

Individual and Communal Values in Human Societies

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Introduction

Many social conservatives assert that individualism [individual values,] is the dominant human social perspective at all scales. To support this claim, they point to the necessity for individuals and groups to struggle against the competitive forces of nature and other groups to assure their survival. Many social progressives assert that socialism [communal values] is – or should be – the dominant human social perspective at all scales. To support this claim, they point to the fact that humans only survive in groups, and each individual's contribution to the welfare of the group is the basis for both the individual's and the group's survival. Let's examine how these two perspectives play out in what we know about the history of human society.

The Base State of Human Societies - 96.4% of Human History

Human societies have always recognized both communal/cooperative values and individual/competitive values. However, during the 96.4% of human history [289,200 of 300,000 years] when modern humans have lived in bands and tribes, communal values have reigned under normal circumstances. The talents and skills of individuals in these smaller scale societies as elders, hunters, gatherers, warriors, medicine specialists, etc. are celebrated for the benefits they produce for the group. But, individuals are strongly discouraged from accumulating wealth, power and privilege for themselves. So, in these smaller societies of bands [30-50 individuals] and tribes [150-400 individuals] where members a) know one another personally and intimately over long periods of time, b) cooperate and share virtually all resources with one another, and c) depend on one another for their well-being and security, the progressive perspective is more accurate – the basic social organizational state of humanity for the vast majority of its history has been socialistic in nature.

However, it is also the case that relations between tribes and even between bands in difficult times can become very competitive with these tribes and bands operating in terms of their exclusive self interests – individual values at the inter-band or tribal level trumping communal values. Under these circumstances, the perspective of the social conservatives is more accurate!

So, through most of human history whether communal or individual values dominate in smaller societies depends on the relative size of the interacting groups and whether the groups – of whatever size – are under stress to meet the needs of their members. Both progressive and conservative views apply.

The General Principle as Societies Become Complex

When human societies increase significantly in size, and when these societies withdraw from their nomadic hunter-gather lifestyle and concentrate in settled communities – relying on agriculture and animal husbandry to supply their basic needs, social relations generally become increasingly more impersonal, the sense of obligation to others and the ability to rely upon others weakens, cooperation among individuals and groups diminishes, competition increases, and individualistic/self-interested values [Me culture] escalate and come to dominate communal/cooperative values [We culture]. As complex societies develop, this is the default condition and challenge that they all confront – the shift from communal values toward individualistic values.

How do these larger complex societies associated with the “civilized” state [city states, states, nations, and empires] deal with this challenging situation?

The First Stage Complex Society Response - 3.5% of Human History

To overcome the loss of personal relations which support communal values, larger size human societies create 1) a more and more highly differentiated social structure resulting in relatively fixed social classes, 2) a formal belief system and religious institution that supports the division of the citizens into these different classes with different rights, privileges, and responsibilities, and 3) a separate bureaucratic class that provides for the basic needs and security of the common citizens while it services the special rights, privileges and desires of the elite. In adopting these changes, emerging complex societies assure that the state is supported, but at the same time they diminish equality for most citizens while they magnify the individual rights and privileges of the elite few. Power, wealth and privilege come to reside with the nobility and religious leaders, with this elite class often being additionally supported by hereditary and even divine claims of privilege. Under this social structural and belief arrangement, the peasantry and slaves do the hard work and are kept in place by the belief system and bureaucratic enforcement agents. And a military force addresses external threats and “opportunities.”

Noteworthy here is the fact that in this hierarchical system the elite as a class operates in terms of the pinnacle of self-aggrandizing, individualistic values. And social, economic, political and judicial equality disappears on a virtually permanent basis for the great majority of citizens.

This is the pervasive social condition of complex societies in their first 10,500 years [between about 8,500 BC and 1800 AD] with the majority of humans living under complex society conditions only for about the last 3,000 years.

