

“Individualism” Kills Individuality - Postliterate - Medium

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To start, I want to share an anecdote to demonstrate my point.

My Anecdote

I grew up in middle-class suburbia — among the last of their kind, as families without upper-class jobs in the US increasingly cannot support their families — and it was surrounded on all sides by upper middle-class/lower upper-class developments. The latter were constantly being expanded, while the middle-class developments became increasingly abandoned.

In theory, the suburbs were an individualist’s dream come true. Every house had its own property surrounding it and was insulated from all houses around it so that every person could keep to themselves and only come into contact with others if specifically desired. Everyone minded their own business such that social compulsion was near nonexistent; you

could run naked into the street and no one would even bother to look out the window to ever notice. Living in these suburbs, you were completely free to be yourself, express yourself, pursue your desires, etc. There was no collective breathing down your neck.

However, what was the result? All the houses were near identical, and as such every person who lived in them was identical. People almost never went outside except to go to their cars or get out of them. It was generally impossible to tell if a given house was long abandoned or had a new family since the last time you checked. The area was subsumed by a terrifying stillness and soul-crushing boredom.

However, occasionally I would go to the city, and within minutes it was clear it was a whole other world. Things *actually happened*. Cars drove, people walked and talked; things were always moving.

The city is much more collectivist than it is individualist, particularly when contrasted with the suburbs. Humans are cramped into smaller living-spaces in a single area; there are many more public services and shared spaces. It is impossible to live in a city and not have to interact with it, to take part in its community, simply in order to survive and figure things out.

What, then, was the result of this city layout? Was it the terrifying hive-mind collectivism Ayn Rand so fervently warned us about? Did it leave the individual feeling constricted and desiring to break free and live on his own? The truth is completely the opposite: the city *more* radically expressed individuality than the suburb.

In the city, something somewhere is always happening, everything and everybody moves, and as such there is so much to take in, so many places you could be, so many people you could be with. The individual flourishes here, he grows and develops radically, and comes to realize himself better than he ever could in the homogenous suburbs. The individual cannot, in fact, survive alone for very long. As such, individuality is not about running away from everyone and being alone; individuality is about choosing the paths and people you wish to choose — true freedom of choice and of

expression. Everyone in the city seemed unique in their own ways and they were all engaging in unique activities all at once; everyone in the suburb was identical and engaging in the same activities all at once.

My Philosophy

The purpose of my anecdote was to illustrate that the supposed dichotomy between individualism and collectivism we are inclined to believe does not exist.

I think the dichotomy never was integral to any philosophy, political or not, for most of history. It was birthed in the age of Rand, in the age of panic about communism and the so-called horrors of collectivism. The point of the dichotomy was to inform people they had the choice of either affirming their own selves or giving themselves up to hive-mind collectivism. Naturally, most chose the former. Only political extremists chose the latter — making the belief in “individualism” or “collectivism” a sort of litmus test for political acceptability.

Neoliberal capitalism, the ultimate response to anticommunist panic, was philosophically the total embrace of the individualist side of the supposed spectrum. It stated that the individual was destined to be free, one of a kind, and furthermore that freedom can only exist in embrace of individualism. This, combined with bad economics, reinforced both neoliberal and radical right-libertarian free-market ideas — some of which became policies. Philosophically, under neoliberalism the individual became the center of society, and as such society could be no more than the sum total of its individuals (very Hayekian and Stirnerist indeed).

Most leftists seems unable to shake themselves from this false dichotomy and merely resolve to affirm the “collectivist” side of the spectrum, mostly to oppose the emphasis on individualism which proliferates in neoliberal capitalism. It would be more radical and more correct, however, to free ourselves from this dichotomy all together.

The point of my anecdote was also to illustrate how the individual cannot possibly develop into a cognizant and unique person capable of distinguishing himself and asserting himself in a Randian manner without a collective to do so. This is where individualism falls so terribly short: in thinking that the individual can even exist, let alone develop, outside of the collective. I believe the true terror of capitalism today is not the specter of a hypothetical hive-mind collectivism, but just the opposite: a scenario in which everyone is alienated from each other in the name of “individuality” — merely leading to the deterioration of the individual into a shell of a man.

The individualists are right in valuing the individual so highly: as a person destined to be one of a kind, as the center of his world, the master of his fate if he so chooses, the only body capable of knowing freedom, etc. Where they fall short, however, is in forgetting that the individual and society are completely inseparable. Freedom, individuality, and all these beautiful ideals are thus just as much the affair of society as they are the affair of the individual.

You cannot separate a man from society and tell him to become unique and free; he will likely respond by doing nothing. He will develop into only half a man, only half aware of himself, and too inside his own head to truly feel freedom. Give him a collective, however, and he will see himself reflected off of others, he will be able to expand his knowledge of the world and all its possibilities, and he will develop a radical individuality he never could alone.

