The Ship of Fools
- a society of selfish individuals

Department of Management

CREDO
The Ship of Fools
– a society of selfish individuals

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1. Bound for Narragonia?

In the “The ship of fools”,¹ a satirical book that was published more than 500 years ago, Sebastian Brant, is imagining that mankind is assembled on a ship sailing through the sea of time bound for the imaginary land of Narragonia, the land of fools. Brant entertains his readers with more than a hundred small poems illustrating the follies of the people on board, poems of greed, of trouble-making, of wooing, of arrogance, of not practicing what one preaches, of squandering, of the conflicts of virtue and pleasure, and a hundred other follies, crimes and vices. Each little poem accompanied by a literal or allegorical woodcut, some of them by Albrecht Dürer.

Brant paints the not so pretty picture of the human beings acting not out of any greater sense of purpose, but out of self-love, low motives and stupidity. Fools giving in to the most base instincts and motives. In satirical form Brant showed a world that was somehow falling apart, due to the lack of guiding principles and norms. Principles and norms that Brant would only find in the belief in God. The whole exercise was meant to show people what kind of aimless and foolish world we would have if people did not bow to the will of God.

“The ship of fools” may seem quaint in a modern world, but the picture of human kind embarked upon a ship in drifting aimlessly through time is also invoked today. Screamed for instance by “The Doors” in their version of “The ship of fools”²:


² Lyrics from The Doors CD: Morrison Hotel. 1990.
The human race was dyin' out
None left to scream and shout
People walking on the moon
Smog will get you pretty soon

The vices may have a modern twist and the screaming may be harsher, but the message is in a way the same. The lack of some overriding common purpose may destroy the ship of fools that we call the earth. Most of us no longer appeal for guidance from God, but we still seem to be in the need of something greater than ourselves to keep us into place and provide some sense of direction.

I am not sure that we realise that. Looking at the modern part of the world we seem to emphasise a more and more individualistic view, while deemphasising and undermining what shared overriding purpose there may be. Today the focus is on the independent individual, on individual self-realisation, on promoting self-esteem and individual assertiveness.

It is the picture of the Marlboro Man commercial, of rugged individualism found for instance in the speeches of Herbert Hoover and early American westerns. Perhaps the smoking Marlborough Man may have become slightly outdated, but he seems to live on in strange new attempts to realise one self by climbing the highest mountains, skydiving, or for those less well off, bungee jumping, diving as deep as possible just relying on the capacity of one’s lungs, running hundreds of kilometres in endurance races, struggling for hours to catch the biggest fish, and taking part in all sorts of strange extreme sports and survival tasks. It may look like a mans world, but I don’t think it is. Women are catching up and children too. Competing for a role in some mindless game in a TV show, singing, dancing, or cramming into a cage filled with spiders. In many ways it looks as if we are again embarked on a ship of fools bound for Narragonia.

Although paradoxical it would seem that in many cases the individual has never been more reliant on others in order to prove his self-reliance. Even the Marlborough Man may in the end have come to depend upon

3 Referring of course to Philip Morris commercial for Marlboro cigarettes going back to the early 1950s. The rugged cowboy figure pictured in the commercial being portrayed by different men, at least one of whom apparently died of cancer.
4 Herbert Hoover speech 1928; We were challenged with the choice of the American system "rugged individualism" or the choice of a European system of diametrically opposed doctrines -- doctrines of paternalism and state socialism.
the combined efforts of a whole health and medical sector to battle against his illness. Doubtless many other rugged individuals depend on a whole tangled net of other people in order for them to show off as independent self-realising individuals. The bearers, the people constructing equipment, the designers of outdoor clothing, the support staff, the people standing by to rescue the daredevils when they have miscalculated.

What we seem to promote and sell is the imaginary picture of an independent self-confident, self-reliant individual, striving to reach a little higher than all the competing individuals in a contest of follies. Strange as it may be in contrast to what may have been the case with the original Narrenschiff, these follies are not regarded as follies, instead they seem to show us something that is worth striving for. When looking into the mirror of our flat screen TV’s we are not seeing a mocking image of ourselves, we are seeing our own desires and ideals. The TV-screen seems to have become the water pool that once reflected the picture of Narcissus. Today the TV-screen may be reflecting a kind of mass narcissism or self-love.

The follies of such individuals may look spectacular, but they may not count for much on our ship. The consequences of other follies may be worse. The self-interest of a producer or of thousands of consumers may lead to follies dwarfing the follies in Brant’s “Narrenschyff”. This presumably is what “The Doors” are screaming, in order to make us listen and change our ways. It is about the tragedy of the commons, the foolish destruction by self-interested individuals of resources and environment, and of human relations and nobler motives, of extraregarding behaviour and overall purpose, of social coherence.

The nature of these individuals would seem to fit Jensen’s and Meckling’s Resourceful, Evaluative, Maximising Models (REMM) of man quite well.

REMM men are smart, but unscrupulous maximisers, ready to use every loophole available to their own advantage, and trade everything in order to maximise their own satisfaction. It is only a question of price. REMM men can be bought. They are willing to give up anything they value, if they can just get enough of something else they value. Moral

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stance and love may be exchanged for a sufficiently large amount of some material goods that is also valued, like perhaps a big flat screen TV or a Porsche. Or a child perhaps for a refrigerator? “The fact that all individuals make trade-offs (or substitute in virtually every dimension imaginable) means that there is no such thing as human “needs” […] There are only human wants, desires, or, in the economists language, demands.”

Our picture of the modern fools and their follies may have the rough and exaggerated outlines of a caricature, but remember a caricature is only a caricature if reality is still recognisable in the pen strokes.

What we want to do now is to take a closer look at the occupants of this modern ship of fools. This means that we first have to take a closer look at the kind of individualism that we find in modern societies and the relation between the individuals and society.

2. The individual enters the limelight

How did the Marlborough Man and REMM men come to be so important? Today this question may sound strange, because of the modern focus on this rugged individual endowed with an unwavering self-interest. It seems so self-evident that one might never think about it.

In order to understand this self-evidence we want to show a few snap shots illustrating and perhaps explaining the development that brought the individual and individualism into focus and made it the foundation of modern societies. In itself this individualism must be seen as relatively recent and perhaps even specific to what we see as modern Western or westernised societies. This is also the view of Cushman “The individual, bounded, communally isolated self is a modern phenomenon … roughly paralleling the development of industrialization and the rise of the modern state.”

Let us have a closer look to see how the individual emerges from history.

Durkheim believes that he can find evidence to show that in primitive organisations and societies the binding collective framework of religion and morality was defined in a very concrete way. This means that duties

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were very concrete and did not leave much to the deliberation and initiative of the individual.

With the evolution of more primitive societies, the duties became more abstract, losing their tight relation to certain given practices, thereby also becoming more difficult to explain. What had once been very concrete and explicit evolved into abstract tacit norms and practices, which would influence concrete behaviour in a very circumspect way, so circumspect in fact that it would become impossible to unravel.

What might once have governed behaviour in a very strict way, allowing little individual latitude, became less of a strait-jacket on individual behaviour, thereby paving the way for individualism. “And if the collective type or ideal becomes that of humanity in general, it is so abstract and general that there is plenty of room for the development of the individual personality. The area of personal freedom thus tends to grow as society becomes more advanced.”

This was seen by Durkheim as important for the development of modern individualistic societies and the idea of the sovereign individual.

On the surface it may seem strange that old societies with their high degree of self-sufficiency were collectivistic with very little room for individualism to play a role, while modern societies, with the extreme separation division of work and the net of global connections that each individual is enmeshed in, seem to offer possibilities for very individualistic views and behaviours.

Reflecting a little upon this we may see that old societies were dependent on family, clans and guilds, or rather on goods and services provided by concrete persons, meaning that people were more or less directly dependent on each other.

An individual in a modern society is no longer dependent on concrete people, the extensive exchange of goods and services that an individual finds necessary is provided more or less anonymously through exchange mechanism like the market or by depersonalised institutions paid for through taxes.

The decoupling of the individual from the closely knit community of men must be seen as a precondition for the development of the kind of individualism we are talking about here.

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The individual enters the central stage in the light of the enlightenment, with the attempt to free oneself from the religious dogmas, and omnipotent rulers.

This is where we find the thoughts about individuals endowed with liberty and individual rights. For instance in Locke’s Second Treatise of Government:

“Though men as a whole own the earth and all inferior creatures, every individual man owns his own person; this is something that nobody else has any right to. The labour of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are strictly his. So when he takes something from the state that nature has provided and left it in, he mixes his labour with it, thus joining to it something that is his own; and in that way he makes it his property.”

In this imaginary state of nature the individual is only subject to what Locke called natural laws, contrasting these with religious commands and man made laws. From this state of nature individuals can voluntarily create societies and positive laws. He stresses the voluntary part though, societies must be voluntary organisations. The emphasis is on the individual, not the society or the state.

No wonder that Locke with his emphasis on the individual, on private property and voluntary association, with a minimal state protecting the property rights of the individual. Locke has been seen as a defender of unrestricted capitalistic accumulation. Perhaps this view is a result of much later hindsight, it would seem difficult to attribute it to Locke, as he would seem to have had a rather different concern.

He could not see the beginnings of industrialisation and of a modern economic system characterised by an accelerating division of work, but perhaps the breaking up of traditional structures like the guild and corporations that brought about the conditions for the modern market.

All this really paved the way for a much greater role for the individual and for the voluntary association. Just look at the famous words found in Adam Smith’s “The Wealth of Nations” from 1776: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest. We address our-

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selves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.\textsuperscript{10}

In 1776 “The Declaration of Independence” in America may be said to usher in the next step in the political and material development towards modern individualism. Now the thoughts of Locke are put into practice, and I believe that one may see the inspiration in these words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”\textsuperscript{11} Of course “men” did not mean all men, it did not mean women, nor did it mean slaves. One can imagine Jefferson writing on a draft version of the declaration, absentmindedly looking out on a field tilled by black slaves, sipping wine brought by female servants, with his thoughts far away on the design for a new world in which all men of property were created equal.

Next we hear the battle cry of the French revolution: “Liberté, égalité, fraternité, ou la mort!” Now common man takes part and women too, as in the storming of the Bastille.

On August 26, 1789 The National Assembly of France approves the “Declaration of the Rights of Man”.

Among its 17 articles we find the following:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.
2. The aim of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
4. Liberty consists in the freedom to do everything which injures no one else; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no limits except those which assure to the other members of the society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by law.
6. Law is the expression of the general will. Every citizen has a right to participate personally, or through his representative, in its foundation. It must be the same for all, whether it protects or punishes. All citizens, being equal in the eyes of the law, are equally eligible to all dignities and to all public positions and

\textsuperscript{11} Excerpt from “The Declaration of Indepence” adopted July 4, 1776.
occupations, according to their abilities, and without distinction except that of their virtues and talents.

Now the genie was really out of the bottle and political movements and economic developments are bringing about fundamental changes that provide the foundations for the modern Western democracies with their emphasis on the individual.

In Mill’s essay “On Liberty” from 1859\textsuperscript{12} we find some surprisingly fresh ideas supporting individual liberty.

It comprises “the inward domain of consciousness; demanding liberty of conscience, in the most comprehensive sense; liberty of thought and feeling; absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical or speculative, scientific, moral, or theological”. Secondly “the principle requires liberty of tastes and pursuits” meaning that we are free to do as we please, even engage in activities that others may find “foolish, perverse, or wrong” as long as we do not make ourselves “a nuisance to other people.” Thirdly says Mill, from the liberty of the individual “follows the liberty, within the same limits, of combination among individuals; freedom to unite, for any purpose not involving harm to others.”\textsuperscript{13}

Mill’s arguments would seem to provide support for a kind of unbridled liberalism, and a whole shipload of the follies we exemplified in the introduction.

Mill is interested in civil, or social liberty and in establishing the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual.

The overriding principle he established may be summarised in these lines: “…the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection.”

Still women are not included among the sovereign individuals, but the realisation that women are sentient beings too was dawning quite early upon men here and there. In 1790 Condorcet wrote that philosophers and legislators were “violating the principle of equal rights by debarring women from citizenship rights, and thereby calmly depriving half of the human race of the right to participate in the formation of the laws… For


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. p.75.
this exclusion not to constitute an act of tyranny, we would have to prove that the natural rights of women are not exactly the same as those of men, or else that they are incapable of exercising them.”

Much later in Mill’s writings we again find arguments in favour of seeing women as having the same right as men. In fact he sees the legal subordination of women to men as wrong in itself and as one of “chief hindrances to human improvement.”

Still the active intervention in the shape of women’s movements in the US and in the UK is needed to establish women’s rights as independent individuals equal to men. In the Seneca Falls “The Declaration of Sentiments,” from 1848 women changed the wording of the “The Declaration of Independence” into “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal.” This idea itself was not enough. It took a long struggle by American and British suffragettes to realise it, and I suppose that one could argue that the struggle is still going on for equal influence in decision-making for instance.

This is not our concern here though. The rise of the idea of the sovereign individual in general was our concern.

Next we shall see how this individualism was seen as the foundation for the study and understanding of society and all other social phenomena.

3. I and We – making up society

Taking into account the follies that individuals may be up to in the modern ship of fools, and the development of the ideas of the sovereign individual, it may be difficult to imagine any overall purpose or direction for the ship, and even more difficult to see how these individuals can constitute a community with enough coherence to drive the ship along in a direction that would mean development and progress, instead of the fool’s paradise of Narragonia.

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16 The Declaration of Sentiments. Seneca Falls, New York, 19-20 July, 1848. The text of the declaration can be found at http://ecssba.rutgers.edu/docs/seneca.html
A look at some of the ideas and approaches found in methodological individualism may perhaps help us to how this may in fact be possible. According to Watkins this principle states that social processes and events should be explained by being deduced from “(a) principles governing the behaviour of participating individuals and (b) descriptions of their situations.”

Apparently the term “Methodische Individualismus” (methodological individualism) was first used by the economist Carl Menger and taken up by Schumpeter in his attempt to explain “Das Wesen und der Hauptinhalt der theoretischen Nationalökonomie.” Schumpeter argued that although the individual cannot live in isolation and is subject to multitude of influences from his social environment, we cannot study these influences. Methodologically we must limit ourselves to the study of individual behaviour. In the sense "daß man bei der Beschreibung gewisser wirtschaftlicher Vorgänge von dem Handeln der Individuen ausgehe." Thus Schumpeter is essentially arguing from a standpoint of methodological necessity.

In “Economy and Society” Weber had argued that social phenomena must be seen as a result of the actions of individuals and in order to understand and explain social institutions one must look at the intentions, motives, decisions and actions of the individual actors. In Weber’s version we are not just talking about a methodological necessity. The individual has taken on an ontological importance.

More extreme versions of methodological individualism have gone even further, arguing for a kind of individual atomism implying a view of society as consisting only of collections of individuals free to act as they please. While this may fit our simple version of modern ship of fools, more sophisticated versions of methodological individualism did not deny the influence and importance of social institutions like the state, community, religion etc. “Methodological individualism, far from contesting the significance of such collective wholes, considers it as one of

its main tasks to describe and to analyze their becoming and their disapp-
ppearing, their changing structures, and their operation.”\textsuperscript{20}

Still von Mises asserts that all actions are performed by individuals.
“The Ego is the unity of the acting being. It is unquestionably given and
cannot be dissolved or conjured away by any reasoning or quibbling. The
We is always the result of a summing up which puts together two or more
Egos.”\textsuperscript{21}

In a bizarre example he argues that it is the hangman, not the state that
executes an individual. The social collective has no existence outside the
individual members and their actions. Social institutions come into being
through the actions of individuals.

In a certain sense von Mises is of course right, social institutions are
erected by individuals and consist of individuals, but can we understand
these institutions just by studying the individuals making up these insti-
tutions?

Could we get the idea of a cathedral by studying the individual stones
that make up the cathedral? Isn’t a cathedral more than a heap of stones?
Mises argues that from the stone mason’s viewpoint we look at the indi-
vidual stones, from an architect’s view we may see the whole project.
“For the architect the whole project is the main thing.”

