

Two Major Trends

Seemingly In Tension in Modern Culture

2009

Thomas A. Burns, Ph.D.

Chiloquin, Oregon

Two seemingly opposite trends prevail in American culture, and to a significant extent in the rest of the developed cultures of the world. The first is the trend toward ever-greater emphasis on individual freedom, achievement, independence and self-reliance with the individual being held more and more responsible for both his/her well-being and security. A correlate of this trend toward individualism is a reduction in the value attached to social community and social values as the source of identity and security. The second trend is the globalization/internationalization of information/communication and economic/market relations. The first trend tends to isolate the individual with less support to and from communal values and the surrounding community, while the second economic/information trend ties all individuals and groups at all levels more and more together rendering them necessarily more and more integrated, interdependent, and cooperative.

It is no small irony that the competitive economic forces of capitalism – which are associated with the biological and individualistic perspective of self-interest, protection and survival of the fittest, are driving the move to tighter and tighter social connectedness and interdependency, while the cooperative/collaborative forces, usually associated with the communal/social perspective, are waning in the face of the emphasis on individualism.

Looking at the overall development of humankind, it is clear that the species' progress is one with its subscribing to ever larger and larger social units of organization [from clans, to bands, to tribes, to states, to nations, to united nations]. Increased integration and cooperation are the hallmarks of this 150,000 year development trend, with the period since the advent of agriculture and the rise of civilization in the Neolithic Era some 10,000 years ago accounting for most of this development.

If this trend toward increasing integration is the greater in the larger view, how do we account for the opposite current trend within this overall development toward an ever-increasing focus on the value and importance of the individual and individual rights, privileges and achievements? One read would suggest that this internal trend toward individuation is the last gasp of a prior condition for the species before final and full social consolidation – the point at which the

species becomes more like a termite mound or aspen grove and less like a wolverine or solitary oak. This read sees full social integration and the identity of the whole of the human community as essential, first to overcome the sources for destructive conflict and second to achieve further species development. And this view regards the separate individual with his or her inclination to pursue his or her own personal desires and benefits as an impediment to consolidated species progress.

Another read is that while the overall integration trend is very real, continued progress for the species can not occur in the condition of stasis like that of the termite mound. Progress requires that the consolidated social pot be constantly stirred by the creative input of those who think and operate outside the conceptual and social confines of the “establishment.” In short, the individual and his or her pursuit of his or her own independent vision is what keeps the group flexible, adaptive, and oriented to the option for change. Lose the recognized importance of the individual and his or her “freedom” to determine his or her own direction and you lose the creative force in human development. In this view, competition engenders the change that leads to progress for the species.

Can we bridge these two “reads?” It is not easy, as they seem to be contradictory.

Clearly the future for humankind needs the benefits of both the increased cooperation that further social integration provides and the stimulation that individual creativity in the face of competition provokes. Perhaps, as it is presently conceived and promoted, the dichotomy itself is false. After all, cooperation is not necessarily monolithic; it occurs across individuals and groups at different social scales, and at each scale there is the option to retain a competitive element across social divisions. Our mistake may be to assume that we lose creativity when we lose “freedom” at the strictly individual and personal levels. Teams of cooperative individuals can compete fiercely against one another while they remain collectively creative in spite of the individual members giving up the pursuit of strictly individual gain. This is true at all social levels to the very top, international level of cooperation and integration. So long as integration is not total, competition across divisions remains viable and the creative input of individualistic values can be retained, even as individuals commit more and more to cooperate as “teams” at increased social scales. In this view, it is not necessary to focus on the exclusive rights of each individual in order to retain the essential benefits of individualism.

As humankind travels the road to ever-greater social integration, the mistake we may be making is to think that in de-emphasizing individualism at the personal level, we necessarily lose individualistic values or benefits. It seems more likely the case that these individualistic values and benefits merely ascend to be expressed at more encompassing levels in competition across teams, groups, corporations, states and nations.

Especially in recent times, we have come to recognize the creative efficiency of teams of individuals operating more or less simultaneously to address problems as compared to efforts made sequentially by separate individuals. It turns out that solutions to all kinds of human challenges are achieved much more rapidly in a cooperative team framework where a diversity of minds and inputs magnifies the creativity, scope and the pace of problem solving. And, interestingly, the individual satisfaction of team members tends to be greater in the team setting than is the case for individuals working on their own. Humans are social animals, and while individual values are important, it is entirely possible that we have missed the mark in assuming that the values and benefits of this individualistic perspective are best achieved by supporting cultural positions that would locate virtually all importance at the level of lone wolves. It may be time to temper our tendency to excessive celebration of the individual and move to highlight the creativity and satisfaction [happiness] that can be achieved in the cooperative setting of teams at all levels. We need not fear that the individual or the benefits of the individualistic perspective will necessarily be lost in the more cooperative social setting, so long as competition remains among these “teams.”!!

If we could resolve this seeming dilemma in the direction suggested here, we might alleviate the fear among many of the continued integration process, as expressed most dramatically by the “One World Order” conspiricists. We might even overcome the knee jerk response of having to see “government” and government “programs” as the enemy of the individual. Cooperating to address human challenges at all levels may enhance the individual’s sense of identity and quality of life much more than it diminishes it. We merely have to retain the individualistic perspective of competition across the cooperating groups – at some level.