

Underlying Causes

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This week I want to write in a bit greater depth about something I allude to often in my writing, namely, the shift that occurred in humanity's evolution around 10-12,000 years ago when what we call "civilization" began and subsequently became the dominant structure in how our species lives on the earth. This change in culture may have seemed innocent enough in its early stages, but it was a profound revolution that has produced consequences of every imaginable kind — intended and unintended, obvious and subtle, glorious and tragic.

The many defenders of civilization routinely praise its accomplishments, especially those of modern and post-modern civilization (usually starting with the Age of Reason in the 17th and 18th centuries — often foolishly referred to as "the Enlightenment") — and continuing to today). Art, science, industry, and technology are typically extolled as the great works of civilization. Most of the cheerleaders don't deny that civilization has its problems — Sigmund Freud, clearly a seminal figure of the 20th century, wrote a book published in 1929 entitled "Civilization and Its Discontents" — but they seem to believe that the brilliance of our accomplishments outweighs the tragedy of our problems. While I certainly agree that civilization has made possible extraordinary developments, I'm not finally a fan. Quite the contrary. I wonder (and worry) about the costs, especially to our sanity and our experience of the sacred nature of life, as well as the increasingly dire possibility that civilization may turn out to be a dead end for our species.

For a long time — estimates in anthropology vary from 200,000 to 300,000 years — humans who were pretty much like ourselves biologically lived on the earth. "Society" and "culture" were expressed through small kinship bands of people (usually encompassing no more than 50 to 150 members). These groups are typically referred to as "hunter-gatherer" bands, although recent evidence seems to indicate that they were avid horticulturalists also, planting gardens to produce the particular foods they most liked. Their tilling of the soil was, however, far from the modern concept of agriculture or farming. (Along with domestication of animals for labor, the development of agriculture was among the significant and recent developments that led to the arising of civilization. Some noteworthy academics, such as neuro-endocrinologist Robert Sapolsky, are of the opinion that agriculture was perhaps humanity's most tragic wrong turn and greatest mistake.)

Many of these hunter-gatherer-forager-horticulturalist groups were nomadic, and most were mobile. Some were herders, following wild animals in their seasonal migration patterns, but even those who didn't herd were less rooted to a certain locale. Permanent settlements existed, but they were apparently the exception rather than the rule. Territoriality was certainly a factor, but "ownership" of land and property had not yet been widely conceptualized and enshrined as sacrosanct.

So, where am I going with this? Well, let me cut to the chase.

Human biology — however you believe we got it, whether from natural selection or "intelligent design" — seems to be optimized for small group interactions of about 50-150 people. More to the point, our inherent endowments are not only inadequate but don't work worth a damn for the kind of mass societies we have in the world today, where almost everyone is a stranger.

Let's assume that you have personal relationships with a thousand different people. Most of us don't have that many, of course, counting among our beloveds, friends, acquaintances, and co-workers a much smaller number, but let's use a thousand. In a country of 330 million people, this means that you know only 0.0003% of your country's people. Using the global population, that tiny percentage shrinks dramatically, down to 0.00000013%. In other words, almost everyone is a stranger.

Well, then, how do we form opinions about all the people we don't know? From images, social memes, group stereotypes, movies, and other people's opinions. The problem is that most of what we get from those sources is fiction, and much of it is dead wrong — mere projection of hopes and fears, likes and dislikes.

Damn near everything becomes impersonal, but in a way that's terribly wrong-headed. It takes the Us-and-Them dynamic so central to human nature and twists it into a pretzel, distorting so much of what we know (or believe we know) about other human beings. "Us" may not truly be us, and "Them" are almost certainly misunderstood.

I'm not suggesting that knowing people personally by logging a lot of flight time with them, working out conflicts and problems, sharing good times and bad, and loving, liking, disliking, or hating them are particularly accurate ways to understand or judge anyone. Hardly. And those methods are sure as hell not easy. Consider the challenges of marriage or long-term friendship. But at least these kinds of personal relationships are based on something relatively real. In bad moments, we may fantasize killing the people we know, but the vast majority of us don't do so, acting out instead in less ultimately violent ways. By contrast, our opinions about people we've never met are based on second-, third-, or fifth-hand information that is infinitely less tangible, less evidential, less thoughtful, and less real. We may not personally wish to kill them, but we don't seem to mind soldiers or drones doing it for us.