If this is the case then it would seem that von Mises undermines his
own main argument. The architect may have no idea of what the individ-
ual stone mason is doing, and may not be interested in the single stones,
as long as the overall structure evolves. A single stone mason on the other
hand has to follow a stringent plan, stones cannot be placed according to
individual whim. In a sense we cannot understand much about the cathe-
dral just by looking at the individual stone masons intentions and actions.
We need to have the view of the architect, and the cathedral is indeed
something more than a collection of stones. Even the view of the architect
isn’t enough. In order to see the object as a cathedral we need to know the
intangible views of religion, and a lot of other more intangible wholes.

To a social scientist a group, a community, a nation state or company
might represent their cathedral, and thus their object would in a sense be

version Ludwig Von Mises (1940) \textit{Nationalökonomie : Theorie Des Handelns und
Wirtschaftens}. Geneva: Editions Union Gent. Here quoted from chapter 2 of the online
version of the Ludwig von Mises Institute: http://www.mises.org/humanaction.asp
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
the whole cathedral or entity, not the single “stone masons” or individuals that had built these institutions.

Von Mises would seem to agree. What else are we to make of the following comment about man and his destiny: “His will is not "free" in the metaphysical sense of this term. It is determined by his background and all the influences to which he himself and his ancestors were exposed. Inheritance and environment direct a man's actions. They suggest to him both the ends and the means. He lives not simply as man in abstracto."22

Perhaps we conclude that strict individualism would represent a view in which individuals would be reduced to something like the molecules of a gas, and their actions to the Brownian motions of this gas. While this may constitute a gas in physics it does not amount to anything approaching a social phenomenon. Ayn Rand’s and Rothbard’s ultralibertarian ideas23 may be getting close to this view.

Hayek, who is a proponent of a milder version of methodological individualism would criticize such ideas as a false individualism that “postulates the existence of isolated or self-contained individuals.” A true individualism has to be based upon the idea of “men whose whole nature and character is determined by their existence in society.”24

Thus Hayek recognises wholes in the shape of cathedral, societies, economies and perhaps regions, as something existing irrespective of the single stones or individuals making up this whole.

It is important here to emphasise that Hayek discerns between social phenomena and physical things. Thus a cathedral might be described using the concepts and laws of physics, in fact using theories and models of science.

The social entity cathedral is something completely different and cannot be understood using views and methods imported from natural science. In Hayek’s view this would represent misguided scientism. “Social structures are never given to us as natural units” and they are certainly “not definite objects given to observe.”25

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22 Ibid.
Spontaneous order ...

How can methodological individualism be reconciled with the view that there are social wholes or regularities that cannot be reduced to individual intentions and actions? Cryptically Hayek states: “Phenomena like language or the market, money or morals, are not real artefacts, products of deliberate creation. Not only have they not been designed by any mind, but they are also preserved by, and depend for their functioning on the actions of people who are not guided by the desire to keep them in existence.”

The important point here is that these wholes are not a result of deliberate concerted actions by the individuals, guided by rational intentions and grand plans. It is instead a spontaneous order generated as a result of the individual actions. Actions guided by the limited views of individuals. The results in the shape of the social phenomena we are talking about emerge so to speak behind their backs. Furthermore the “significance of the abstract character of such orders rests on the fact that they may persist while all the particular elements they comprise, and even the number of such elements, change.”

Think of an anthill if you will. The individual ants may have a very limited view and very limited tasks. They “know” nothing of the structure that they erect, and the society they are creating by their individual actions. Even so it is through their actions that a structure emerges that looks to have a very material existence and a very clear purpose.

So how do we get purposeful structure or spontaneous order as a result of a myriad of individuals acting in their own interest, with their own intentions and plans? Elsewhere we have tried to explain how this may happen using a simple thought experiment with two robotic ants in the attempt to understand how cooperation may emerge as a result of mindless individual activity.

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*Hayek* (Draft version ed.). Cambridge: The Judge Institute of Management, University of Cambridge


27 Ibid.

A couple of robots, looking remarkably like ants, are milling around on a level playing field surrounded by an immovable barrier. A round cylinder is placed on its side somewhere on this playing field. The robot ants are programmed to move forward, unless they meet an immovable barrier, in which case they wait for a while and then back off to continue their aimless activity in a random direction. Two robots hitting the rolling surface of the cylinder at right angles within the same short time interval and from the same direction will be able to move the cylinder. Often one hits the cylinder, often both at the same time but from different directions, and the cylinder does not budge. Now waiting for some time we may see that by chance two robots happen to hit the cylinder from the same direction at right angles, and it moves. Because it moves, the robots continue to push.

What we have is a kind of statistical cooperation coupled with a simple programmed response. Perhaps this is the cooperation we find with real ants too. And perhaps this is also a characteristic of some of our human efforts, for instance in situations where we have no idea of how to solve a problem that we do not really understand and solve on our own.

In some cases it would seem that spontaneous coordination is possible to achieve even with large numbers of individuals involved. Some of you will have seen football games and maybe even have taken part in one of those giant human waves sweeping around a stadium, made up of spectators alternately rising from their seats and sitting down. How are they synchronised? Like a flight of birds?

Except for the thought experiment with the robotic ants we expect that individual efforts are guided by an intention to achieve something. Trying to do this we might discover that cooperation with others makes it easier to achieve this something. Move heavy objects or whatever.

These combined efforts may become habits that sooner or later become crystallized as social institutions as cathedral building, markets, money, companies, a system of ethics, laws, and states.

While I believe this might help explain the origins of spontaneous order and the social institutions that Hayek is talking about, it does not really help us understand how these institutions are preserved.

We have seen Hayek asserting that the institutions are “preserved by, and depend for their functioning on the actions of people who are not guided by the desire to keep them in existence.” This sounds somewhat mysteriously. How can that be?
The simple explanation might be that Hayek sees these institutions somewhat along the lines of market mechanism. A single individual may have no desire to keep the market system in existence, acting like Smith’s baker only out of self-love. The invisible hand of the market coordinates and regulates the self-loving efforts of the baker in a way that benefits all and helps preserve the functioning of the market system.

An individual “generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the publick interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. ...by directing [his] industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.”

It is doubtful whether the somewhat rosy picture of individualism and spontaneous social order that is painted here can stand the test of reality. Let us see why.

The market does not preserve itself in the simple manner just described. In order to preserve market and the invisible hand mechanism it is necessary that every individual abides by a myriad of practices, norms, and rules, or we would soon have no market. In order to complete just a single transaction on the market it is necessary that those taking part in the transaction can have trust in the transaction, either by having trust in each other, or by having a social institution outside that market that guarantees that I can have trust in the transaction.

Such a system would in former times have been the rules governing the activities of the members of a guild aimed at preventing deception and cheating. “The butchers were forbidden to inflate the meat, to mix tallow with lard, to sell dog’s flesh, and so on.” In 1623 the statute of the butcher’s guild in Copenhagen “forbids all butchers strictly and seriously to sell any kind of fresh meat from animals having died from disease, on punishment of loss of honour and right to be a butcher.”

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31 Laugsforordning for slagtere 1623, Kjøbenhavns Diplomatarium
Today the deceptions and tricks disclosed in recent food scandals may be somewhat more sophisticated, but one gets the idea. Just take a look at the EU regulation governing ecological production of agricultural products. The annex concerning plants and plant products requires one to follow a whole catalogue of strict rules. Here are some:

- “at least 95% of the ingredients of agricultural origin of the product are, or are derived from, products obtained in accordance with the rules laid down in Article 6 or imported from third countries under the arrangements laid down in Article 11;
- all the other ingredients of agricultural origin of the product are included in Annex VI, Section C or have been provisionally authorized by a Member State in accordance with any implementing measures adopted where appropriate pursuant to paragraph 7;
- the product or its ingredients have not been subjected to treatments involving the use of ionizing radiation;
- the product has been produced without the use of genetically modified organisms and/or any products derived from such organisms.”

Of course there is much more to it. This is not important here though, what is important is the reason for this regulation.

An individual farmer motivated only by self-love might want to sell products produced in a manner that has nothing to do with ecological principles under an ecological label because ecological products reach a higher price in the market. For a consumer it would be impossible to differentiate between this farmer’s products and products following stringent ecological principles. Motivated by self-love others might follow the example set by the farmer and the result would be that real ecological products would be forced out of the market.

Indeed this might be an illustration of Gresham’s law stating that bad quality will drive out good quality, or of Akerlof’s theory explaining the manner in which lemon’s drives out the cherries in the market. “There may be potential buyers of good quality products and there may be potential sellers of such products in the appropriate price range; however,
the presence of people who wish to pawn bad wares as good wares tends to drive out legitimate business.”

Now this would seem to indicate that the market does not preserve itself, that in fact individuals motivated only by self-love would soon undermine the market.

There are many other problems with the idea of individuals motivated only by self love or in modern parlance self-interest. There are the well known and classical problems related to the provision of public goods, free riding or the Malibu surfer’s dilemma. Or the problems relating to variations of the prisoner’s dilemma.

Thus it should be evident that anything approaching a theory of strong individualism is untenable in practice. The individual cannot be free to do whatever he pleases, and self love must be tempered by something outside the individual. We have to see collectives in the shape of social institutions as very real, reified entities, that must influence the activities of each and every individual, somewhat in the way an existing anthill society influences the individual ant. In a similar way man shapes social institutions and is in turn shaped by these, albeit in a way that is immeasurably more complicated and complex than the anthill.

_Upholding order_

It is now evident that the social order which may have been achieved spontaneously must be upheld by something outside the single individual, somewhat greater than this individual, something of a collective nature. This something must include some kind of shared values and some kind of contract that defines an apparatus, like a state that guarantees the order achieved through laws, and through the use of a power apparatus legitimized by the contract and the laws.

The question we are interested in is the differences between the implicit order upheld by shared values on the one hand and the explicit order upheld by a state apparatus on the other hand. Another question we are interested in is the question of the balance and relation between shared values and a state apparatus.

To see what this means let us return to the example with ecological farm products and look at the explicit order upheld by a public institution, in this case the EU and the nation states. The self-interest of the individ-

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ual farmer is held at bay by a very elaborate set of rules and regulations, including a system of controls and presumably sanctions. In this way it is hoped the farmer is forced to comply with the rules governing the production of ecological products, and is prevented from cheating by selling non-ecological products under an ecological label. He is in other words forced to behave in a certain way. This system of regulation from outside does nothing to alter his self-interest, it just limits his possibility of exercising it. He may still act out of self interest, like a REMM man looking for every kind of loophole in the regulation or areas in which regulation is not accompanied by control and sanctions, as we described elsewhere.34

What would happen in the hypothetical situation where the farmer somehow had been imbued with the value that it would be wrong to cheat and sell non-ecological products under the label of ecology? In this case his self-interest would be tempered by the consciousness and the conviction that it would be wrong to cheat, even if it would result in a greater profit. No regulation would be necessary to force him to comply with standards defining ecological products.

In a more realistic situation perhaps in which we realize the need for some kind of regulation to guard against cheaters, shared values tempering self-interested behaviour have an important role. In most cases it would be impossible to make rules that catch all attempts to cheat and likewise a 100 % per cent control would be too costly to be achievable. Thus we still have to rely on some sort of shared value that would make individuals abide not only by the words of a rule, but by the purpose of the rule. Even this simple example would seem to indicate the importance of the social phenomena of shared values, a kind of social grammar binding us to expressions limited by this grammar, similar to the way in which a shared language grammar is incorporated in our verbal expressions, at least if we wish to make ourselves understood by others.35

How would such shared values emerge in a society of self-interested individuals?

Hume had the idea that the utility of for instance cooperation would be felt directly, instead of being a result of deliberations and conscious reflection. “Two men who pull the oars of a boat do it by agreement or

convention, though they have never given promises to each other.”

They can feel, for want of a better word, the advantages of cooperation directly. This again leads us back to the idea of the two robot ants happening to push in the same direction at the same time.

No compact was expressed for general discussion and mutual consent. This to Hume would have been far beyond the mental abilities of the individual members of early societies. Instead a tacit cooperation on concrete problems, like oar-pulling, showed itself to be advantageous, and this made it become more frequent, until its frequency gradually produced a habitual, voluntary and therefore precarious acquiescence in the people. In the oar-pulling process the cooperation may become better and better every time one has to row together with others. In other forms of cooperation stable patterns more important to morality may have emerged, in reciprocal exchange of favours, in trade arrangements and so on. Slowly this may have led to changes in expectations with regard to other individuals, and in emerging dependence on each other.

In other words, certain forms of behaviour may have coagulated in conventions, habits or norms, that by and by may have lost their close ties to the problems that brought them about, just leaving impressions in the tacit strands of an invisible moral fabric.

In the example with the farmer we were looking for social institutions that would contain and limit the expressions of individual self-interest in a way that would benefit all individuals.

Now what about the opposite problem, identifying what might contribute positively to a social order that assures and enhances individual freedom and rights?

We find expressions of Human individual rights in for instance “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” A few of the articles seem inspired by ideas of Locke and Mill. For instance article 1 “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” Or article 3 “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

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Now, who and what assures that individuals are free and equal in dignity and rights? The immediate answer is the answer that Locke and Mill gave: The law and the state do.

“The Universal Declaration of Human Rights” goes much further in its demands than Locke and Mill. Article 25 for instance points to the state as the social institution responsible for assuring the individual “the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

This would certainly fit the view of a modern welfare state, taking over more and more responsibility for the individual, from in vitro fertilisation to the urn containing the ashes of the individual. With advanced and specialised health and social care systems, with institutions for safe-keeping, for aimless and mindless activity, and for education, with institution upon institution, with safeguard upon safeguard, the state’s responsibility for our lives would seem to have gone so far that we may have only the areas of consumption and leisure left to ourselves. Even here public institutions encroach upon us, as we are treated to cultural contributions, music and theatre schemes.

While the social order created in a welfare state assures and enhances individual life and security, it may in fact reduce liberty and the responsibility of the individual, although this individual is supposed to be “endowed with reason and conscience.”

Thus I wonder if we are leaving conscience and reason, and responsibility for our own lives more and more to the social institutions of the modern welfare state. This institutionalised responsibility is certain to erode the tacit values that can only be upheld by individuals acting upon them in their everyday life.

If we lose these shared and tacit values that amongst others demand individual responsibility we might get a kind of irresponsible self-centred individualism.

If that were to be the case our individualism would in essence be reduced to the freedom of a spoiled and foolish child given to all sorts of narcissistic and hedonistic impulses and plays, like the follies found in the introduction, but having no real responsibility of its own.
This picture of the individual found here would be a travesty of the individual that Locke and Mill sought to pave the way for.

Although rights may help create freedom, there is a danger that this freedom will be a freedom of indifference; the freedom not to get involved, the freedom not to take on responsibilities. “The concept of human obligations … serves to balance the notions of freedom and responsibility: while rights relate more to freedom, obligations are associated with responsibility. Despite this distinction, freedom and responsibility are interdependent. Responsibility, as a moral quality, serves as a natural, voluntary check for freedom. In any society, freedom can never be exercised without limits. Thus, the more freedom we enjoy, the greater the responsibility we bear, toward others as well as toward ourselves. The more talents we possess, the bigger the responsibility we have to develop them to their fullest capacity. We must move away from the freedom of indifference towards the freedom of involvement.”38

In the UK they seem to have realised that it is important to shift the balance between public and individual responsibility towards the individual:

“The vast majority of the British public believe that it is the State’s responsibility to provide healthcare for the sick, but less than a third think that it is the State’s responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one ... A sharpening of the sense of personal responsibility may help to explain the shift in some public attitudes away from a reliance on government in a number of key policy areas in the late 1980s /early 1990s. The welfare reforms in the late 1990s based on ‘tough love’ appear to reflect these shifting public attitudes – that there should not be ‘rights without responsibilities’, and that the receipt of publicly-funded benefits should be linked to an obligation to take available work or training.”39

From this long and tedious discussion we may have got a glimpse of the relation between individual and society in the modern world. We have seen how the idea of the sovereign individual emerged in a battle against all sorts of totalitarian and collectivistic influences. Hayek helped us understand how individual efforts not guided by any overall idea or mas-

ter plan might have brought about a spontaneously social order consisting of social institutions from markets to states to ethical value systems.