The Very Recent Representative Democracy Adjustment in Complex Society

The Last 350 years - .1% of Human History

At the end of the 18th century, a number of conditions were in place that favored change in the structure of complex societies: 1) the considerable expansion of more independent subgroups of craft, technology, and service workers, 2) the increased concentration of common citizens in cities rather than in the more easily controlled rural agricultural zone, 3) the shift to a religious belief system that did not directly support the elite, 4) the emergence of a more independent justice system focused on fairness, and 5) the over expansion of complex societies into large empires of global scale. In short, the elite were vulnerable to losing control of their populations. Under these conditions, the common citizens began to first escape and then rebel against the highly inequitable conditions that had prevailed in the preceding authoritarian version of complex society.

It is in this context that the representative democratic movement developed, flourished, and spread first in America and then across Europe. This movement included the establishment of an independent judicial system committed to equality and fairness under the law as determined by the people – not as prescribed by the elite. And, under the newly instituted constitutions following revolutions in many nations, political equality returned first for the average male adult citizen of property, then for the average male adult citizen generally, and finally for all male and female adult citizens. The broad based success of this movement in many complex societies meant that communal values received a very significant boost in importance with the average citizen participating in and enthusiastically supporting government. Common man nationalism replaced the previous conscripted version of support for the nation under authoritarian rule!

What happens with respect to individual values in this context? In spite of major gains in the political and judicial realms that support equality and communal values, impersonal social relations – which restrain cooperation and sharing, remain the social norm. And a rapidly expanding and competitive economy rewards the most successful individuals and subgroups. Free enterprise and the financial industry that arises and supports it exist as major promoters of individualistic values at both the individual and emerging corporate levels. So, overall, modern complex societies that adopt and sustain representative democratic governments evolve to support equality and communal values in their political and judicial institutions while they support personal gain and individualistic values in their capitalist economic institutions.

Politically, progressives tend to support government policies and laws that support egalitarian and communal values, while conservatives tend to support

government policies and laws that favor individual/corporate gain and individual values. When these perspectives and their input in the governments of complex societies remain in balance, the results are generally constructive. But these two perspectives and the political parties that support them are constantly competing for increased influence. When the progressive perspective dominates, it can suppress economic activity in the pursuit of equality [public ownership and high taxation]; and when the conservative perspective dominates it can undermine the political and judicial processes by buying off legislative and judicial representation [high financial support for campaigns and PACs].

This is the relatively new, fragile, and dynamic situation that exists within democratic nations. But currently, among nations, the progressive perspective is much weaker and the conservative perspective is much stronger. The result is that the nations of the world are more competitive than they are cooperative – each pursuing its own self-interests rather than the benefits of the collective community of nations. This imbalance fosters conflicts and reduces the ability of nations to address and resolve global scale issues and challenges. And at the present time {2021}, it is global scale challenges that are most pressing and important for humanity as a whole. If these challenges are left unattended, they may well undermine the survival of complex democratic societies as the basis for the modern civilized state of humanity. To address this problem, what is needed is for the nations of the world to commit to an empowered and democratic global government. Currently, the conservative perspective, which emphasizes national self-interest – individualism at the national level, is blocking the path to this necessary level of global integration and cooperation.

Conclusion

In general, complex society remains a test case in terms of the long history of human societies. In complex society's last phase, which is much newer yet and in its very initial period of being tested, it has evolved from a conservative condition of gross inequality under authoritarian rule to a more balanced condition of progressive, communal, equality under a democratic polity combined with a conservative, individualistic, capitalistic economy.

Humanity in the civilized state of complex society does not have thousands of years to determine first, whether at the national level it can maintain balance between the forces of conservatism [Me Culture] and progressivism [We Culture] and second, whether it will commit to implementing a parallel system of balance at the global scale. Unfortunately, humanity understands neither its history when it comes to the expression of individual and communal values at the societal scale nor the serious perils it faces for its future if it is unable to “get it right” on this matter at both the national and global levels.