

Advent of the ME Perspective in Modern America

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The ME Perspective of a Great Many Individuals in Modern America:

“I am not that concerned about community or family. These things tie me down and limit me in my ability to pursue my personal interests and goals. I need to be free to do what I want, with whom I want, where I want, and when I want as long as my activities don't violate the law. These are the Individual Rights guaranteed to me in the U.S. Constitution. For me to have to expend much of my energy in behalf of community, family, spouse, or children takes away from my efforts to be successful, to achieve my personal goals in life, and to participate in the American Dream.”

“To be able to pursue my life of personal freedom, here is what I need you to do for me:

- 1) Provide me with a nation that guarantees me comprehensive security under a universal system of laws that are adequately enforced at all levels,
- 2) Provide me with a stable and secure home to support a quality childhood and adolescence,
- 3) Provide me with quality food, clothing and shelter to support my quality childhood and adolescence,
- 4) Provide me with good health care when I need it at least through childhood and adolescence,
- 5) Provide me with a quality public education through Junior College,
- 6) Provide me with emergency food and shelter if I need it as an adult,
- 7) Provide me with a sufficient emergency income if I need it as an adult,
- 8) Provide me with a quality communication system to accommodate my personal access to information and my use of this system to communicate,
- 9) Provide me with an extensive quality transportation system to accommodate my moving anywhere I want to go,
- 10) Provide me with a supportive economy that assures my employment through my adulthood,
- 11) Provide me with the guaranteed ability as an adult to vote for the political representatives to government that support my point of view,
- 12) Provide me with a guaranteed retirement system to support my economic and health needs in my older years,
- 13) Provide these ‘things’ while taking as little as possible of my assets in taxes,
- 14) Provide these ‘things’ without asking me to do more than vote in most elections.”

This is the Modern ME Deal in America. This perspective has grown steadily from the time of Westward “settlement.” And, while many do not realize it, this ME perspective has become the underlying agenda of both Conservatives and Liberals. Standard Conservatives will complain about the level of commitment to social services, but they will not hesitate to take full advantage of them. Standard Liberals will support these social services, and they will push to expand equal access to these services for all citizens, with the result that all citizens have the ability to participate in the ME lifestyle. Extreme Conservatives will fight against support for social services and access for all citizens to these services while reducing regulations and taxes for corporations and the wealthy in the name of promoting an ever expanding economy. Progressive Liberals will support a greater range of social services to cover more citizens while focusing on the negative impacts on the environment caused by an insufficiently regulated economic system. Beyond participating in occasional protests, only a few within even these more Conservative and Liberal groups will actually get involved in activities that directly support their perspective. For the most part, the ME Agenda and ME Lifestyle prevail under both regimens.

It is certainly revealing that – in order to be sustained – the ME perspective as just outlined depends on a great many contributions from a stable and committed surrounding society! In this regard, there seem to be a lot of contradictions between the claimed personal freedoms in the ME agenda and the expectations of social support that make pursuit of the ME Lifestyle possible.

How Did We Get from the WE Based Perspective in the Smaller Societies of 96% of Human History to the ME Based Perspective of Modern Mega American Society?

The variables promoting the progressive reduction in the commitment of citizens to community and family include:

1) The Development of a Mega Complex Society

Modern America consists of a huge diversity of groups including hundreds of millions of citizens occupying an enormous geographical area. This situation results in great social and physical distance between individuals and groups. Vastly more impersonal than personal relations and greater physical separation among citizens invite a reduced commitment to and involvement in community.

2) Status Inequality

Within America, status and class divisions have arisen that are reflected in differential social and economic conditions. This situation magnifies the social and physical separation among citizens and fosters less unity and reduced commitment to community.

3) Specialization

Diverse occupations – often associated with entirely separate locations – reduce contact among the members of different groups who no longer know one another or share in mutual daily activities. The extent and quality of personal relations and commitment to community weaken in this context.

4) Greatly Reduced Agrarian Basis for Society

When – for whatever reason, once strong, shared identity ties to the land/place/territory dissolve for a great many citizens, a significant component supporting community is lost. From 1800 to 2020, the population living rurally and in small towns dropped by 76%, and small towns are struggling to merely survive.

5) Industrialization and Urbanization

Industrialization and the development of the financial “industry” invite economic polarization. Urbanization compresses citizens together who are mostly strangers to one another resulting in nearly all social relations being defined by the lowest level of connection – toleration with pervasive inattention.

6) Universal Education

Universal education supports Specialization and separates youth from the presence and oversight of family and adults. The result is the development of an independent, youth oriented sub-culture with loosened ties to family and the surrounding community. This education also instills the awareness in students that a large number of occupations in many other locations are available encouraging adolescents to consider options outside their “home” communities.

7) Mobility

The economy of modern mega societies requires elaborate transportation and communication systems and the infrastructure to support them. Access to these systems make it much easier for individuals to move rapidly and frequently across large distances and multiple communities – weakening both commitment to any one community and ties to the extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, and nieces. In just two generations of high mobility, the relations among members of the extended family are frequently reduced to occasional visits. And often this “visitation” situation extends to the immediate family of parents and siblings. High mobility also promotes the development of Suburbia, which is frequently a zone of adult residential transients unconnected to either the city or the local community.