I'm also not suggesting that life within small kinship bands is always wonderful, loving, and true. Hell, look at family dynamics. What I am asserting, however, is that life in mass societies virtually guarantees collective madness. Sure, you don't actively hate the checker at the grocery store or the teller at the bank, and those interactions go smoothly for the most part. But societies that base so many necessary functions (i.e., commerce and business) on interaction with strangers inadvertently create the serious and increasing loss of any sense of shared humanity. Our endowments in human nature simply don't provide good ways to deal with strangers. That's one reason that war was virtually unknown and didn't exist throughout our long hunter-gatherer history. War is a product of civilization, and not merely a by-product, but instead a central theme.

My point here is not to decry over-population, although the various arguments about that are compelling. No, all I'm saying in this commentary is that we can't handle life among so many strangers without losing something essential. The checks and balances that constrain cruelty, violence, disregard, and the many other ravages of aggressive, predatory narcissism — checks and balances that operate effectively in small group settings where we know everyone — are lost when we live among a sea of strangers. Empathy and sympathy are largely reserved for people we know and define as "Us."

The onset of social media over the past decade and a half has intensified all this awfulness by increasing our estrangement. Rather than greater connectedness, we experience increased disdain far too often. We react rather than respond, and our reactions are all too often aggressive, in part because our seeming invisibility and anonymity remove the natural social constraints. In today's America, death threats from strangers are now commonplace. Other human beings cease to be people to us. They are reduced to Tweets. And it doesn't stop with the online "communication." We take that psychic damage home with us, into our hearts, like poison injected right into our souls.

I have a Facebook account, but I stopped using it years ago, and I never even open Facebook anymore. At some point, I may close and delete the account, but it's been easier so far just to stop using it. I don't have a Twitter account, and I never will.

Please don't take this as advice. Your using social media or not is up to you. If you do, however, please try to be conscious and thoughtful about it.

Many human beings seem to believe — or at least think — that we're in charge. We're not. And we're sure as hell not in control. This delusion applies to our long history in hunter-gatherer kinship bands, but it's a thousand-fold more true (and more dangerous) in modern civilization. Yes, we're clever and creative as a species, but "civilized societies" are and always have been unmanageable. What's different about our current situation is that it's no longer just human suffering that results. All our many deals with the Devil (including religion, by the way) now imperil the entire biosphere and all life on earth.

OK, I accept that we're not going back to hunter-gatherer times. But it might be a good thing if we're forced to downsize and relocalize. We won't go to the considerable trouble of getting to know our neighbors until we have to, and it appears more and more likely that this may become necessary. The days of the global economy with its endless, disposable consumerism and one-day delivery from Amazon are numbered, so (however perverse this may sound) enjoy it while you can. As much as we love all our toys, they've always come with a dark-side cost in diminishing our humanity.

As with so much of what ails us, addressing modern impersonality, alienation, and narcissism is daunting. Personal relationships may be medicinal, but it's hard work. Many people actually prefer the toxic corporate alternative. It's a little like asking people to support their local small businesses rather than buying stuff online from some megacorporation — that's far too inconvenient and unpleasant, so most of us don't even try.

This is yet another of the Death Culture conditions I see for which I have no viable solution. Humans seem to have created the world we have because it was and continues to be the path of least resistance, and taking the harder roads toward sanity may be simply too much to expect of this or any species.

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Meanwhile, as a left-field addendum or footnote, a grassroots movement has arisen aimed at pressuring the few presumably "progressive" members of the House of Representatives to force a floor vote on Medicare for All by withholding their approval for 80-year-old Nancy Pelosi's getting a third term as Speaker. Americans overwhelmingly support single-payer universal health care (M4A), but Congress won't move in that direction even an inch unless people rise up and demand it.

AOC (Alexandria Ocasia-Cortez), leader of the progressive "squad" in the House, came out *against* the idea, justifying her refusal to take a stand against Pelosi by suggesting instead that progressives in Congress use their leverage to gain influential committee positions. Well, Pelosi quickly put the kibosh on that argument by arranging to deny AOC a seat on the Energy and Commerce panel, giving it instead to a centrist (i.e., corporate) Democrat — Rep. Kathleen Rice, who is another shill for the Empire of Wealth. Hey AOC, so much for not using your leverage assertively! God forbid you should actually confront Pelosi.

Trump isn't even gone yet, but we're already seeing how despicable all the corporate-lackey Democrats are. So, Death Culture rages on and entrenches its hold over America even further.