But this did not really show how social institutions could be preserved, for this we need to understand how these social institutions in turn influenced the individuals making up society, through the laws and the state apparatus and through the shared values that had emerged.

From this we may be able to see that upholding a society depends on a very fragile balance of values and institutions on the one hand, and individual actions and self-love on the other hand.

We surmised that this fragile balance may be shifting in a direction in which the state is taking over more and more responsibility from the individual, while at the same time the individual may have lost the immediate sense for the importance of the values and attitudes that are necessary for upholding this precarious balance. Once we were able to see the immediate benefits of for instance cooperation as in the examples provided. Now we may no longer realise the importance of a cooperation that has to include a large part of the world. Now we may only be able to see our own self-interest, and that may be a major problem as we shall see in the next section.

4. “Because I am worth it”

Or “Parce que je le vaux bien,” as it sounds in the original version of the L’Oréal commercial showing the intensive antiwrinkle and firming qualities of the Revitalift formula for Women from the age of 40. Perhaps this wonderful expression can stand for the modern focus on the individual and a version of self-love that would be quite close to narcissism.

Not in the strict sense perhaps of the personality disorder described in say the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM), or in Freud’s writings on primary narcissism, but in more general terms as something that might help us categorise an individual in modern society, more like the myth found in Ovid’s metamorphosis, in which Narcissus is a beautiful young man, who spurned the love of others. One day he discovers his own reflection in a pond and falls in love with this reflection.

The self-love of the reflection in the pond of a modern Narcissus would include a grandiose conception of self, guiding fantasies of suc-

40 See for instance http://www.ciao.fr/L_Oreal_Revitalift_masque_tissu__740025
cess, of power, of beauty and general admiration. Filled with such expectations he wants to have them fulfilled. Narcissus needs to be admired, needs to feel important and entitled to admiration and praise without really having done anything to earn it. He is yearning for a role in the spotlight and is craving for constant attention.

Occupied with the attempt to live up to his own fantasies and expectations Narcissus shows shallowness in emotional relationships. Like the mythical Narcissus he ignores or does not respond to the love of others. Lacking empathy he may be incapable of having sympathy for others. Instead he strives to present the right impression on the surface, using this to manipulate and exploit others to his own advantage. Overwhelmed by fantasies of grandeur he may not take kindly to criticism, humiliation and positions of inferiority.

It is obvious that in most cases the expectations cannot not fulfilled. They are set too high and there are too many having the same high expectations. This creates a kind of entitlement gap, presumably filled with frustration and creating a potential to use short cuts and devious means in order to close the gap.

In a strange book entitled “Malignant Self-love,”41 perhaps in itself a product of the author’s own narcissism, Vaknin talks about narcissism in the boardroom, describing how managers use whatever it takes to close the gap, which he calls the grandiosity gap.

Such managers only care about appearances and seem to have almost psychopathic traits. They lack a sense of empathy and they do not seem to be able to put themselves into the minds of other people. In Vaknin’s view a narcissist manager does not recognise conventional boundaries in the striving for grandeur. “Everything and everyone are to him mere instruments, extensions, objects unconditionally and uncomplainingly available in his pursuit of narcissistic gratification. This makes the narcissist perniciously exploitative. He uses, abuses, devalues, and discards even his nearest and dearest in the most chilling manner. The narcissist is utility-driven, obsessed with his overwhelming need to reduce his anxiety and regulate his labile sense of self-worth by securing a constant supply of his drug - attention.”42

A good illustration of this malignant self-love is perhaps found in the book\textsuperscript{43} and the movie “American Psycho”, where we find a narcissistic individual using, abusing and devaluing everything. It is the story of the Wall Street broker Patrick Bateman obsessed with outer perfection and seeking constant stimulation. But it is also a story about self-love turning psychotic and murderous.

Less malignant narcissistic individualism is promoted and encouraged everywhere today, in the media, in the focus on celebrity, in learning, in psychology, in advertising, in the culture of the body, in consumption.

In “The Culture of Narcissism”\textsuperscript{44} Lasch saw modern society as a society promoting this kind of narcissism, in the self-awareness movement and the emphasis on individualism and self-gratification at the expense of the community. “[T]he perception that success depends on psychological manipulation and that all of life, even the ostensibly achievement-oriented realm of work, centers on the struggle for interpersonal advantage, the deadly game of intimidating friends and seducing people.”\textsuperscript{45}

Others have had similar ideas, thus Sennett talks of “The Fall of Public Man”\textsuperscript{46} criticising the way self-absorption in modern societies drives out the interest in this society. In Sennett’s description Western societies are moving away from an other-directed condition to an inner-directed condition. Private expectations and psychological categories are intruding into and eroding the public realm.

I am not sure that Sennett is right. It may seem like this is what is happening, but the inner-directedness may just be a surface phenomenon. In essence the individual inner-directedness may be the reflection of something outside the individual. We may have lost important parts of the other-directedness attributable to religion, ideology, shared values in general, and other social institutions. But this other-directedness may have been substituted by new forms for other-directedness in the shape of fashions, fads, interest in exotic religion, gurus, and other more ephemeral phenomena catering to the narcissist.

Take a look at modern media culture. Not the least television with series and movies showing fantasies of success, of power and of faultless beauty. Similar fantasies can be enacted in the self-orchestrated adventure

\textsuperscript{44} Lasch, C. (1979). \textit{The Culture of Narcissism. American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations} New York: W.W. Norton
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. p. 66.
games, in which everyone can take on their favourite role in a virtual world.

Mass media has also helped bring about a celebrity culture that epitomises narcissism. Larger than life figures are receiving the focused attention and admiration of millions of fans, fuelling the dreams and fantasies of their viewers. These figures show what it really means to become the centre of attraction.

No wonder that it has become popular for individuals to compete in strange TV contests, where they may conquer the limelight for a few seconds or minutes, and even have the chance to change over night into a celebrity of their own.

The public interest in the psychology of strange new personal disorders like the hyperactivity of individuals categorised as ADHD or DAMP,\(^\text{47}\) may perhaps reflect and encourage a growing focus on individual peculiarities, ignoring perhaps the social conditions that further the growth of personal disorders. A strange thought perhaps, but one may wonder whether even a problematic diagnosis of ADHD does not in fact encourage some of the narcissistic traits, by making individuals suffering from ADHD special and thus the focus of attention.

Perhaps even trends in education may reflect and encourage individualism and certain narcissistic traits. In education the focus seems to be shifting more and more to the individual and its potential. The task is to unfold the potential of the single individual. Thus PISA tests\(^\text{48}\) measure only what individuals working on their own can achieve. Recently the Danish Minister of Education decreed that group-exams were abolished. From now on pupils and students had to be graded individually.

This may all be a bit airy, other trends are more tangible, like the interest in one’s body. They are catered for in commercials that often emphasise exactly the aspect that L’Oréal expresses, convincing me that “I am worth it,” and showing a glimmering reflection of how we will look when buying this product. How we will be admired, earn praise, stealing away the spotlight from all the others. It is not only a question of using

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\(^{47}\) Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) with symptons like hyperactivity, forgetfulness, mood shifts, and distractibility, apparently also known as DAMP (Deficits in Attention, Motor control and Perception).

\(^{48}\) The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an internationally standardised assessment that was jointly developed by participating countries and administered to 15-year-olds in schools. See OECD at: http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2966,en_32252351_32235907_1_1_1_1_1_1,00.html
anti-wrinkle formulas, it is the whole universe of individual centred commercials reflecting our alter egos in the flat screen pond. Selling us success and admiration through cosmetics, hair shampoo, teeth whitening and what not.

Somewhat more intrusive is beauty enhancing body modelling, commonly called cosmetic surgery. According to statistics released by the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ASPS), more than 10.2 million cosmetic surgical and nonsurgical procedures were performed in the United States in 2005. Among these were procedures like: Liposuction, Breast augmentation, Mentoplasty, Laser hair removal, Eyelid surgery, Hyaluronic acid (Hylaform, Restylane), Rhinoplasty, Microdermabrasion, Abdominoplasty. The next step must surely be to remodel muscle mass, creating a totally remodelled athletic body. Together with more advanced anti-wrinkle methods using Botox we will soon be able to recognise in ourselves a genuine narcissus, when looking into the reflecting pond or in the admiring faces of our fellow men and women. If we can still recognise ourselves that is.

Anti-aging is still in its infancy, but until it has grown up, there is a convincing attempt to transform the boomer generation into a generation of zoomers. “These new boomers are coloring outside the lines, zig-zagging and zooming toward a bright new horizon chock-full of possibilities for reinventing retirement and redefining what it means to be a mature adult in the new millennium.”

A zoomer is someone who:

- understands the difference between primary (inevitable) and secondary (reversible) aging
- exercises daily (aerobics for endurance, anaerobics for strength, and neurobics for brain power)

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50 Some of these may be self explaining, but I suppose that terms like Mentoplasty, Hyaluronic acid, Rhinoplasty, Microdermabrasion, Abdominoplasty have not yet become part of our common vocabulary.

Mentoplasty is chin augmentation. Restylane is a gel of hyaluronic acid produced by bacteria and used for treating facial wrinkles and folds. Rhinoplasty is nose reshaping. Dermabrasion, is a skin treatment that can reverse the outward signs of aging as well as improve the appearance of acne scars. Abdominoplasty is a cosmetic procedure that treats loose or sagging abdominal skin.

51 Quote from Age Venture, found at: http://www.demko.com/zoomers.htm
• can calculate daily nutritional and caloric needs based on age, gender, and weight
• enjoys a social support system of companions, close friends, and a confidante
• maintains a positive self-concept, and a passion for living life to the fullest
• has the resources to live an adventurous life thanks to sound retirement planning.

A zoomer is an aging narcissist keeping up appearances, feverishly demonstrating agility and youthfulness not the least by conspicuous consumption.

Do we also detect a hedonistic streak in here that includes not only the zoomers but the whole of society. The narcissistic individual may seem to be in permanent fear of losing not only his good looks, his good fortune and his youthfulness, he also seems to live in permanent fear of something causing him to become unhappy, or subject to pain. Our hedonistic streak shows in our constant attempts to seek pleasure, instant pleasure and instant happiness. We demand that social institutions even out the bumps on the path of our lives, in order to avoid pain and unhappiness, we consume drugs like Prozac or Frontec not just to ease depressions but to feel self-assured and even happy. I wonder if we rely more and more on a chemically induced rush in the shape of a drug to make us feel in charge, or even ecstatic.

I am what I consume

Conspicuous consumption, a term coined by Veblen,52 was once used to describe the consumption habits of the wealthy leisure class. It was consumption calculated to show off social status and wealth. Now a new kind of conspicuous consumption seems to define the narcissistic individual: “I am what I consume.”

52 In Veblen, T. (1899). The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions (1994 ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin. “Conspicuous consumption of valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure. As wealth accumulates on his hands, his own unaided effort will not avail to sufficiently put his opulence in evidence by this method. The aid of friends and competitors is therefore brought in by resorting to the giving of valuable presents and expensive feasts and entertainments.”
Advertising seems to focus on exactly this by demonstrating the grandiloquent status an individual may achieve in the consumption of this or that product.

A review of the new Mercedes top of the line S-Class in the magazine TopGear ends with this: “It’s big and commanding, and there’s real power in those rear haunches. It just isn’t that easy to love. But then the S-Class doesn’t exist to be loved. It’s here for respect. And it looks like it’ll get it. Fortunately, that’s down to the car, not to the fact that some of its future owners are plain scary.”53 So however you are, whatever you do, you will get respect by driving around in the S-Class. The Germans have a word for it “Überholprestige” or overtaking prestige.

Just flipping through a magazine one may see how dresses, watches, cars, vacations, yachts, and myriad of other things bought and consumed individually, show how easy one might become the centre of attraction. “Every night, on television advertisements, you see smooth-jawed men in £ 30,000 cars, attracting the envious, admiring glances of their peers and attractive women … Values however, percolate through our culture (or lack of it). Witty, moneyed advertisers have always sought to sell us more and more expressive possessions, but they now also choose to do so by relentlessly mocking any “value” which is not material; usually those found in either marriage or religion.”54

A little less is the celebrity status achievable by the consumption of less costly and more ubiquitous products like hair shampoo and the right detergent.

Holbrook and Hirschman55 argue that buying, using, showing off, and discarding products is a form of self-articulation. It may even look as if this form of self-articulation is becoming a main aim of one’s life.

In “The Social Psychology of Material Possessions”56 Dittmar reaches a similar conclusion. Consumption and positional goods function as material symbols of identity. “The ways in which people relate to their

53 TopGear, August 2005, p. 133.
56 Dittmar, H. (1992). The Social Psychology of material Possessions: To have is to be. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf
possessions can be seen as reflections of how they view themselves and relate to their social and physical environment."\textsuperscript{57}

The idea of seeking to achieve positional goods is found already in Hirsch’s “Social Limits to growth”\textsuperscript{58} in the 1970’s. Positional goods are goods that achieve their value from their scarcity and exclusiveness.

The key term “life-style” is signifying that one can choose to be whatever one chooses, essentially using consumption to show off one’s lifestyle. This showing off today includes more than dressing up in a certain way, buying and consuming certain stuff, it includes the social connections you have, where you are seen and in the company of whom. It is as if one may be setting up a theatre play with one self as the main character, decorating the scene with the right props and a supporting cast of people in one’s network and passing glimpses of celebrities one may know.

Life style signifies a kind of superficiality of the individual. I am nothing more than the play I am enacting today. There is no original me.

5. Individuals floating in the air

Modern day narcissistic individuals seem to be engaged in cutting loose from community. If this happens the individual is leaving the ground, to float freely in the thin air, alone in a loose collection of other individuals that have also left the ground they were embedded in.

These free floating individuals are not alone, they are together with others in the same predicament, they are alone in a mass of others in the same situation. One may feel tempted to use the title of Riesman’s book term “The Lonely Crowd”\textsuperscript{59}.

Picture if you will a multilane freeway in the US during morning rush hour. An avalanche moving slowly and sometimes not at all towards the city consisting of thousands of cars with a single driver. They are in the same predicament as they are all in a crowd, but at the same time they are all alone. They only see each other as vague shapes of anonymous heads and hands behind darkened glass, and as certain types and marks of cars.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p. 125.
\textsuperscript{59} In “The Lonely Crowd” Riesman used three ideal types, tradition directed, inner dicted and other directed to discuss a movement in the modern American society at that time from inner dicted to other directed. Other directed meaning conforming to others in one’s opinions, behaviour and outer appearances. (Riesman, D. (1953). The lonely crowd: a study of the changing American character. Garden City: Doubleday)
They may be listening to the same program on their radios, hearing the same information about gridlocked traffic in the city, or they may be connected up to their Ipods, playing the same kind of popular music. Music helping to isolate them even further from their actual surroundings.

Or picture a scene with morning commuters in a train, totally immersed in free papers with very little real information, ears and minds plugged into their Ipods. Or watching videos on their videocapable phones. Or acting like idiots talking to themselves using Bluetooth to connect to their smart mobile phones, being in their minds somewhere else, not here in the train in an anonymous collection of people, but at home, with friends, or at work.

In a way we seem to live more and more of our lives in a kind of virtual communities. Virtual communities of people not actually together at the same location most of the time, but connected through phones, Internet or some other technical means of communication. In reality disconnected voices, pictures or SMS Volapük. Or virtual communities of people doing the same thing like jogging, skiing, riding or Harley Davidson motorbikes.

“As the close bonds of communities wither away, people survive the new order of weak communities by a continuous re-expression of self to transient audiences. They dress up, now as skiers who never ski, now as pilots who cannot fly, now as soldiers who never see army life, in search for the expression of individualism bound up in fantasy status. They discover community through the community of shared brands: brands link consumers via promotion to similar others.”

One may wonder whether this picture of skiers who never ski, pilots who never fly, and soldiers who never soldier is a picture of the modern version of the ships of fools?

It is as if the combination of loosely coupled, irresponsible individualism and collectivist institutions having the responsibility to take care of everyone is resulting in a kind of meaningless individualism.

What we have is neither the self confident and self-reliant individualism of Locke or Mill, nor would it seem, the more moderate version found in von Mises’ and Hayek’s theories.

