model, but if you'd like to read more in-depth and learn how you can adapt this theory to your life personally, please see this article series from which I am drawing these descriptions for more information. As you read, keep in mind that most self-assess to be at a higher stage of development than they truly are. Honest and reliable self-assessment is a highly challenging task as we hold many blind-spots when constructing a picture of ourselves, behaviors, beliefs, and motivations. For more on this, see David Schnarch's book Brain Talk.

Stage two is defined by the imperial mind. This is when the realm of subject is defined by one's needs, interests, and agendas. For the imperial mind, relationships are transactional. Relationships are a means of meeting one's personal needs, rather than something that is shared among two subjects. The perceptions that other's hold about oneself matter only inasmuch as they define one's ability to fulfill one's personal agendas. The development from stage one (the impulsive mind) was categorized by a shift from a subject/selfhood defined by impulses, feelings, and perceptions, to a subjecthood of needs, interests, and desires. Upon this shift, the former self of impulses, feelings, and perceptions became object- something that one "has" but that is not core or defining of self.

Stage three, the most common stage of adult development, is defined by the socialized mind. The subject of the socialized mind is interpersonal relationships and mutuality. The objects of the socialized mind are the needs, interests, and desires that made up the selfhood of the imperial mind. This is the stage that is most heavily defined by norms, ideologies, and beliefs of the people around us. A greater focus on relationality exists here as it is primarily the perceptions others hold of us that defines our sense of self. This is what Schnarch and Bowen would place in the realm of emotional fusion with others. Here we are quick to internalize the perceptions others hold and make it part of our core identity.

There is a popular strain of thought on the left that romanticizes what we could call here "the socialized mind" as an ideal that creates social harmony and cohesion. However, as stated above, this is where emotional fusion arises, and contrary to what one might think- emotional fusion is actually the site from which most major interpersonal conflict arises.

At stage three, we rely on other-validation for a sense of self. We do not posses a solid sense of self on our own, and therefore in asking others to reflect a positive sense of self for us, we ask them in some critical contexts to forgo their own integrity to provide it. When they do not, we can respond by subduing ourselves or subjugating or attempting to subjugate the other, and bitter struggles for power arise.

While stage two of development may be more obvious in the ways it creates social functions that give rise to hierarchies, that is- a regard of human beings as objects who's purpose is to fulfill one's own agendas, rather than subjects in their own right, stage three is just as pernicious in it's social functions when seeking to create relationships and thusly communities and societies in which power is divided equitably.

Cultivation of cognitive development depends upon a convergence of factors. Not only does there need to be some kind of external or internal impetus to transform, there must also be the proper environment. Any paradigm for successful anarchist social organization must seek

to create the conditions for such cognitive development to occur. While the process of development may be personal and individual, we are collectively responsible for cultivating the societal conditions for such growth. It is widely understood that mutual aid is a crucial tool for the cultivation of relationships of solidarity. It is a building block that forms a strong web of social connections. Solidarity, however, will always be fragile if it cannot be subjected to the pressures of self-definition.

Here we emerge into stage four, the self-authoring mind. The subject of the self-authoring mind is self-authorship, identity, and ideology. The object one has is relationships and mutuality. Self-authorship is the root of differentiation, it is where we come to understand that the perceptions of others do not define who we are, and that we hold power unto ourselves to self-define, to self-author.

It is important to note that differentiation is not self-authorship in opposition to others. To self-define in opposition to others still relies on a reflected sense of self and allows others to determine your own actions and beliefs, it is just the inverse to harmony-seeking relationality. True self-authorship and differentiation self-defines both from one's own seat of power and perception, as well as through the accepting of influence of others. We can see where the struggle or input we share with another can lend critical insight and align/author ourselves accordingly. We also accept that identity is fluid and changing. However, the stage of self-authorship in Kegan's model is primarily defined by the cognitive shift to understanding and utilizing one's personal sense of agency.

Stage five is the most rare stage of human development, but I don't believe this is because of an inherent difficulty to achieve it, but rather due to social and structural elements that make it challenging to survive in a ruthless hierarchical context.

Stage five is the interconnected mind. The subject of the interconnected mind simply is. The object the interconnected mind has is self-authorship, identity, and ideology. The interconnected mind is the most flexible, has a solid sense of self, is able to adapt and change and see oneself as in relationship to a variety of roles and contexts. At this stage, one is able to hold paradox and contradiction without a fundamental crisis of identity, and so is best equipped to hold space for differences and diversity, of self and of ideologies.

The struggle of cognitive development is that it is a profound, challenging process that is multi-factorial. It is both within and outside of our personal control. To reach stage five would be the ideal, however I believe in terms of what will facilitate egalitarian social structures, striving for and encouraging others to step into stage four of self-authorship is crucial for the development of differentiation. Many if not most power struggles are cut at the root with the development of differentiation. Not that the conflict that power struggles arise from cease to exist, but that our locus of power is moved from the other to ourselves.

From a place of differentiation and self-authorship, we have a more natural understanding of appropriate divisions of power and responsibility, we are better able to collaborate and accept influence while not relying on the fragility of other-validation for a sense of self, and we are better able to accept and endure the dissonance that comes with asserting yourself in opposition to others, or when others assert themselves in opposition to us. The use of force is no longer required when we do not allow ourselves to be subjugated, nor seek to subjugate, but when we are solid enough in our sense of self that the battles we pick are picked from true integrity and grounded discernment. When a sense of self is not reliant on other-validation, the mutual threat that diversity and disagreement hold disappears. We are free to see where the true battles lie- in

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fundamental struggles for liberation, wherever the personal agency of the individual and of the collective to choose how to exist as oneself and together alike is threatened.

