

Me and We Values in Democratic Capitalist Societies

2021

Thomas A. Burns PhD.

Klamath Falls, Oregon

There is a long history that has led to the overall dominance of the Me/Individual perspective over the We/Communal perspective in the lives of humans living in modern democratic capitalist societies.

Aboriginal Society

For 240,000 years, humans lived in bands and tribes – mostly limited to 20-50 individuals in bands and 150-300 individuals as bands coordinated in tribes. In order to survive in the long term as hunter-gathers, humans learned to cooperate and share in their internal social relations and to observe the limits in their relationship to the external ecology. At the subjective/spiritual/sacred level, they understood that all natural phenomena, including themselves, are connected and deserve respect. To the present day, social relations within bands and tribes are personal in nature, and, in spite of roles being differentiated, equality among adult individuals is the norm. While internal band and tribe relations are mostly cooperative and supportive, inter-tribal relations can be much more impersonal and competitive with periodic conflicts erupting over territory and access to resources. In brief, this has been the stable condition achieved by the vast majority of humanity for about 96% of its history.

Complex Society and Civilization

Complex society evolved with the advent of agriculture and settlement in the last 10,000 years with most of humanity only coming to live under these conditions in the last 3,500 years. Complex society itself has remained in a state of constant change never fully stabilizing, and currently it remains in a rapid state of change. As such, complex society – and civilization which rests upon it – really amount to ongoing experiments. In its early period [9,600 years], complex society was built on a highly authoritarian structure of nobles and priests with bureaucrats placed between the elite and the masses who existed as peasants controlled by institutionalized religion and internal enforcers. The equality based on personal relations of the aboriginal condition disappeared, and often natural resources were strained beyond sustainability to meet the excessive demands of the elite. Only in the last 400 years in some nations with the institution of representative democratic governments and justice under the law has the equality of aboriginal social relations been reintroduced within complex society. And, in terms of human history, this 400 years amounts to only an opening trial period in which the forces promoting authoritarian rule can be observed constantly pushing to reemerge in one form or another! Complex society is in its early childhood, while democratic complex societies are in their infancy.

Me and We in Complex Democratic Capitalist Societies

Under authoritarian rule, the dominant Me orientation is obvious in a fixed class system with the Me elite at the top. In democratic complex societies, Me is restrained by the We oriented government and justice system. But when this We governmental and justice system is combined with a Me oriented capitalistic economy, a dynamic emerges where We is constantly under challenge. So, in many modern democratic complex societies with capitalistic economies, there is always the built in tension between the Me and We perspectives; always the need to keep the influence of these two perspectives in balance.

That is the overall Me versus We structural condition in modern democratic, capitalistic societies. Now, what role has the development of social relations in these societies played in this dynamic since the industrial revolution?

With dramatic population growth in these societies – in part resulting from medical advances in treating childhood diseases – the number of young adults greatly exceeded the ability of farms and village communities to absorb them. One result was that urbanization exploded bringing individuals together from diverse locations with virtually no obligation to or responsibility for one another. External trade had always encouraged mobility, but now internal mobility supported a focus on individuals realizing their personal potential. Society responded to the needs of so many “extra” children by instituting universal public education which separated children from adults and opened the path to a separate adolescent peer subculture. Together, universal education, a separate adolescent subculture, and necessary internal mobility led to the celebration of individual opportunity with young adults free to pursue their own talents and interests through higher education and/or employment far beyond the local level.

With the dominant trend of more and more children and young adults moving away from their families and communities, extended family relationships progressively weakened with parents, children, grandparents, and siblings living lives mostly separate from one another. In this context, marriage and the nuclear family became the only remaining stable social unit. Then came birth control and the Women’s Liberation Movement, freeing women from the confines of home and child rearing. As the influence of community and family weakened, individual pursuit of success increased and an overall shift occurred in society from moral behavior based on religious beliefs to secular materialism. The result was that the support morality provided for social commitment waned, further increasing the emphasis placed on individual values and individual freedom. Then came the escalation of divorce as more and more spouses were liberated to pursue their own interests and desires. Finally, as the nuclear family

unit destabilized with divorce becoming common, the single parent unit emerged as prominent with mostly women responsible for the resulting households.

Through this entire historical process, the dominant theme is increasing freedom for individuals to pursue their own interests and desires rather than commitment to marriage, family and community relations and values. Overall what we see since the industrial revolution is the ascendancy of the modern social culture of Me. It is no longer just the capitalistic economy in democratic complex societies that is promoting the Me perspective and challenging the We perspective. It is the evolution of social relations themselves that has significantly favored Me over We.

The great irony is that many among this dominant modern cohort of supreme individualists are social progressives who are committed ideologically to social values and social responsibility. They just do not want to lead their own lives in terms of these family and community values! They want “society,” or government, to come to the rescue and support single parents, child care, health care, housing, food, and education for those in need while they continue to “dance” to their tune of full liberation and self actualization. And they do not even recognize the contradiction!!

Now, we are seeing what may be the final step in this personal “liberation” sequence: adult couple relationships without any form of legal commitment, but with the expectation that the independent desires of each of the partners will be satisfied even as the goals and desires of each partner evolve. Sometimes having lived together for years, these couples remain only committed to one another day to day with the option fully open to depart whenever they choose. No surprise, most of these serial monogamous relationships eventually dissolve – one person’s freedom eventually conflicting with the other person’s freedom. These modern couples remain together only so long as the We does not conflict substantially with the Me in the relationship. And, importantly, We has lost the strong combined support of extended family, community, and morality.

Social progressives do not provide an answer to this metastasizing challenge. Their governmental solution addresses the symptoms, not the causes of the underlying problem: the familial, communal, and moral failure of modern life that celebrates individual values and the “benefits” of a consumption oriented lifestyle. And, unfortunately, the development of an excessive Me orientation in modern social relations – when combined with an established Me oriented capitalistic economy – increases the pressure on a We oriented democratic government by reinforcing the Me values associated with 1) Me authoritarian rule [oligarchy, dictatorship, etc.], and 2) Me exploitation of planetary ecology.