What we have instead is apparently a more superficial narcissistic, hedonistic and irresponsible individualism, in which the individual no longer seems to be dependent on any other individual and no other indi-

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60 John O’Shaughnessy p. 531.
individual seems dependent on him. Not a family, not a group, not friends, not any concrete person.

Likewise values and norms have become so general and moved so far back in our minds that we no longer recognise their importance. To the individual social institutions may seem to have their own lives, not dependent on the activity of any one individual.

A spider’s web of dependencies

As we have mentioned before, there is something strange here. It would seem that there is an enormous difference between the picture of the individual envisaged in our discussion of individualism, and the free floating individuals we are talking about here. Modern individuals are not sovereign, they have in a certain sense never been more dependent on the surrounding society than now. We are enmeshed in a spider’s web of relations, even though every one of these relations may look unimportant, because they can be exchanged for some other relation.

“The cultural conception of autonomous individuality is at odds with the social constructivist assertion that self and society are crucially interdependent. This is particularly true in modern and post-modern society, where individuals are inextricably immersed in society, due to such large-scale factors as ever-growing economic interdependence, mass-produced goods, or the influence of the mass media, experts and science.”

If this is the case, how can we act as free floating individuals? The resolution of this paradox is that we may be dependent on others, but it seems that all dependencies can be exchanged or substituted by another dependency. This may create the superficial impression that we are not dependent on anyone or anything. We have become choosers and consumers of our own life.

We can choose to create a child in the old fashioned way, or we can choose to carry out in vitro fertilisation, or even have another woman carry the baby. We can choose hospitals and doctors. We can let the child be looked after in our choice of kindergarten. The child itself can choose amongst a bewildering array of possibilities, playthings, schools, friends and educations. We can choose the religion in vogue at the moment, and a passing political conviction. We can choose the right kind of people to network with, people like ourselves, and call them our friends. We can

drop out of work for a while and find something else to do. We can design our own future, and the possibilities seem endless.

We can choose the place and style we want to live in, the means of transport that we prefer, the kind of car that fits our lifestyle. We can live in several places, moving with the seasons. We can roam the world, nothing is too far away, we can listen to our kind of music wherever we please, see the movies we prefer. We can eat dishes seen as exotic, although they can be had everywhere, and sip wine from all parts of the globe. We can play skiing, piloting and soldiering on our vacations.

We can insure ourselves against any conceivable mishap and then some. When we leave work we can become zoomers, replacing the parts of our bodies that bother us, and be made to look as new.

When we depart we can choose to have our ashes shot into space thus really returning to dust, or we can have a mausoleum built to remind people of ourselves.

Choices, choices everywhere. Everything is up for grabs. Is that not heaven for an individual?

What we do not see is how dependent we have become on the aforementioned spider’s web of relations. The choices we can make mask how much we depend on others. On the surface nothing seems fixed, there are always possibilities.

A closer look will reveal a different reality. It will reveal an individual that may never have been more dependent on others, almost as dependent as a child or a genuine fool.

We depend on myriads of other people in our society and scores of others living in other societies.

Look at the apparatus that is necessary for in vitro fertilisation, or giving birth at a hospital.

Think about the world connections that are necessary to produce just the simplest things that we use everyday. For every choice we can think of, we can make a cascading list of necessary dependencies.

It is not just a question of material needs though. We may be used to live in stable societies, in which we can make plans for the future and expect to fulfil them. We live in societies in which relations between the individuals are well-ordered, we know what to expect, and we know that we can usually trust others in our dealings with them.
We are secure in our lives and know that there are safety nets under-
neath our efforts, made up of complicated systems of institutions. Being
looked after by institution after institution from birth to death.

In other words we are more than ever dependent on others, on social
institutions and the shared values and ideas that make this possible.

*Losing a sense of purpose*

What happens if we no longer see the fine web of connections that make
up a society. What happens if the individualistic and narcissistic tenden-
cies discussed in the previous section run amok? What happens if we
ignore these dependencies and become the free floating individuals we
have talked about?

Cutting the remnants of the connections to shared values and norms
may result in losing a sense of purpose. To achieve something is to
achieve something worthwhile. To get a sense of fulfilment there must be
some value attached to the fulfilment. Values do not float in air though,
values are part of the social phenomena we have talked about earlier.
That something is valuable would seem to imply that it is collectively
seen as having value. Valuing is done by the collective.

Losing a sense of the shared value must mean that one’s individual
achievements in a way become meaningless. What is the sense in panning
for lumps of gold, if say nobody else values gold?

Durkheim may once have thought of similar questions in his discus-
sion of causes for anomie. Anomie refers to a situation in which the social
norms in a society dissolve with the result that nothing is guiding and
limiting the individuals living in that society.

In “Suicide” Durkheim states that there is no evident limit to man’s
appetite for more of everything, just like we discussed in the previous
section. “Nothing appears in man's organic nor in his psychological con-
stitution which sets a limit to such tendencies. The functioning of indi-
vidual life does not require them to cease at one point rather than at
another; … It is not human nature which can assign the variable limits
necessary to our needs. They are thus unlimited so far as they depend on
the individual alone. Irrespective of any external regulatory force, our
capacity for feeling is in itself an insatiable and bottomless abyss.”\(^{62}\)

p. 246/47.
If nothing limits man’s appetite this in itself becomes a source of torment to man. Like in the discussion of narcissistic tendencies, it will never be possible to fulfil every need. Thus the appetites cannot be quenched. We may add that one of the problems with the attempt to quench them is that everybody else is engaged in the same futile effort. Like individuals in a crowd attempting to stand on their toes to get a better view, with the collective result that no one is better off. This illustrates also the problems with positional goods. Nothing is achieved, except that everyone will be frustrated in their individual attempts to better their situation.

Another problem may arise even if we succeed in getting to stand higher than others in the crowd. We may discover that there is nothing to see. Meaning that our efforts do not seem to result in any fulfilment. Standing on one’s toes is not enough, there must be a purpose to standing on one’s toes, there must be something worth seeing.

“All man's pleasure in acting, moving and exerting himself implies the sense that his efforts are not in vain and that by walking he has advanced. However, one does not advance when one walks toward no goal, or--which is the same thing--when his goal is infinity.”

Durkheim reaches the conclusion that man’s appetite must be guided and limited by something outside individual man. “It is not true, then, that human activity can be released from all restraint. Nothing in the world can enjoy such a privilege. All existence being a part of the universe is relative to the remainder; its nature and method of manifestation accordingly depend not only on itself but on other beings, who consequently restrain and regulate it.”

Durkheim mentions in passing that physical restraints cannot be effective in limiting the appetite of individuals, because he says, “hearts cannot be touched by physico-chemical forces.” While this may sound poetic, I am sure he is right. It does not really help us understand the nature of the guidance and limits that must be set from the outside.

Let us cast a glance back at the discussion of individualism, at the cathedral building, a very physical object. Here the guidance and limitations come from shared vision or more precisely a plan for the cathedral. This at least gives direction to the efforts of the individual stone mason.

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63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
In society shared visions of better life, shared values shaped by our collective history, and shared problems, recognised perhaps as problems because of shared values, are needed to make the individual efforts worthwhile. Religion may once have played that role, but since Nietzsche’s cry “Gott is Tot!” this may longer be the case, at least in the more secular Western societies.

Shared collective values not only guide our efforts, they also limit the excesses of individual self-love, and passions. Only shared values and norms can give us something worth striving for in guiding our appetites, and at the same time limit individual excesses.

“Only then can they [appetites] be harmonized with the faculties and satisfied. But since the individual has no way of limiting them, this must be done by some force exterior to him. A regulative force must play the same role for moral needs as the organism plays for physical needs. This means that the force can only be moral.”65

While Durkheim’s idea may be a little out of fashion, we still wrangle with problems similar to his. Individuals floating in air and only “united” in their patterns of consumption, their life style. Thus we are still looking for the intangible phenomena that may guide and limit individual actions, uniting them into something worthwhile for all of us.

6. Losing a sense of community

Self-identity cannot just be a question of consumption and possession. The story we just told cannot be the whole truth. One’s identity must still be connected to more than that. Our gender, ethnic origin, the life we have lived, the choices we have made, the things we have done, our work, our relations, our family, our culture, our beliefs, religious or otherwise, our whole experience and our knowledge, all these things must have contributed to our identity, our sense of self.

Many of these influences make up a kind of social embeddedness. We are individuals in a family, in a group of people close to us, we are imprinted with a certain culture. We take part in shared socialisation and educational efforts, we contribute collectively to production of something in the workplace. We are anchored in beliefs and norms. We show trust in

65 Durkheim op cit p. 248/49
others. We have responsibilities. We belong somewhere, we are embedded in something collective, something that is somehow greater than us.

Today a sense of embeddedness seems to be eroding. “Liberal societies like the United States have a tendency toward individualism and a potentially debilitating social atomization… There is evidence that in the United States, trust and social habits that underlay its rise to greatness as an industrial power have eroded significantly in the past half-century.”

This erosion is today seen as reduction in what is called social capital. Although there is some confusion as to what is actually meant by social capital. It is not even a new concept, but it becomes popular with Putnam’s “Making Democracy Work” and especially of course with his book “Bowling Alone.”

In Putnam’s version “social capital refers to connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.”

In Putnam’s version social capital seems only to be attached to the more superficial aspects of social capital, as he focuses on tangible networks of reciprocal social relations. A similar reduction in the concept of social capital, is found in Bourdieu’s version as he states: “The volume of social capital possessed by a given agent … depends on the size of the network of connections that he can effectively mobilize.” In the more superficial versions it might be said that “we define individual social

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capital as a person’s social characteristics—including social skills, charisma, and the size of his Rolodex.”

Today, Putnam asserts, we are losing the social capital that exists as forms of participation in voluntary networks of reciprocal relationships. We are bowling alone not in groups. His evidence is fairly simple. In the US people are becoming less engaged in voluntary group activities. People are less likely to join unions and professional organisations, less likely to take part in organised religious activities, less likely to vote in elections, less likely to join clubs, and participate actively in organisations of which they are members. Less likely to marry. Less likely to socialise with others and less likely to trust other people.

Putnam concludes that the more intangible parts of social capital are eroding. I am not sure that we really get any measure of the social capital. Unless that is, the whole concept is reduced to mean the number of the contacts in the rolodex or the PDA we are carrying.

This network focus is too simple. Our thesis would be that the number of people in one’s network in an age of electronic communication might not count for much. There may be hundreds of names in the Contacts list “but that is certainly not a sign of the more fundamental aspects of social capital, to say nothing about the necessary other-directedness and shared values that we were looking for a short while ago.

Contacts today may have become easier to store, more fleeting, more related to market transactions, or just inactive collections of addresses and numbers. Not even the other indicators that Putnam see as declining would really seem to indicate the existence or absence of what we are looking for.

It may be difficult to look directly at the amount of trust and the direct influence of norms and obligations in guiding and limiting behaviour. It is certainly much easier to look at the number of social networks and individual participation in those networks and count the number of contacts in a rolodex. The risk is that these networks may tell us very little about the deeper layers. The existence of certain networks may have very little to do with shared values or even trust.

Perhaps we should be weary even about the use of the term social capital, which has connotations linking it to some measurable stock of

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capital, like in economics, which would certainly be problematic. Shared
values and trust are certainly not like a physical stock of capital.

The economist Arrow urges the abandonment of the term social
capital. Solow seems to share this view: “Why social capital? I think it is
an attempt to gain conviction from a bad analogy. Generically “capital”
stands for a stock of produced or natural factors of production that can be
expected to yield productive services for some time. Originally anyone
who talked about capital had in mind a stock of tangible, solid, often
durable things such as buildings, machinery, and inventories.”\textsuperscript{73} Solow
instead uses the term “behaviour patterns”. Not that that would be without
problems as once more the focus would be on the surface phenomenon,
more or less like Putnam.

Neither the World Bank nor the OECD are listening to these objec-
tions. Perhaps for the reason stated by Solow, in order to gain conviction,
although I think there is more to the term that just an attempt to gain con-
viction. A book on social capital published by the World Bank in certain
chapters seems to see social capital with the eyes of an economist, thus
giving the whole concept a certain slant. For instance Coleman asserts
that “the function identified by the concept of “social capital” is the value
of these aspects of social structure to actors as resources that they can use
to achieve their interest.”\textsuperscript{74}

In a similar vein The OECD Directorate for Education states: “[T]he
concept of social capital, which refers to the capacity of people to act
together, create synergies and build partnerships, is a valuable source of
organisational capacity and learning. The measurement of its impact on
economic or social performance is even more challenging than that of
human capital.”

This indicates that the OECD has come to realise the importance of
something more than GDP measures, that social capital and the personal
version of it, human capital, are seen as important for economic and
social progress. Thus the growth of social capital is supposed to contrib-
ute to the growth of more traditional forms of capital. In their view of
social capital they seem to concentrate on exactly the same superficial

\textsuperscript{73} Solow, Robert. 2000. "Notes on social capital and economic performance," In \textit{Social
Capital: a multifaceted perspective,} edited by P. Dasgupta and I. Serageldin. Washington DC:
The World Bank, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{74} Coleman, James S. 2000. "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital." In \textit{Social
Capital: a Multifaceted Perspective,} edited by P. Dasgupta and I. Serageldin. Washington DC:
aspects as Putnam did, and strive to make indicators that will allow the direct measurement of social capital and its contribution to more general measures of welfare.

In the conceptions presented here social capital is somehow embodied in the web of observable connections that individuals have. To Putnam trust and values arise from the connections of the web of relations, implying that networks are somehow causing trust. The views found in the World Bank and the OECD may be more concerned with the aspects of social capital promoting economic growth, but like Putnam they seem to be mostly concerned with the more superficial aspects that can easily be measured and used as a basis for discussing political strategies for promoting social capital.

The deeper layers

Our understanding of social capital according to which the connections depend upon deeper layers of values, trust, and expectations is in fact turned upside down by such simple minded views.

In our view of social capital we must discern more sharply between the deep intangible layers and the possible surface expressions, somewhat as shown in table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surface</th>
<th>civic participation in society, social networks, rule of law, compliance with rules and norms, lack of corruption, democratic procedures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate level</td>
<td>Civic virtues, trust, responsibility, obligation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep dispositions</td>
<td>Collective deep values and beliefs, culture, basic cooperation, empathy, solidarity, belonging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The deeper layers of social capital would consist of shared social norms and obligations mostly tacit, fulfilling the role of guiding and limiting the

activities of individuals in a way presumably similar to Durkheim’s morality.

These shared values found in norms and obligations might be fundamental in bringing about and preserving a sense of civic duty, a generalised reciprocal trust in each other and a sense of one’s responsibilities and obligations towards one another in a community. In fact being essential for the existence of a community, as something more than a collection of individuals. A community, embedding the individual in web of social relations. Fukuyama argues that interpersonal trust is important for social relationships to emerge. In fact interpersonal trust is seen as fundamental to a flourishing economy. As we have asserted earlier without this kind of trust it becomes impossible to carry out even simple one-to-one exchanges in society, to say nothing of the complicated net of exchanges in the modern market place. “If people who have to work together in an enterprise trust one another because they are all operating according to a common set of ethical norms, doing business costs less.” Coleman argues that “a group whose members manifest trustworthiness and place extensive trust in one another will be able to accomplish much more than a comparable group lacking that trustworthiness and trust.”

Without a kind of generalized reciprocity and trust it would be difficult to envisage how markets and democracies could ever have emerged. These values help bring about a cohesiveness, creating tolerance towards others and helping along integration into coherent wholes, creating the sense of community. Even so trust does not seem to play a big role in economic theory.

Only on the surface the social capital would be revealed in the social relationships found in reciprocal networks of connections between peo-

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ple. In social networks, in civic participation, in the rule of law. Things that we can observe and to certain extent measure and compare.

_Uprooting what is socially embedded_

In the following we shall see how the reduction of social capital to the more superficial and observable elements may lead to a rather strange perception of what social capital may be and more seriously what we are to promote in order to preserve and presumably enlarge social capital. We fear that well-meaning efforts using the tools of statistics with little conceptual knowledge may pervert the whole idea of social capital, uprooting it from the deep values and the social embeddedness that we see as important.