8) Technology

Constant advances in technology – from radios to computers to “Smart” phones and the Internet; from horse drawn wagons to 18 wheeler trucks and jet airplanes, from city streets to Interstate Highways – magnify the effect of all of the other variables. Technology floods citizens with information about the world beyond the local community, and ease of transport provides physical access to this expanded world – further weakening identify with and commitment to the local community. Family interaction often gets reduced to “zoom” events.

9) Control of Reproduction

Controlling reproduction results in family that can be planned and frees women to participate in the activities of society beyond child rearing and caring for the home. Additionally, with options for independent fertility, women can elect to have children outside of marriage. These basic changes reduce the commitment to marriage and the simplest form of family – the nuclear family.

10) Divorce

With a current 50% divorce rate, the marriage basis for stability in the nuclear family has weakened considerably. More and more single parent families are the norm. In this context, children are often being raised across different households and parents – with these spouses and households often in conflict over various issues. With strong extended family relations having mostly disappeared, the prevalence of divorce has undermined the most basic social structure: the nuclear family. More and more both couples and families become defined by the relations of loosely committed “significant others.”

11) Media

Ironically the broadcast and the internet based electronic media have connected individuals worldwide at the “virtual” level while leaving many young people lacking in basic face-to-face interactive skills. “Belonging” to groups on the internet reveals the human need to share community in the context of greatly reduced actual communities. But this virtual belonging can be strategically manipulated by exploiting the equally powerful human attraction to the sensational. Exposure to the diversity of opinions in real communities serves to restrain such manipulation. In addition, making nearly everything readily available at any time on television and computers fixes attention to these “machines” and holds people inside, off the front porch, and away from direct participation in local community events. The result is that it is difficult to find a sense of community even in the neighborhoods of small towns. And ironically for computer and smart phone using freedom lovers, the internet based, vast expansion of artificial intelligence [AI] means that interested parties now know all the time where you are, where you go, and what your attitudes and views are on all kinds of issues. The freedom of the ME Lifestyle encounters hidden WE watching, listening, and recording by the empowered few!

Additional Significant Variables

1) Friends

In the context of weakened family and community, personal friends and friendship groups have been “asked” to fulfill the social functions of these entities. And indeed to an extent they do. But, given the mobility common to adult working life, friends are often dispersed all over geographically with these relationships – like family relationships – weakening over time. Retirement and greater location stability can provide a more stable context for friendships to

develop and be sustained, but they usually lack time depth and suffer from the members' health deterioration as these friends age. Friends rarely are as committed and dependable as family, especially in situations of extreme and/or long term need. Overall, in the modern ME Lifestyle context, friends cannot be expected to be an adequate substitute for family. And, unfortunately, family itself has come to lack the cohesion and commitment to provide the level of support required when major needs among its members must be addressed.

2) The Elderly

Modern American mega society places the highest value on young adulthood and the adaptability of the young to what has become the prevailing condition of rapid change. In this context, the knowledge and perspective of elders tend to be considered antiquated with the result that after retirement most elderly citizens have been assigned to society's periphery. This situation further fragments the basis for family and community. In addition, when the health of elders deteriorates and life gets more and more restricted, the consequences of the ME Lifestyle come home to roost. Single older adults often get committed to one person apartments in assisted living facilities, if they can afford the progressive costs. And in the end, many die alone in nursing homes or intensive care wards. End of Life is when the choice for the ME Lifestyle truly catches up with Americans. And with 17% of Americans now over the age of 65, America is more and more becoming a society of older adults who no longer have a significant or valued role in families or communities.

3) Race, Ethnicity, Language, and Religion

Only at the ideal level does America pride itself on its diversity. In practice and whenever groups within American society experience stress or threat, minority groups – based on differences in race, ethnicity, language, and religion – are likely to be negatively targeted, even to the point of being subject to violence. All of the factors that contribute to increased separation of groups and individuals in complex societies like America render community difficult to establish and maintain.

Conclusion

Liberal or Conservative, social relations in modern America – and throughout most of the Western World – have become more and more focused on personal freedom – the ME Perspective and the ME Lifestyle. Social commitment to community and place, extended family, marriage, and the nuclear family have weakened progressively and been replaced with an emphasis on individual freedom. The Question: Has this overall trend away from social commitment and toward personal freedom progressed to the point of threatening the fundamental fabric of modern American society? Individual freedom is certainly important, but like any other value it can be carried to an unproductive extreme.

Post Script

In this essay, I have highlighted the social challenges that have arisen in Complex American Society with the modern emphasis on the Me Perspective and Lifestyle. 80 years ago, Arthur Morgan produced what remains an outstanding work that identifies many of the same small community difficulties, but that emphasizes potential solutions. See: Arthur E. Morgan, The Small Community: The Foundation of Democratic Life, N.Y., 1942. Unfortunately, since Morgan's time, the challenges for the small community have grown considerably, and the results of attempts to implement a number of solutions have not reversed the overall trend. The hope remains that the combination of the negative aspects of mega urban and suburban life and the emergence of the alternative location options that the computer, the internet, and zoom communication have made possible will make the choice for the small community more attractive for goal oriented individuals, for marriages and families seeking greater stability, and for various forms of enterprise.