The subject-object shift is core to the projects of personal and interpersonal liberation. Where these shifts occur, we gain freedom. Freedom from the bounds that defined who we are, who we are in relation to each other, and who we are in relation to ourselves. We free ourselves as we grow, and we free others as we move away from seeing social relationships as either transactional in concrete ways (seeing each other as objects that advance our personal agendas), or transactional in more abstract ways (seeing each other as objects for a reflected sense of self). We free each other as we free ourselves, and create the space and context within which equitable divisions of power can exist and flourish.

Part 3- Schnarch and Vygotsky: Culture, Relationships, and the Conditions for Growth

Lev Vygostky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development diverges from the more widely known Piaget's theory in that he emphasizes that learning precedes development, rather than the other way around. He also posits that culture, relationships, and social context form the most important elements that facilitate learning and thusly development. For Vygostky, adults in society confer to children not only knowledge but meaning- what to think and how to think. He believed that higher mental functions could only develop in relation to more advanced others.

One of the biggest hurdles in developing coherent and resilient lasting organizations on the left has been dealing with intracommunity conflict and violence- a struggle we are capable of on our own but also has been a proven weak point for state intervention in breaking up solidarity. At it's root, these are issues of differentiation. Even interpersonal violence stems from emotional fusion and the imposition of one's will against another, the attempt to erase one's reality and capacity for self-authorship in favor of a that of the subjugating force. Raising levels of differentiation is a critical step in protecting ourselves and supporting others in protecting themselves from abuse. When we reach the level of cognitive development wherein we are self-authoring and have an inherent comprehension of the boundaries between self and other, the moves that others make to attempt to subjugate us no longer have the same power.

While these major hurdles have been sites of immense devastation and despondence, they are actually the sites from which we can harness critical growth, as individuals and as communities that are attempting to prefigure structures of future societies, particularly as we watch the devastation of societal collapse happening all around us. We are in a prime moment to be creating structures through resilient culture of differentiation.

Emotional gridlock is the result of emotional fusion- when a relationship meets the limits where other-validation begins to encroach upon personal integrity, and it is this site of emotional gridlock that Schnarch calls a "crucible" for personal development. Vygostky calls the space between what one is capable of and what one is not yet capable of but ready to learn the "zone of proximal development." To approach the zone of proximal development and tackle growth requires something Schnarch calls "meaningful endurance," or the ability to tolerate discomfort for the sake of growth.

Sites of intracommunity conflict are prime examples of zones of proximal development for those of us seeking to grow from definition by others to self-authorship and to raise our personal levels of differentiation. Our ability to show up in these situations from a place of meaningful endurance (in tandem with Schnarch's other four points of balance) creates supportive relation-

ships where we can model self-authorship and support others in moving into a place of their own self-authorship. We lay the scaffolding for each other to grow from.

It doesn't take large conflicts to achieve this. There are myriad tiny moments in which we can relate to others from a place of differentiation and support non-reliance on other-validation for sense of self. Not that we withhold validation altogether, but that we move towards reliably offering only validation that is authentic, and tolerating the discomfort and anxiety of dissonance when we cannot offer it.

The more we are able to infuse this into our relationships and communities, the more we encourage people to grow. This is the creation of culure and meaning making, and we have the power on both individual and collective levels to push culture to shift.

Schnarch and Vygotsky both speak of the importance of meaning-making, and the latter moreso of culture. Anarchists in particular have long valorized "the struggle"- defining the struggle in relation to an oppressive higher force. However, the struggle exists as well right within our own selves, in our intimate relationships, and in our communities. Our struggle to "resist tyrrany," as Schnarch says, is to self-define, and to do so in a manner that still manages to be conducive to healthy interdependence. This requires a balance of commitment to a higher collective vision and a commitment to one's own integrity and self-authorship. This is the vision of Differentiationist Anarchism.

Imagine the highest version of yourself, and imagine a utopic vision in your heart that guides it. From where does that person act? What kinds of commitments does that person make? How does that person approach challenge and in what ways are they willing to grow to facilitate their vision? How does that person endure dissonance in pursuit of personal growth and shared visions?

We must ask ourselves what it would take to maintain organizations of society that resist hierarchical power and domination. We must ask how we infuse it into the fabric of our cultures and our very beings. It is attractive to conceptualize of struggle as simply a fight in opposition to other. But I believe we must look deeper and farther and begin to conceptualize struggle as something within and amongst ourselves as well- struggle as sites where we can grow and create meaning, struggle at the most microscopic social levels for liberation. We must struggle towards the kind of growth that facilitates a pluralistic society, that sees differentiation of self as much in ecological terms as in personal terms. Yes there are real enemies and real fights where we must take a stand, and the stands we make are all the more impactful when rooted in the strong bonds that differentiation facilitates.

Differentiationist anarchism is an anarchism towards prefiguration of structures that are nearly unbreakable- not by means of imposition of force, by domination, but by undying committment to the agency of the individual and it's balance with the social bonds and visions that tie us together.

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