Although the measurement problems would seem not to have been solved, van Schaik⁷⁹ mentions that an attractive measurement model might include four dimensions consisting of: 1) interpersonal trust, 2) institutional trust, 3) participation in civil society (formal and informal), and 4) trustworthiness of the respondents themselves. To get an idea of the kind of measures used in practice, we might take a closer look at the first dimension. Interpersonal trust is measured by asking respondents the following question: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?"

Some of the answers are found in table 2⁸⁰.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Most people can be trusted</th>
<th>Cannot be too careful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>65.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>38.5</td>
<td>61.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>58.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>58.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Looking at these numbers it would be difficult to see a relation between the answers to the trust question and economic or social performance in the respective countries. It is difficult to understand what causes these differences. Is the high Danish and in general Scandinavian trust measure caused by deeply held and shared moral values, or by public regulation and institutionalised responsibility? And what might explain the fairly high number for trust in Belarus or conversely the fairly low value in Great Britain? Does the Belarus number signify that in a society with low general trust the persons that you know are the persons you trust, leading respondents to express a moderate trust level? While Britons perhaps have less regulation than the Scandinavian countries and less close personal bonds than people in Belarus. These are just speculations, but they perhaps fit the picture painted in my “Otherworldly Economics,” in which the assertion is that both a high degree of regulation, and low degree of regulation leads to order. Regulation forces a trustworthy order, while lack of regulation makes it necessary for people to find trustworthy partners. The in between situation would lead to less order with less trust.

Schaik asserts that the relationship is better with regard to the relation between social capital measured as number of active memberships of groups and the economic performance of the respective countries, concluding that “social capital in terms of (active) group membership contributes to regional economic growth in Europe.” I am not sure that he has shown that this is indeed the case. He has only shown that there seems to be a relation between group membership, as measured, and economic growth indicators. In fact we do not know what the relationship is, or what is causing what. He acknowledges that when he writes: “as long as we do not exactly know the mechanism between active membership and regional economic growth, it is too early to formulate clear policy implications.” Yes indeed!

The Scandinavian welfare states score high on the Putman indicators. “Comparative studies on trust show that the citizens of the Nordic countries belong to the most "trustling" in the world in the Putnamian

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83 Ibid., p. 13.
sense of the word.”

Siisiäinen also mentions that “The Nordic countries are also among those countries in which no general decline of social capital has taken place”. Is that so, or are the measures used incapable of telling us anything about the deeper aspects of social capital?

I fear that this might indeed be the case. Participation in voluntary groups may be high in the Scandinavian countries, but it may not signify that there is a large amount of social capital. Voluntary groups may consist of associations that do not really have any interest what so ever in the society as such, but only in their own benefits. The voluntary groups may consist partly of interest groups that are only united by one singular interest and in their claim on other parts of society for support for this interest of theirs, acting perhaps as a kind of super-individuals.

In 2004 there were 14,852 idrætsforeninger (Athletics associations) in Denmark. According to DIF (The National Sports Federation) at least some of them were very active: “As an example, every year 190,000 tournament matches under the Danish Football Association are arranged for football players of all ages and at all levels. Under the Danish Handball Association 92,000 tournament matches are played every year, and even in the smaller federations the tournament and competition activity is extensive.” Support is provided for these associations in varying amounts from the public sector.

Of course this is a positive sign of voluntary engaging in associations, but it says nothing about the interest in society as such or in upholding shared values and social institutions. Instead we may get the idea “that social capital stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures.”

One might easily get the impression that social capital is becoming a somewhat ambiguous concept. On the one hand it may represent something that provides cohesion and helps bring about the otherdirectedness we are looking for, on the other hand it contains notions of “what is in it for us”.

If social capital in practical and operational terms is reduced to being a relation in associations and networks, I am not sure that it actually pro-

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85 Found at http://www.dif.dk/

motes cohesiveness. Rather it may represent a local answer to specific problems shared by several individuals. A group interested in motocross activities may unite in their effort to get the support from the local council to provide them with facilities for their sport. It does not however mean that these individuals are engaged in society. They may represent the loosely coupled individuals that happen to share this one interest. They are not interested in possible negative effects of their activities on the rest of the community. They ignore that their activities encroach upon the interest of others. Like the interest in living in peaceful and quiet surroundings, not disturbed by motocross motorcycles.

Further indication that the measure showing that the amount of social capital is high in the Scandinavian countries can be misleading, may be had from looking at the number of people living as singles in the society, or the amount of digital dating attempts.

Yet another aspect contributing to the decline in the individual embeddedness in close social relations may relate to the fact that we are living more and more in large agglomerations of people, in cities, in which we may mingle with a large number of people every day, without knowing more than a very small number of these. We are becoming more and more anonymous to each other in the society in which we are living. The growing number of connections will hardly represent a contribution to social capital, except perhaps in the most superficial sense. In fact one is led to the conclusion that economic progress may contribute to the decline in close human relations, as found in families and partnerships.

If we are right in our interpretation the decline in social capital, not the least the deeper aspects of it may be more serious than shown by the interpretations and measures used by Putnam and institutions like the World bank and OECD.

The OECD and other institutions may have realised that social and so-called human capital is important for smooth functioning and cohesiveness of societies, but it almost seems as if they do not realise that with their main focus on economic cooperation and development, they may indirectly contribute to the erosion of existing social capital, and promote an even stronger individual self-interest.

Individuals are reinforced in this attitude by dominating economic theory seeing the individual as dominated by self-interest in all areas of life. This is the self-love of the baker argument put forward earlier and
discussed more thoroughly in Petersen.\textsuperscript{87} Avoiding individual responsibility, free riding and shirking is seen as advantageous for the individual. Although if this becomes general attitude everyone will suffer the effects of this.

With decline in both the superficial and the deeper parts of social capital it becomes increasing difficult to solve the social problems that demand cooperative actions by the individuals. No one can see their own immediate benefit in cooperating voluntarily.

With less trust in other individuals we will have to create more institutionalised trust in the shape of a formal set of rules, and institutions responsible for the task of making sure that we abide by the rules, and if not, meter out sanctions. In other word the less trust we feel toward each other, the more we need to build institutions that guarantee our exchanges with others, not only in the market but also in other areas.\textsuperscript{88}

Designing intricate rules and creating institutions to protect us against knavish behaviour may in fact crowd out what civic virtues we may have. “As a result, the citizens exploit all legal opportunities to the fullest and the constitution is less observed. The effort to constitutionally constrain citizens may thus lead to a perverse result. Although a constitution, and more generally public laws and regulations, must check against knaves and prevent the exploitation of the citizenry by free riders and by professional politicians, it should also support civic virtues.”\textsuperscript{89}

7. Generating Singleness

The creation of public institutions to take care of every single individual need makes all of us individually more independent of each other, as we have discussed in the section on free floating individuals. More and more public institutions to care for our needs may in fact generate singleness. The individual no longer needs the family or the partner. There is no need for the security of marriage and the lifelong binding marriage vow –


\textsuperscript{88} This topic is discussed more thoroughly in Petersen, V. C. (2002). Beyond Rules in Society and Business. Cheltenham, UK • Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar.


“until death us do part.” Care for children is to a large degree the responsibility of institutions created for that purpose. Old people need no longer depend on the their family, neither in the narrow sense of their own children, nor in the wider sense of remote relatives. They can be cared for in special institutions for the aged and senile.

With the dissolution of personal bonds further aggravated as we shall see by the technological possibilities for living at distance, the individual may lose a sense of belonging somewhere. Not belonging to any distinct and close entity does of course make the individual even more free, but is this a kind of freedom we can wish for?

Beck talks about a “Vollkasko-individualiserung” in the modern welfare state. It seems evident that this opens up a potential for the break up or dissolution of traditional families into singles living either alone or in fleeting partnerships of choice. Religious commands, “thou shalt not …”, no longer have the power they once had. Religion in some cases may become more a matter of convenience, of choice and of what is in vogue.

The Civitas institution in Great Britain reports that “Marriage and remarriage are increasingly being preceded or replaced by cohabiting unions. The proportion of single women in cohabiting relationships doubled from 13% in 1986 to 25% in 1999. Cohabiting unions currently make up 70% of first partnerships. Although cohabiting recently has become more socially acceptable, these types of unions tend to be fragile. Cohabitations last an average of two years before dissolving or being converted to marriage. Of cohabiting couples who do not marry, only about 18% survive at least ten years (compared to 75% of couples who marry).”

Or we might take a look at Denmark. In 2006 there were 2.2 million one family households, of these 460,332 were households with a single male and 618,570 were households with a single woman, married couples made up 867,260, while the rest is made up of unmarried couples.

Political, social and economic development has brought about liberation of the individual in all spheres of life. It has established the individual as the central unit in a society of individuals.

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91 NYT FRA DANMARKS STATISTIK Emnegruppe: Befolkning og valg Husstande og familier 1. januar Nr. 79 • 24. februar 2006, tabel. 2.

According to Beck the modern welfare state is contributing to the phenomena of “Individualisierung.”

“Der Sozialstaat ist - vielleicht wider Willen - eine Versuchsannahme zur Konditionierung ichbezogener Lebensweisen. Und man mag das Gemeinwohl mit einer Pflichtimpfung in die Herzen der Menschen spritzen, diese Litanei der verloren gegangenen Gemeinsamkeit bleibt doppelzüngig, doppelmoralisch, solange die »Mechanik« der Individualisierung intakt bleibt, und niemand sie wirklich in Frage stellt - dies weder will noch kann.”

Perhaps the progressive project of making the individual secure and independent may have turned into a rather distorted delusion.

The looseness of family connections is accompanied by a loosening of the connections of the individuals to their jobs and to co-workers or colleagues in the workplace. More and more flexibility is demanded of the workforce. No longer an individual can expect to keep a certain job for a long time. In former times sons might follow their fathers, or uncles, or brothers and go to work in the same mine, steelworks or shipyard. Nowadays mobility is demanded, with the ability to shift jobs with short intervals. Not only that, mobility also means that individuals no longer can depend on the special skills belonging to a certain craft or just to a certain education. They have to adapt to new and shifting demands, learning new knowledge and gaining new skills on the fly.

In “The corrosion of Character” Sennett talks about a Post-Fordist regime. A regime that could perhaps be characterised by all the buzz words found in mainstream management to day. From just-in-time, flexible operations and workforce, lean management, change management, knowledge management, project organisation, outsourcing, empowerment, to ISO-standards and total quality management.

93 Ibid. p. 193.
There is an overall trend towards algorithmisation of work processes. Meaning that the individual has to follow the detailed commands specified in the lines of a software program. A program in which he had no share and no influence, a program whose purpose he may not see. Moving to and fro, all in accordance with the way in which the program is constructed. At every step the individuals behaviour would be determined by the configuration the program was in.  

In a Danish reform of employment agencies, new integrated job-centres are supposed to screen the unemployed in order to help them in the most efficient way. As part of the efficiency drive all jobcentres are to use what is called “Visitationsværktøjskassen,” or the screening tool. Part of this screening tool consists of a job-barometer program. This barometer program is supposed to provide the screener and the unemployed with an indication of the chances for new employment within the next six month. It has green, yellow and red sectors. If the person being screened is in the green sector he would have a good chance of gaining employment within the next six months. In the red sector the chances are of course almost nonexistent. The whole instrument is based upon statistical data, general as well as personal, and it is stated that the job barometer predicts correctly in 70% of the cases.

How would the employee doing the screening react when the barometer showed that an unemployed person was in the red sector? Would one react by finding ways of bringing the person in question into the yellow or green sector, or by concluding that this person had no chance of gaining employment? I fear that such an instrument takes away personal judgement and responsibility on behalf of the screener, leaving the decision to a statistical tool, that shows average probabilities and not the exact potential of the person in question. With the emphasis on the use of such tools the abilities of the screener become less important.

Robot-like carrying out of detailed instructions may replace individual consideration and thought as in the case of a job-centre screener, who knows how to play according to certain rules in the shape of quasi-algorithms. But does he understand the relation to real world problems, or worse, will he try to impose the “play” on the real world, thereby ignoring relevant aspects, clues, and information, making it a paper solution?

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Detailed algorithm-like instructions may lead one to commit a crime of non-thinking negligence.

The problem with such quasi-algorithms is that they promote a head-under-the-arm-attitude and erosion of every kind of individual responsibility. Instead of having the individual responsibility to act according to certain general norms and values, an employee now only has to observe the rules of the program, whether they are relevant or not. Individual responsibility, insight and forethought are not really demanded as the procedures are described in detail.

If we carry this tendency a little further we might see that the individual no longer has to relate directly to his fellow employees, the algorithm becomes the intermediary. Not the product or the service, but the program that specifies the procedures, is the thing that unifies the work of the individuals. Much more sophisticated than any assembly line has ever been. The exception to this may be the production of the algorithm and program itself.

To all this may be added the vagaries of globalisation, with global division of work, movements of jobs, companies and capital across borders, in rolling waves of opportunities, somewhat like swarms of locusts grazing off the opportunities and then moving on to new green patches.

To the individual it means that all aspects of work become unpredictable and loose, and the individual has to engage in almost perpetual adjustment to these vagaries. We have seen how the individual appeared to become free floating and independent. For every relation the individual may engage in it is possible to find a substitute. Now every single individual itself with his skills and knowledge may have become substitutable to a degree never before seen.

Highly skilled software designers in a high wage country may lose their jobs over night to an equally skilled group of software engineers in Bangalore. Craftsmen may be substituted by robots following unwavering algorithms and by push button operators. The perpetual adjustments and changes brought about by this may paradoxically mean that the individual might have an incentive to enlarge his superficial network of people he knows. The network might help him to counter the vagaries of the work life, with the possibility of activating network links making it easier to find a new job.
The corrosion of character

All these developments contribute to a corrosion of character. With character consisting of "the ethical value we place on our own desires and on our relations to others. They are the personal traits that we value in ourselves and for which we seek to be valued by others." This is what makes us capable of making and keeping commitments, it provides dependability, consistency and coherence to our lives.

Character cannot be seen in isolation from the concept of the deeply held values that we discussed in a previous section. Character in our view is a lasting commitment to these deep values.

These values are being eroded because character and the attachment to the deeper values are no longer valued. A job no longer has to depend on the individual sense of responsibility, on commitment and character. Sennett argues that in order for us to be reliable as individuals we must feel needed, and this is no longer the case. To Sennett a regime "which provides human beings no deep reasons to care about one another cannot long preserve its legitimacy."

The loosening of specific ties to a family and to work is accompanied by other tendencies that may contribute to a life lived at a distance. Like the development of the computer, broadband technologies, mobile phones and video communication devices, of the Internet, of programs for communicating, sharing and chatting.

It is now possible to work at a distance, living in the Outer Hebrides and participating in virtual work groups in the US for instance. Or collaborating on the development of an avarian flue vaccine with people all over the Earth, without ever having to meet them face to face, except on a video connection.

It is possible to learn at distance, participating in class discussion with a remote teacher, following lectures of university professors located in other countries collaborating on group tasks, watching each others presentation, take exams, all more or less at one’s own pace.

It is possible to socialise at a distance, participating in chat rooms, adventure games or poker games with others whose identity may remain for ever hidden, behind strange sounding names and characteristics. Internet shopping relieves one of the tedious business of going to a shop.

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98 Ibid.
Remote diagnosis and some sort of self-treatment programs might make at least some of the trips to a doctor or hospital superfluous.

Dating at a distance is possible with ever more popular and specialised dating services, to help speed up the matching characteristics, although presumably the intention here is still to meet face to face with some of the persons found with the help perhaps of matching algorithms. Virtual mating might perhaps be seen as a logical next step.

In a not too distant future I suspect it will become possible to live a large part of one’s life in a kind of virtual life, being only connected to the outside world through one’s computer, with lots of connections to virtual friends, but no close connection to anyone. I emphasise possible because I believe that to most people close relations and face to face communication cannot really be substituted by virtual relations and video dialogues.

A study of trust development in dilemma games comparing the results from three different computer-mediated communications channels in the shape of text based, audio and video channels and face to face communication concluded: “Communication media makes a difference in trust development, and all mediated communications tested in this experiment had some disadvantages when compared to face-to-face communication. Groups using text chat did the worst, having the most difficulty establishing high trust based cooperation in the Daytrader social dilemma.”  

Apparently opportunistic behaviour showed up when using communication in channels conveying only text and or audio. From this we draw the conclusion that living, and cooperating at a distance, may contribute to the corrosion of character and of the deeper values we have been talking about.

This seems to be confirmed by a real life study comparing cooperation and development of trust in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) with face-to-face communication. “CMC groups take longer to develop interpersonal relationships and task commitment. Subsequently, lower levels of task and social cohesion initially in CMC groups may result in diminished performance on interactive tasks and other factors associated with cohesion such as organizational commitment, group satisfaction

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with goals and group effectiveness. CMC groups may also show an initial increase in absenteeism and low productivity.”  

The somewhat surprising conclusion of the authors seems to be that CMC works best when given sufficient time to develop cohesion based upon trust and higher productivity based upon involvement and non opportunistic behaviour of the individuals separated by distance. It seems paradoxical that technologies designed for flexibility and speed demand long term connections in order to counteract lack of trust and opportunistic behaviour. While face to face communication can work also for collaborative efforts with a short time horizon.

It is evident that all those developments that make life at a distance possible may have a lot of actual and potential positive effects, contributing to more comfortable life, to the possibility of staying in contact and collaborating with others wherever they are located, learning about life and culture in far off places, and much more.

The potential downside is that the same possibilities set the individual free in the sense that there is less and less need for the individual to interact, talk, collaborate, live with, and be dependent on other individuals in the sense of being physically close to others. Less and less sense of belonging anywhere. This may be detrimental to the development of character and the deeper values, as well as socialisation in general.

“A sense of belonging is something humans need if they are to commit themselves to more than simple selfishness. Families and family businesses know something about the sense of belonging and the motivating force of collective pride in the family tradition, as well as the responsibilities that go with belonging. Families, at their best, are communities built on mutual trust. If the family could be extended to include key contributors, the sense of belonging would be properly inclusive. Without some real sense of belonging, virtuality looks like a very precarious state and a perilous base for the next phase of capitalism, whatever the economic and technological advantages.”

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**Imprinting values**

Elsewhere we have tried to show how children develop an early understanding of the view of other persons together with notions of helping, of justice and fairness, of claims, of feeling perception and inner states, of self and self-interest, and a host of other notions. Four features of this understanding stand out: understanding others’ feelings, understanding others’ goals, understanding social norms and understanding others’ minds.

This understanding must necessarily include the ability to compare, to calculate, to assign weight with regard to relevance, seriousness and so on. It would seem that without these abilities it would be impossible to get to a sense of justice, for instance when deciding what a fair share would be.

Perhaps situatedness is important also for ethical proficiency. Thus all constituent parts of the moral fabric are inextricably a product of the activity and situations in which they are produced and used. Because new situations, negotiations and activities are recast in a new, more densely textured form, concepts continually evolve with each new occasion of use.\(^\text{102}\)

Vygotsky\(^\text{103}\) has pointed to the importance of language and culture for development of mind. His work has influenced theories of mental development and of learning, underlining the importance of situatedness. Bruner does the same when he states that culture though formed by men also forms man. According to this view “learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources.”\(^\text{104}\)

Interestingly this would indicate that the environment must have some structure or coherence, or there would be nothing to internalise. A chaotic or multistructured environment may thus presumably make it impossible to get a coherent sense of the moral fabric. Somewhat flippantly one may say that it would be equivalent to using many different objects to imprint on at the same time in one of Konrad Lorenz’s experiments with imprinting.

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One of the most serious problems with living at a distance might be that it might become impossible to gain any coherent sense of the moral fabric. In fact it may be impossible to say what one is imprinted with, to use the Lorentz terminology. One thing is for sure though an individual no longer enmeshed in a close web of relations with other people, is no longer subject to mutual adjustments to one another and self-correcting activities found in a tight group. An individual in a group with individuals that are close has to gain, like the child in a family, an understanding of others’ feelings, understanding of others’ goals, understanding of social norms and an understanding of others’ minds.

One wonders what may happen if the individual living at a distance no longer feels the same need to show this understanding. A coherent character may no longer be necessary. The individual can put on a mask and play saint one day in one virtual group and act like a rascal the next day in another group. He is no longer held to account by people physically close.

This would have serious effects on the cohesiveness of societies, making ever more regulation and control necessary in order to ensure the compliance with explicit rules necessary for this cohesiveness.

8. The dissolution of the individual

The discussion until now has focused on the individual and the trends towards “Individualisierung” and the movement away from a sense of belonging to a community. This may no longer be enough. If we place the individual under a kind of magnifying glass we may discover that the individual itself is dissolving. Not so much in the physical or biological sense. Although there may be an increasing tendency to see the individual as consisting of a collection of replaceable parts, somewhat like a car. Just think of the advances in organ transplants, the latest apparently being the possibility of having one person’s face grafted to another persons head. At least that would change the look of that individual radically.

An assembly of masks

It is something else though that we see the vague contours of under the magnifying glass. It is the dissolution of the individual in an assembly of roles. Roles related to the development of modern society with increasing anonymity and fragmentation, caused not only by division of work, but of
the division of life in separate activities, and agglomeration of these activities in ever changing combinations. It seems that we no longer need to be seen and act as whole individuals, only certain aspects of an individual are needed in those different activities. There is no longer any need to see the individual as an individual with certain consistent traits and an individual history. Instead we become just collections of activities and superficial symbols, seen for instance in what we consume.

We become a collection of masks consisting of views, behaviours and attitudes belonging to a chosen role. When that happens society turns into a masquerade with some of the characteristic of an adventure game where unknown players are hiding behind a collection of chosen characteristics, a role. Actually the Latin word persona originally meant character in a drama, with the word perhaps borrowed from the Etruscan “phersu” meaning mask. Dittmar talks of the “shifting, multiple, identities we attempt to create, negotiate and maintain in an increasingly fragmented society, not the least through the socially shared meaning of material objects and consumption.”

In a world of strangers this masquerade becomes more and more easy to play, as the individual can play according to what is convenient at any given moment. The audience only has the mask to go by when judging whether one is genuine or not. Meaning of course that superficial masks and the right acting become important if one is to convince others. Situational awareness, and appearances become more important than sincerity, commitment to deep values, or one’s actions in the past.

“In a milieu of strangers, the people who witness one’s actions, declarations, and professions usually have no knowledge of one’s history, and no experience of similar actions, declarations, and professions in one’s past; thus it becomes difficult for this audience to judge, by an external standard of experience with a particular person, whether he is to be believed or not in a given situation.”

Of course the more we participate in this masquerade the more we lose a sense of being more than the collection of masks, an appearance with no being behind it. The masks and the roles we are playing take over. In essence we become the masks.

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We act in accordance with the mask we carry at a given moment. As a parent of a child with ADHD syndrome we demand special facilities and care, while at the same time trying to keep costs under control as members of the school board. Driving the new fast car we may fume about the speed bumps popping up like pimples everywhere, forgetting that we took the initiative in writing a petition and collecting signatures to be sent to the local authorities, demanding that something should be done about speeding motorists on our quiet residential road. Finally, as patients waiting in line we may certainly see the need for good hospital care, while as taxpayers we fight against tax increases to be used for what might be the local version of the NHS.

What I am asserting is that in our separate masks we are playing a kind of prisoner’s dilemma game against ourselves. The players in this game are represented by the different masks we carry. If we follow a strategy of defection we are in fact defecting on the other masks we carry. In this way we lose all sense of relatedness, of coherence, and of the common good, whatever that may be. One of the consequences is that bigger and bigger gaps can develop between the expectations and demands we have when carrying one mask and the results we experience when carrying other masks. We will not even be able to act in solidarity with ourselves. When that happens, we will all experience the bad results of an expansive defection strategy. It will not be easy to see that part of the problem lies with ourselves. Instead we may increase our demands. The politicians have to do more, the authorities, the police, the companies, the management of the company in which we work.

What we have here may only be a mocking trick-mirror of what I call mask-egoism. It may not be totally correct as a mirror. It may enlarge certain problematic features. Nevertheless, I believe that traits of this mask-individualism can be found in most modern societies.

Mask-egoism may multiply the expectations, wishes, demands and needs that we have. They are directed towards somebody else, towards the local council, towards the schools, towards management, towards the social institutions, towards the state, towards everyone else that is, than ourselves.

We may act opportunistically without realising that we are cheating on ourselves. Engaging in smart tax evasion schemes, while at the same time demanding more of the services paid for by taxation. If we can get a concrete advantage by cheating this system or by getting something appar-
ently for free, we cannot be bothered with the diffuse and very small dis-
advantage that everyone else incurs because of that. No concrete person is
really hurt. It is still a game with a large and dumb opponent. One can
cheat on the sucker time and time again, and it does not seem to mind.
What a game. The trick is that one is not playing against another person,
who would soon change his or her tactics to suit yours in a repeated
game.

Who and what can make sure that there is some kind of relatedness, of
coherence, and some idea of a common good? If I am right, the onerous
responsibility falls to an increasing degree on the institutions, and then we
are back with the problem of institutional responsibility. Not only that,
politicians may also be part of the game, no longer representing individ-
ual voters, but increasingly strong groups of individuals carrying a certain
kind of mask and characterised by having a loud voice.

The result is that we do not see that many of the things we do not like
or do not accept are a direct or indirect consequence of our own behav-
ior. We just put on our mask and ask “What is best for me? Or what is in
it for me?”, which is exactly the attitude that may have created some of
the problems in the first place.

Components of personality

Quite another way of dissolving the individual is represented by the many
attempts to break up the individual into types and type components or
personality traits according to a limited number of criteria. Using an arse-
nal of more or less unfounded psychometric tests and the categorising
resulting from these tests.

Hsu describes how personality tests have become a short cut. “There
are now such large numbers of people in our schools, corporations and
legal system, we need a way to screen them, and these tests ask what
we’er all like as people and provide a neat tidy label.” Hsu also
describes the controversial use of personality tests in high stake situa-
tions, in job interviews, parole hearings and court cases in the US.

In 2004 U.S. News and World report estimated that the MBTI test was
taken by more than 2,5 million people a year in the US, and that the per-
sonality testing industry was growing at an estimated rate of 10 percent a
year.

One of the most well-known and widely used of these tests is the so-called MBTI, or Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.\(^\text{109}\) MBTI was developed by one Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs Myers during World War II.

Myers and Myers assert that the personality people is not due to chance but is related to a few basic mental characteristics. It is supposed to be based upon the work of Jung\(^\text{110}\) on personality and psychological types. Psychological type referring to the inborn individual preferences.

Using what I perceive to be vague and precarious arguments supposedly based upon Jung’s types MBTI categorises people into 16 types based upon the following binary categories:

- Sensation (S) – Intuition (N).
- Thinking (T) – Feeling (F)
- Extravert (E)– Introvert (I)
- Judgement (J)– Perception (P)

MBTI is seen as a tool that may help individuals and organisations in many ways. It may help people to understand their preferences and behaviour. It may enhance communication. Identify potential sources of conflict. Help individuals identify careers that match their preferences. Optimise the use of the respective individual preferences in an organisational setting. Help us to understand how the different personalities react to different situations, like crisis or stress.

Popular is the use MBTI in relation to management. For instance relating MBTI types to management effectiveness, decision-making, conflict management and of course to leadership quality. Businesses are using MBTI and other tests in connection with team building and the creation of groups.\(^\text{111}\) Zemke describes how team members who must

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\(^\text{110}\) *Psychological Types (Collected Works of C.G. Jung Vol.6)* (Paperback)by C. G. Jung, Gerhard Adler, R. F.C. Hull

work closely together “are given copies of the instrument to fill out. Then, as a group, they are led through exercises and explanations that impress upon them how the panoply of psychological types on the team can be both a barrier and an asset to working together effectively.”\(^{112}\)

These uses indicate that MBTI categorisation can influence careers, leadership selection, creation of teams, conflict resolution etc. All presumably in order to enhance effectiveness and efficiency.

Recently the MBTI has also been used by online dating services for a kind of matchmaking. PerfectMatch.com’s CEO argues: “We developed a Myers-Briggs type of indicator focusing on relationships. It's called the Duet Total Compatibility System. We have a 15-20 minute test on the site – it's comprehensive, not exhaustive. It gives us a snapshot of whom our members are, personality-wise, and how they might relate to others based on these factors. Over the past year, many dating sites are launching these types of tests. What we want to do is also to take the next step and search for individual matches based on the information they give us.”\(^{113}\)

**Mirrors distorting personality**

With all these potential uses it is no wonder that MBTI has come to be regarded as a kind of Swiss army knife for psychometric testing. No wonder that it has become an important element of the arsenal of tools used by consultants all over the world.

Still the widespread use does not guarantee that this is a serious tool\(^{114}\). In fact there may be cause for alarm. Taking a look at the fanciful verbal descriptions of the different types one is immediately reminded of the descriptions found in a horoscope. There is something in there that seems to fit any individual in a very glib way. One just has to focus on the parts that one recognises as fitting.

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\(^{113}\) http://www.perfectmatch.com/

Case and Philipsson\(^{115}\) argue that Jung’s types “actually inherited and reproduced concepts of astrological and alchemical cosmology” due to his interest in alchemy and astrology. Thus “contemporary users of the MBTI are inadvertently conducting a form of astrological character analysis.”

Scientifically the problem is that MBTI does not seem to have any serious supporting theory behind it. Even Jung seemed cautious about the typology upon which the MBTI is created. It “is only a scheme of orientation. There is such a factor as introversion, there is such a factor as extraversion. The classification of individuals means nothing, nothing at all. It is only the instrumentarium for the practical psychologist to explain for instance, the husband to a wife or vice versa.”\(^{116}\)

According to Michael\(^{117}\) research has questioned the validity of MBTI and also criticized its use far beyond Jung’s original intent.

Rings writes: “[T]he great challenge in the development of the MBTI, designed to ascertain as correctly as possible the true personality preferences of an individual, is that its validity is based upon the validity of the very constructs of type it seeks to identify. For the one who does not accept the basic assumptions inherent in the theory, no amount of data, however vast, will be sufficient support for the instrument’s validity.”\(^{118}\)

To illustrate some of the problems with MBTI think for a moment of the flawed, distorting mirrors that may be found at a fun fair. One mirror may show a person as small fat individual with a bulging middle part and very short legs, while another mirror may show the same person as a thin individual with a long lean body, albeit perhaps with a very large head, or some other part made prominent.

Now if the MBTI works a little like the house of mirrors it may reflect a rather distorted picture of the individual, indicating that its validity would be low. In a house of real mirrors this might pose no real problem. We know how we can identify a mirror that could be assumed not to be distorting, and thus used to correct the reflections shown by all


the distorted mirrors. In a test of personality type it would prove much more difficult to guarantee that a mirror is not distorting.

It would not help that the same mirrors, or in this case the tests, showed the same picture every time the test was used, that might indicate a reliable test, but would not help us in finding out how the person would look in a flat non distorting mirror, or a valid test.

Next problem. How does the reflection a mirror provides influence the view of that individual? If I can only see myself in distorted mirrors, will I not come to have a distorted view of myself? A view influencing my whole life. Even more problematic, other people might begin to trust the mirror reflections, seeing and reacting to my reflection instead of the original.

The recognition and confirmation of some personality traits in the mirrors of the test may convince the individual that these features are important. Strengthening the belief that they might serve as something on which to base action. “I am doing this, because it fits my ENFP type.” If that were to be the case it would confirm our fears that the pigeonholing might serve to enhance and enlarge features almost like a caricature might do. Tests like the MBTI may indeed have become all things to all people. There is always something in there that one can recognise, something that can confirm what one already knows.

It is possible that widespread belief in and use of test like these might lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. A self-fulfilling prophecy in which “a false definition of a situation [is] evoking a behavior which makes the originally false conception come true.” Like the self-fulfilling prophecies of other theories of behaviour.

Still it is evident that personality testing and self-assessment tools have become all the rage, and one can really choose an instrument suiting one’s temper and Wallet among a surprising array of tests with exotic names and more or less occult underpinnings.

Individuals can be cast into one of 16 roles as it is done in the MBTI test. Or the 9 team roles of the Belbin test, adorned with names like Plant, Monitor, Shaper Completer and so forth. Or choose to use the even more fanciful Enneagram types like Caretaker, Succeeder, Devil’s advocate, Adventurer, Peacemaker etc.

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None with much in the way of scientific psychological evidence. Perhaps the really important task today is not to validate this or that test. The really important question to answer is: Why have such tests become so popular?

The intangible aspects of personality, the impossibility of hearing, seeing, tasting or feeling it, create excellent possibilities for cunning tailors to create tests that demand the “expertise” of exactly those tailor’s or at least their certified apprentices in order to administer and interpret.

Perhaps all these attempts to disassemble the individual into discriminate elements of sensing, intuition, thinking, feeling will contribute to dissolution of the individual.

10. Thinking alike - of parrots and peacocks

Why do we act so foolishly? Supposing that others can see that there are serious problems with the personality test we have just been discussing, one may wonder like the psychologists reporting on the use of MBTI “why the instrument is used so widely, particularly in large organisations.”

Why do intelligent people invest so much trust and effort in tests like the ones we have just been describing?

Reaching further back one may ask why people have become so obsessed with the “because I am worth it” activities, rearranging and streamlining as it were their bodies to the same stereotype?

Or one might quite simply wonder why so many women in westernised societies today (2006) are buying and walking around in shoes with pointed tips that seem to reach 10 centimetres or more in front of their toes. Almost like 15th century beak shoes with pointed tips bending backwards. The immediate answer to this question is of course that “fashion dictates.”

From Fashion.about.com we learn that for the spring of 2006 the fashion dictate for women’s shoes sounds like this: “Forget about delicate heels and dainty soles: the hottest footwear trends feature a thick footbed (or platform) and/or wedge heels. From rope-wrapped espadrilles to sexy evening platforms, these shoes are the perfect balance for spring's romantic blouses and dresses.”
Now if women trying to get a little ahead of the rest were to follow this dictate they would to their dismay discover that many had the same idea.

Is it a similar mechanism that dictates that we invest in personality tests categorising us by four letter words? Four letter words that we can wear proudly on our T shirts, print on coffee cups or have made into a charm.

Or makes us use the paraphernalia of instruments and tools found for instance in management and in organisations? Like balanced scorecards, which look like a miniature version of a command economy, or knowledge management, even though we barely know what knowledge is, much less how it is brought about, or incentive systems focusing on the individual, even though it may destroy cooperation among individuals. What is the cause and source of this infatuation with tools whose contribution to efficiency and effectiveness may seem very doubtful?

Today trends and fashions, whether of shoes, psychological tests, management tools, or beliefs in general are becoming world wide synchronised phenomena. That this is possible may be easy to understand, given the reach of modern media and communication devices and the intense interconnections between almost every part of the world, or at least the economically developed parts of the world.

Still, that does not explain why we, the individual decision makers, jump the band-wagon. Where has the independent and self-confident individual gone? On the surface this personality may seem to have been reduced to a kind of stereotype, stamped with the same fashion element that everyone else is wearing.

Looking for ways to understand this thinking alike, this looking alike, this parroting, this herding, we may be able to discern a series of interrelated explanations.

These explanations may be grouped under the following headings:

- Acting alike,
- Thinking and believing alike,
- Reacting alike to shared problems and challenges, and finally rather self-explanatory,
- Forced conformity.
We shall try to explore these different avenues with the main focus on those explanations which may explain why we voluntarily react alike or think alike, in order to understand why we all engage in similar follies at the same time.

**Acting alike**

Here the important idea is that each individual may possess individual information, knowledge, beliefs or convictions, but knowingly ignore this. This would mean:

Adaptation and following the examples set by others, avoiding or ignoring one’s own independent ideas, thoughts, knowledge, and experience. This is a phenomenon that we might refer to as information cascades.

For instance carrying and opening an umbrella, imitating others who are still carrying open umbrellas, ignoring one’s own realisation that it is not raining anymore.

A variation of this might include actively wanting to belong, to be accepted by others, by one’s peers, in a kind of reputation cascade. This would mean that potential different ideas and opinions of one’s own would be suppressed.

In umbrella terms: Not choosing an umbrella in outrageous colours for instance, when you see that those before you have bought grey or black umbrellas.

In a curious way conformity in behaviour might also be a result of individuals striving to be different, to get ahead of the rest, to stand on one’s toes to see further. To get ahead of the rest one buys the latest in umbrella technology, and soon discovers that many others have had exactly the same idea.

In the 1950’s Asch\(^{120}\) made a series of experiments in order to study how and to what extent other people influenced our opinions and attitudes. The experiments were very simple, the outcomes were intriguing. Asch assembled groups of seven to nine young men in a classroom for an alleged psychological experiment in visual perception. In the first experiment all but one individual in the group had been instructed to act in a certain way beforehand, while a lonely individual did not know that he sat among a band of conspirators.

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An experimenter informs the groups that the task will be to compare the length of a black line, a standard, to the length of lines on a separate card. One card shows a single vertical black line, this is the standard, while the other card shows three vertical black lines. One of these has the same length as the standard, the others have varying lengths, the difference ranging from three quarters of an inch to one inch and three quarters.

The subjects are now supposed to make a visual comparison of pairs of cards, one showing the standard line. The subjects are to tell which of the three lines on the second card has the same length as the standard on the card showing the standard, and announce their answers in the order they are seated.

It is assumed that the differences in length make it easy to judge which of the lines matches the standard.

In a series of trials subjects are shown such pairs of cards and announce their answers. During these trials the subjects having received instructions from the experimenter are unanimously to choose the wrong lines in certain trials. The focus of the test is on the answers given and the behaviour shown by the single unsuspecting subject, in these situations.

In one experiment he dissents, in the following trials where the majority chooses the wrong line, he becomes more worried and hesitant before giving his (correct) answer.

“The single individual who is not a party to this prearrangement is the focal subject of our experiment. He is placed in a position in which, while he is actually giving the correct answers, he finds himself unexpectedly in a minority of one, opposed by a unanimous and arbitrary majority with respect to a clear and simple fact. Upon him we have brought to bear two opposed forces: the evidence of his senses and the unanimous opinion of a group of his peers. Also, he must declare his judgments in public, before a majority which has also stated its position publicly.”

The subject in question in essence had to choose either to state what he believed was the correct answer disagreeing with the majority or go along with majority ignoring in fact what his senses told him.

In 36.8 per cent of the trials the subject chooses to bow to the majority and give the same answer as they did. Asch also found that around a quarter of the subjects placed in this dilemma, were completely independent and unwavering giving correct answers and dissenting from the majority. Those who yield to the majority apparently did so for a variety

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of reasons. “I am wrong, they are right”, or so as “not to spoil the experiment”. Many thus went along with majority even believing that the majority was wrong.

Even though the results of the experiment may sound curious to most people, I believe that all have witnessed situations in which something like this happened in a group of people. Seeing for instance people with an opinion on a certain subject suddenly change their opinion, having heard that the majority thinks otherwise. They may of course have become convinced that they are wrong, but they may also have changed their opinion for some other reason. Not wanting to contradict the majority, not wishing to stick out, afraid of being shut out.

In sequential decision-making we might see that people are following the examples set by the people who made their decisions first. Like our umbrella reference where we open our umbrella because we can see that the others already have opened theirs.

Think of a situation in which you have to buy a new flatscreen TV, and good friends have already bought a certain brand that they swear is the best. When you visit a store it will demand some persuading by the sales people to convince you that you should in fact choose another brand. Even in the face of believable evidence you may stick to the choice already made by people you trust.

On a more serious note. When interviewing applicants for an open position in your company, you may find one of the applicants to be well suited for the job in question, still you may decide not to hire that person, because it turns out that this person has already interviewed with other companies, and evidently without success. You may then choose to disregard the impression you have got, and copy the decisions made by others who may be even unknown to you.

In a more stringent version of this we talk about information cascades. “An “information cascade” occurs when initial decisions coincide in a way that it is optimal for each of the subsequent individuals to ignore his or her private signals and follow the established pattern.”

Information cascades indicate that we are talking about sequential decision making, and about information.

Anderson and Holt describe a small experiment used to test for information cascades. There were two urns, A and B for the experiment.

Urn A contained two light coloured balls and one dark coloured ball, while B contained one light-coloured and two dark coloured. Light-coloured balls we denote with an l and dark-coloured with a d.\textsuperscript{123}

For each round a throw of a dice decided which urn A or B was used. The test subjects of course did not know which urn was used, only what the urns would contain, and that they would have to make decisions as to what urn was used, based upon the drawing of one ball from the urn in question.

In each session they would sample the urn sequentially by drawing one ball from the urn. The ball would be replaced. Each subject would write down his or her draw as private information not to be shared with the others. Publicly the subject would only announce what decision he or she had made as to what urn was used, announcing either A or B.

In this way sequence of decisions would be made. This is the results of two different sessions\textsuperscript{124}:

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Urn B used & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 \\
\hline
Private info & l & d & d & d & l & l \\
Announcement & A & B & B & B & B & B \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Urn B used & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 \\
\hline
Private info & l & l & d & d & d & d \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

In the first session using urn B, the first individual draws a light ball, and announces that this must be urn A. The next subject draws a dark ball and announces that it must be from urn B. These announcements cancel each other out. The third and fourth subject draw dark balls and announce B. They create the “imbalance that can dominate the information contained in a single draw.” This is what happens when Subject 5 and 6 draw light balls. They choose to ignore their private information and make same choice as their predecessors. Thus the imbalance resulted, in a cascade, and in this case the correct overall decision: Urn B.

In the another session the decisions made by the first two subjects dominate the private information that the following individuals obtain in

\textsuperscript{123} Anderson and Holt use a for light coloured and b for darkcoloured. We find that confusing.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., p. 852.
their draws. Thus subject 3, 4, 5 and 6 announce urn A, ignoring their private information. Thus we have cascade again, this time resulting in the wrong overall decision.

Imagine that the subjects had not known the decisions made by their predecessors. Then each subject would have had to base his or hers decision only on the information they obtained from their own draw. This would have led to the correct overall decision.

In real life cascading decisions or actions may be based upon very little information. “Cascades are often involved in the formation of a crowd or a queue. In communist Eastern Europe, it is said, long shopping lines would suddenly precipitate whenever a few people happened to stand together.”

In fact Hirschleifer asserts: “An action is fixed upon when the weight of evidence grows to be just enough to overcome one person’s opposing information. At that point, if the next individual is similar, he is also just barely willing to ignore his own information signal, i.e., he is in a cascade. The reasoning extends indefinitely, so that all further individuals do the same thing. Thus, a very small preponderance of evidence causes a landslide majority to take one action over the other. In this situation, a very small shock to the system – such as new public information – can affect the behavior of many people.”

One might in fact compare what happens here with some of the theories found in complexity theory, where small differences in initial conditions lead to very different results. Perhaps this may be illustrated in the following way. Think of a land area with mountain ranges and valleys with rivers flowing in them. The tributaries of these rivers reach high up on the mountain ranges to the water divide. A raindrop falling to one side of this divide may end up very far away from a water drop falling on the other side of this divide. In the Alps for instance in the Mediterranean instead of the North Atlantic.

The more or less artificial experiments and examples provided here might help understand why individuals may end up acting like a herd and it may also point us to some of the serious problems related to herd-like behaviour.

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126 Ibid., p. 4.
In Asch’s experiment one could see that even evidently false information leads a significant percentage of individuals to ignore their own information, acquiescing instead in the false statements. In the cascade experiments we could see how sequential decision-making meant that individuals ignored their own information and decided on the basis of information about their predecessors’ decisions. In the experiment this might result in both correct decisions and incorrect decisions. While the Asch’s experiment may show how majority consensus is created, the cascades experiments may show how rapidly cascading opinions can spread in a society, and just how little small deviations in initial conditions might give rise to very different cascades.

A somewhat different cause of conformity may have something to do with reputation. Our opinions and decisions may be influenced by reputation. By people with a high reputation, or by our attempt to gain or keep reputation ourselves.

In a series of very simple experiments involving quotes from novels in the 1930’s Sherif showed that “prestige-suggestion or stereotype plays a considerable part in people's judgments. In other words the attitudes towards authors serve as reference points. Authors rated high tend to pull up, and conversely authors rated low tend to pull down, the rating of the passages attributed to them. This is but a specific case of a general psychological principle. It appears that our judgments like our perceptions, are organized in relation to definite reference points or in relation to a general level of reference.”\(^{127}\)

Relevant real world examples today are seen in the clustering of interest and opinions around experts, designated as gurus. Perhaps peacocks would be a more appropriate name. It would seem that many individuals like for instance journalists lose the ability to use their own knowledge and common sense when referring to statements from such peacocks. They may state very banal or evidently self-contradictory things and still people may gather around them as if they have the qualities of the Oracle of Delphi, who was also sometimes saying strange things. And the cascade usually widens until in certain areas of expertise very few people influence what the “right” opinion is.

Perhaps we may conclude this section with the somewhat outrageous idea that in many cases we confirm ourselves in our choices in a kind of

spiralling cascade of our own choices. Sounds weird? Well think of the woozle hunt in Winnie-the-Pooh\textsuperscript{128}. In this hunt Winnie, the very stupid little bear, hits upon a set of track marks. Convinced that they are made by the woozle, he sets off. Suddenly he stops and Piglet who has joined him asks him: "What's the matter?". Winnie-the-Pooh has suddenly discovered that there are two sets of tracks in front of him. Thus concluding that he is following two woozles. Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet now proceed in company, until Winnie suddenly stops again pointing to the tracks: "The tracks!" said Pooh. "A third animal has joined the other two!" "Pooh!" cried Piglet "Do you think it is another woozle?" Seeing that the new pair of paw marks are smaller Winnie thinks it might be a wizzle.

Of course Winnie-the-Pooh was running in circle or more precisely a spiral following his own paw marks and when Piglet joins him the footmarks of Piglet are added. Thus the woozles are imagined, but, in Winnies view the tracks confirm that there are more and more woozles and perhaps a single wizzle.\textsuperscript{129}

Now I wonder whether we can see a kind of cascade originating in a similar way with our own choices, in the sense that having made a set of choices these choices may somewhat like the tracks that Winnie saw convince that we are really doing the right thing. Of course this might be multiplied by all the tracks already made by others, but then I suppose we are back in the ordinary information cascade.

\textit{Thinking alike}

Here the important idea is that everyone may unknowingly be subject to a kind of Lamarckian process in which our beliefs and views of the world are shaped by shared, but submerged ideologies that have left traces in all our activities. Somewhat in the way we may have been socialised into a certain environment. This environment may include values and ideas, institutions, and even the language we are using.

Perhaps this might be exemplified by people always carrying an umbrella, although it is not raining very often, but they have always been used to carry an umbrella, just in case.

\textsuperscript{129} By the way if Winnie had already seen two sets of tracks when Piglet joined him I suppose there should be four sets of tracks when they hit their own tracks again. The two existing plus Winnie’s and Piglet’s new set.
While the theories we have seen in the previous section might help understand why we act alike, they are not enough. Our thinking and acting alike may be due to some shared but submerged ideologies that have left traces in all our activities.

“When people act on the basis of ideology, they inadvertently arrange the very conditions that bring reality into correspondence with the ideology.”130 Perhaps many of the assertions modern economics have are in the process of becoming what Merton once called self-fulfilling prophecies. A self-fulfilling prophecy in which “a false definition of a situation [is] evoking a behavior which makes the originally false conception come true.”131

We do not need to be forced into a common mould, we may actually believe that this is the only way to think. The comprehensive example of this might be the ideas and values set by individualism itself. Believing in the kind of individualism we have described in the previous sections gives us a shared view of the world that of course influences the way we think and the way we behave. As we have seen, our actions based upon these beliefs have undergone serious alterations in comparison with the original ideas about the individualism turning us perhaps into caricatures and stereotypes.

“Theories can become self-fulfilling when institutional designs and organizational arrangements—structures, reward systems, measurement practices, selection processes—reflect the explicit or implicit theories of their designers, in the process that transforms “image into reality.””132

This is a topic that we have treated in a paper discussing the way modern economics pervade all areas of our lives. In this paper we saw how basic economic assumptions about human nature may in fact help make these assumptions come true.

Rattner and Miller found that the norm of self-interest had effects on social action. People would believe that if they did not show self-interest in their actions they would somehow be seen as strange and irrational. They concluded that “lacking a self-interested account, people may feel


they lack both the moral authorization and the psychological cover to act."\textsuperscript{133}

We concluded that incentives shaped by such ideas led us to focus heavily on extrinsic rewards and sanctions to bring forth the desired behaviour. What we do not realise is that these external efforts to motivate us to certain activities quietly erode away the motivation that we would otherwise have got from the activity itself.

I fear that we are in fact in the act of creating a vicious downward pointing spiral, in which our views of man more or less force man to act in a way that supports this belief. Studies of behaviour in praxis may thus show that the assumptions were correct, leading presumably to a strengthening of the already problematic influence of these assumptions on practice. For instance by relying even more on extrinsic motivation, performance based pay schemes, rules and regulations.

Such assumptions and models may inscribe themselves in most of our activities without anyone of us realising that. They may serve as a hidden instrument of socialisation, a subtle working but very efficient rectifier or “gleichschaltung” of individual minds leading them to think and act alike. Not only making us believe in these ideas without realising it, but also making it difficult to move outside the mould economic assumptions and models have put us in. Should anyone attempt to do just that, anonymous mechanisms would soon set that individual right.

Ferraro et al.\textsuperscript{134} also see ideas like these becoming self-fulfilling theories “because they provide a language for comprehending the world. Language affects what people see, how they see it, and the social categories and descriptors they use to interpret their reality. It shapes what people notice and ignore, what they believe is important and what is not.

This is exactly what Newspeak was used for in Orwell’s “1984,” a kind of “reality control” meaning that language should take over control of the individual mind, prohibiting dangerous thoughts from entering the brain.

“To do anything that suggested a taste for solitude, even to go for a walk by yourself, was always slightly dangerous. There was a word for it


in Newspeak: ownlife, it was called, meaning individualism and eccentricity.”  

Modern Newspeak may serve the same purpose, helping prevent strange and perhaps slightly disturbing individual ideas.

In a strange way individualism may also lead us to become more alike. Each and everyone of us may strive to become something special, special looks, special consumption, special ideas and habits. The problem is that we are often copying the same ideals, having the same cosmetic surgery, the same whitening of the teeth, drinking the same wine recommended by wine experts, reading the bestsellers, and generally behaving like surfers on beach riding the same waves or vogues until they die out, leaving us searching for new waves.

Perhaps this is not so curious as it may seem. When we strive to present ourselves as something special, using for instance, as we have previously seen, consumption to show this, we are constrained in our choices. If we want others to see us as something special we have to choose, in the case of consumption, something that we are convinced that others will see as something special. For this to work we have to choose something that is in general valued by others. Thus in order to be recognised and appreciated by others we must of necessity have a shared conception of what is worth striving for, what is connected to status, to individuality.

Middle aged well off males in Western societies buy Harley Davidson motorcycles with all the paraphernalia belonging to this, like those stupid looking small round shell helmets, and all the rest including perhaps a Polo shirt or HD pen to be used while not on the bike. All just to make people aware that somewhere inside that stupid helmet is a small Hells Angel with a devil may care attitude, independent with a spirit of freedom, youthfulness, and an out of bounds wildness,

This only works as long as the right people can read the symbols, and as long as there are values attached to them. If nobody knows what a Harley Davidson is, and has no idea of what a Hells Angel might be, it may not be very smart to use a symbol like a Harley Davidson motorcycle to impress others.

“Consumers (not necessarily all, but at least those in the reference group of interest) must have in common a shared conception of the prod-

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136 According to a biker glossary, they are known as BAMBI’s for Born Again Middle-Age Biker Idiots (http://www.rmh-d.com/info/glossary.php)
uct’s symbolic meaning. For example, driving a ‘prestige’ automobile will not serve as an effective symbol of one’s social status unless others in the relevant social groups share the driver’s belief that the automobile is, indeed, prestigious.”¹³⁷

The result being of course that in order to become something as an individual in society where appearances become more and more important, one has to choose the same things that others like oneself would also choose. And suddenly we see a synchronisation in what these so-called independent individuals are doing.

We find the same phenomenon in the scientific endeavours, meaning that what is seen as scientific may at least in the social sciences and in the humanities be similar to the Harley Davidson example seen above. With a researcher trying to become a researcher by acting like one, choosing whatever theories seen as being in vogue at the time, like social constructivism, and seeing everything through the shapely glasses of social constructivism. And being recognised by those who at the moment value such an approach. He may not really be contributing anything original and may use only the most schematic version of popular theories, but that may be enough to pass off as researcher.

The wonders of globalisation and internationalisation will mean that we will see a higher and higher degree of synchronisation in what we are seeing as valuable, worthwhile, popular, the right way including what we see as individualistic and original. Thereby in fact defeating most endeavours to be something, to an individual, to think an original thought, and to act independently.

If we think back for a moment to the gradient search example a few pages back this would in effect mean that we would try to find the highest mountain in the same place. In this way we actually limit the search space. What people read, watch in their TV’s, read in their newspaper seem to undergo the same expanding synchronisation. A good example of this synchronisation can perhaps be seen in the vague concept of globalisation itself or in popular management ideas related to this globalisation.

There is no end to the fads that seem to roll in synchronised waves over modern societies, letting managers focus on: Shareholder value, lean management, lean sizing, TQM (Total Quality Management), bench-

marking, knowledge management, human resources managing. Managers seem united in a view characterised by these and other terms signifying that they are using the most advanced tools and appear to be in control, and show accountability. Glaser talks of management “duckspeak” using an expression from Orwell. Having criticized the uncritical use of such terms he finishes the article with these duckspeak terms: “360 degree feedback – people talking to each other; empowerment – asking people to do things; the learning organization – claptrap.”

Reacting alike to shared problems and challenges

Here the important idea is that when people experience the same problem or challenge they may react independently, but all do the same. In this case conformity does not indicate that individuals have given up independent thoughts and opinions.

This goes for instance for sudden changes in shared environmental conditions, with people all over the world subject to similar problems and solution spaces. For instance reacting to threats like the avarian flu by staying away from dishes made from chickens.

Or each individual may discover an advantage in doing the same as the others, for instance moving in a “stream” together with others in crowded pedestrian areas.

An umbrella example: If it suddenly rains umbrellas may seem a good solution to everyone, even with no inspiration from others.

In this explanation of synchronous and apparently conform behaviour we expect sensible people who are subjected to similar problems and challenges may for a variety of reasons react in the same way, creating the impression similar to the impression we get from the acting alike and thinking alike explanations. The difference being that in this case people are really acting independently and on their own volition. Not unthinkingly, not just following in the tracks of others, not ignoring their own information and knowledge.

Still the result might not be too different from the explanations discussed above. A simple case may show why. In 1998, transport workers in Denmark went on a strike which was joined by other unions. Quickly it became clear to everyone that it might soon be a problem to get petrol for

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one’s car. A common reaction to this was to fill up the car and even extra containers. All very sensible seen from each individual’s view.

In the news it was mentioned in passing that supermarkets would soon run out of bread and yeast. The result was a kind of stampede to get the small packets of yeast that one could use to make one’s own bread. Even people who would not usually bake their own bread went to get as much yeast as they could lay their hands on. And the result was that yeast disappeared from the shelves. Normally there would have been yeast enough for normal consumption, but now it suddenly disappeared, together with petrol of course. Not very smart in the view of most people, and not necessary, but what could people have done otherwise.

Apparently something similar happened when it was announced that the avian flu might show up in Europe in the winter of 2005/06. Many people went to buy stocks of the medicine Tamilflu, which was regarded as the only potential remedy that might help if a person somehow caught the flu, even though expertise saw an epidemic as being very unlikely. Of course people also did something else, they turned away from chickens, and bought less fowl, creating a small stampede away from something, in this case chicken. From a health viewpoint perhaps not very smart, but still many reacted individually in this way.

There is nothing new or mysterious in what we see here. This form of stampede also occurs when people strive to get from cities to beaches and clog all access roads on a hot summer day. When teenagers attempt to get to the open air concerts of world famous popstars. Or when news media announce an especially promising IPO (Initial Public Offer) of a company going public, and every potential shareowner wants to get his or her hand on some of these shares. Or in countless other cases.

I believe though that these cases are different from the one’s we have been discussing in the previous sections. Although they contain elements of the explanations found in “acting alike” and “thinking alike”. For example in the propensity to act on the similar impulses. Here the individuals act more or less independently, it is just that their individual efforts combine to give what is sometimes stupid or unpleasant results. One might perhaps say that each individual is in fact following Smith’s dictum: “[G]enerally, indeed, neither intends to promote the publick interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. …by directing [his] industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he
intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.”

It is just that the end promoted is somewhat of a problem for each and everyone in these cases.

Globalisation and internationalisation not the least in field of media, may make these stampede results more frequent, and I wonder what one can do to de-synchronise as it were the actions of an ever-growing number of people prepared to act on the same impulses.

**Forced conformity**

Here the important idea is that individuals may have limited choices in the way they express their individuality. If we are forced to choose like everybody else, or if the variety of choices is limited, we will of course look alike. Or as Hirschleifer and Teah mention using e-mail when everybody else is using e-mail we may sooner or later feel that we have no choice but to use e-mail ourselves.

In umbrella terms it may mean that there are only black umbrellas available and no raincoats for instance, meaning that we will see everyone with a black umbrella when it is raining.

Suppose that social science for some reason is moving in a direction in which the quality of research and of the individual carrying out the research is judged by the number of journal articles published, multiplied by an index signifying the quality of the journal in which these articles are published. Then scientific reputation is of course dependent on the number of articles published in these journals. A young post doc wanting to make a career in social science would be expected to conform to this system for earning a reputation. Evidently this means that there will be a competitive pressure to publish or perish. What this means for originality and engagement into research areas where results are a long time in coming or where it is difficult to see whether anything will emerge from one’s efforts, one can only guess.

One thing is fairly certain though. “The likely result should be clear. If rewards come to those who conform, cascade-like behavior will increase, simply because the incentive to be correct is strengthened or replaced by the incentive to do what others do. The extent of this effect will depend on the extent of the incentive to conform. But whenever the
incentive is positive, people will be all the more likely to ignore their private information and to follow others.”139

Sunstein sees a similar problem for reputational cascades: “Exactly the same problem arises in a reputational cascade, where the public, for a very different reason, is unable to learn what many people know and think. Here people silence themselves not because they believe that they are wrong but because they do not want to face the disapproval that, they think, would follow from expressing the view that they believe to be correct.”140

Noelle-Neumann141 calls this silence “Schweigespirale” or spirals of silence. This is appropriate as the silence is propagated like cascades.


Economic logic may be even more forceful in their ability to bring about conformity. Baumol and Blackman143 have shown that it is not possible to introduce extraregarding views, moral and ethical considerations into the economic logic. A perfect market may lead to allocative efficiency, but it is difficult to see how it could lead to virtuous behaviour. According to this view a single manager of a company can do nothing, whatever his own attitude and values. If a company tries to raise the standards on its own, it will soon find itself at a severe competitive disadvantage. According to Baumol and Blackman “[the company’s] good behavior will terminate rapidly, either because it is abandoned by management as a matter of self-preservation, or, if management holds out

140 Ibid., p. 45.
142 Quote from wikipedia: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schweigespirale
because of its moral convictions, because the ethical firm is driven out of the market altogether, succumbing to the competitive prowess of its less fastidious rivals."144

The voluntary pursuit of socially acceptable goals in general are doomed to fail: “To put the matter bluntly, the market automatically interprets any expenditure by the firm that is undertaken only as a matter of good works as an act of unmitigated wastefulness.”145 In a competitive market building upon a Smithian self-interest there is no room for this kind of expenditure. Whatever the attitude of the owners, managers and employees, they would be forced to behave like all of their competitors.

Dissentents have something worth hearing

Just following in the tracks made by others ignoring one’s own information and knowledge, or keeping quiet and acquiescing in the decisions made by others in order to further one’s own immediate self interest is a problem for all of society. Just as in the information cascade examples wrong decisions may be the result, and new ideas and actions that may represent potential benefits or smarter solutions to current problems may not be expressed, resulting in a loss for society.

No wonder that Sunstein concludes: “social influences also diminish the total level of information within any group, and they threaten, much of the time, to lead individuals and institutions in the wrong directions. Dissent can be an important corrective; many groups and institutions have too little of it. As we shall see, conformists are free-riders, whereas dissenters often confer benefits on others; and it is tempting to free-ride.”146

In the real world this would mean that we should encourage individuals to gain use and reveal the “private” information in their decisions and actions. Relying not only on the information they can get from the behaviour of others.

This would make it possible to break cascades. In an experiment similar to the one we have just seen, Willinger and Ziegelmeyer,147 try to show what happens when some individuals gain more information. In this experiment the subjects had a special option when the two previous play-

144 Ibid., p. 5.
145 Ibid., p. 13.
ers in the sequence had announced the same decision. They were then allowed two draws instead of just one before they made their decision. Thus they had the possibility of gaining more information about the content of the urn. The remaining subjects were then informed that this decision was based upon two draws. Willinger and Ziegelmeyer report that these better “informed” subjects were indeed able to break cascades. Not always though. From this experiment one might draw the provisional conclusion that better informed people, who are seen as better informed by those who follow, might at least influence the decision making of those who follow. This is certainly not sensational news, but it seems to fit reality.

More interesting is an experiment that shows what happens when the subjects were rewarded for correct group decision and punished for a wrong group decision. Group decision being in this case equal to the decisions a majority of subjects had decided individually. This apparently brought forth more decisions based upon the private draws, instead of the subject relying on the previous decisions. In most of the cases the individual decisions matched the private information gained from the draw. Thus cascades were broken, and more correct group decisions made. This is easy to understand, when looking at the table. The individual draws are the same as in the second example above, but this time the individual decisions are based upon the individual draws, resulting presumably in the decisions seen in the announcement row. The majority decision is of course B, which is correct.

<table>
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<td>B</td>
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“The majority-rewarding variation on the urn experiment gives people an incentive to disclose accurate, privately-held information. This is the information from which the group benefits, and this is the information that does not emerge if people are rewarded for correct individual decisions. Full disclosure of accurate information is a central goal of institutional design.”\(^{148}\) We have to be cautious here though.

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Group decision making based upon individual and independent decisions may be important in problem solving. Another simple example referred to by Surowieck in his “The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business” might show why.

The experiment involves a glass filled with jelly beans, or think of peas or marbles. A series of individuals make independent guesses as to the number of beans in the glass. It turned out that the group estimate, or the average of the guesses made, was a better estimate than all but one of the individual guesses. This led Surowieck to the conclusion that in general group decisions based upon independent individual decisions trumped individual decisions.

This might be right in the experiment and in many cases in the real word, but if we look at phenomena like innovation or changes in groups and societies, the majority decisions or group averages might not represent a very efficient method.

Instead it is independent individual decision making that may be important for new approaches in research, new insights into society, new technologies, new products and ways of living.

We see how it is actually in the interest of society to encourage independence of opinion, and may we add, of research, in order not to end up in very local minima. This calls for an explanation.

Think again of our mountainous landscape, and the task of finding the highest mountain in this landscape through gradient search. We might start out from the same valley and move up the steepest gradient we can find, until we reach a point from where we can only go downwards. That we may not have found the highest mountain by this method is evident. Somehow we ought to have had many different starting points in order for us to be reasonably sure that one of us would in fact find the highest mountain by this method.

Sunstein recounts Sen when he states that democracies have real material advantages: “Consider the fact that in the history of the world, no society with democratic elections and free speech has ever experienced a

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famine—a demonstration of the extent in which political liberty protects people who do not exercise it.” Somewhat paradoxically, it is the ability for each individual to take an individual stand, using the “private” information it possesses, that makes organisational and societal progress possible.

This was already clear to Mill, when he wrote: “When there are persons to be found, who form an exception to the apparent unanimity of the world on any subject, even if the world is in the right, it is always probable that dissentients have something worth hearing to say for themselves, and that truth would lose something by their silence.”

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