

Too Many Strangers

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Human society and civilization share certain similarities with hive-based insect colonies, such as ants, bees, wasps, and termites. While far from identical, the resemblances are striking and, at least to some extent, disturbing.

Technically, these hive-based species — ants, bees, wasps, and termites — are called “eusocial insects.” According to Wikipedia, the term “eusocial” designates the highest level of social organization, defined by four characteristics:

1. adult habitation in status groups
2. cooperative brood care (individuals raise babies and adolescents that are not their own)
3. overlapping generations within a colony of adults
4. divisions of labor according to reproductive or non-reproductive status

Human societies within civilization have not evolved all the way to those four characteristics, but we’ve been headed down the road toward three of them for quite awhile. First, where we live does tend to cluster around status groups, based mainly on economic wealth, but also on race and class. Second, nuclear and multi-generational families may still be the norm for many humans, but the emergence in modern civilization over the past two centuries of social services has cut into that dominion and altered the exclusivity of families for child-rearing. Third, divisions of labor according to reproductive or non-reproductive status are more rigid as a caste system among eusocial animals than most examples of human society have been.

While we might cite the “Untouchables” of India and the “eunuchs” of various sects in Europe and Asia as groups for which reproduction is either limited or impossible, that’s really not the same as the non-reproductive female worker caste of ants. Crazy though we may be, humans haven’t yet reached the point of specifying whole classes of individuals to be non-reproductive from birth. What we’ve done is define divisions of labor according to class, status, and wealth. From the very beginnings of human civilization, we practiced slave labor. In recent history, chattel slavery has been outlawed universally, but that hasn’t stopped us from promoting a kind of *de facto* slavery among groups that are categorically disenfranchised or disrespected within society.

Despite these differences, numerous similarities between “civilized” human societies and certain insect colonies remain striking. The problem I see is that what works well for insects is often not so wonderful for human beings,

presumably because our biological evolution (the hard-wiring of our DNA) differs in certain fundamental ways from that of insects.

Unlike insects, whose function and fulfillment can occur regardless of the number of individual members within a society, colony, or "hive," human programming allows us to function well only within the limited social context of relatively small groups. Anthropologists suggest that we are designed to operate in "kinship" bands — groups of 50-150 total human members, with 75 often cited as an optimal number. When we live, work, or participate in groups much larger than that, both our performance and our understanding suffer.

Perhaps this difference between insects and human beings has to do with the role and meaning of individuality in our lives. Apparently, insects are "individual" only in the most mechanical sense, as functional parts within the larger whole of the "hive mind." Unlike the Jungian notion of "individualization" that carries the positive implication of mature consciousness for a human being, individual insects are not designed to evolve beyond their roles in the collective colony. They are not supposed to separate from the hive and cannot do so.

The idea of a hive mind was popularized in 20th-century American culture by the Star Trek television franchise, which I would define less as "science fiction" and more as a "space western." The hive-mind element the Star Trek writers came up with was *The Borg*, a race of cybernetic beings who appeared frequently on the series as recurring antagonists to Star Trek's human heroes. The "hive mind" of the Borg was called "The Collective," whose intention was to assimilate all knowledge, consciousness, and individuality into a single God-like and perfect entity. Individuals within the Borg were referred to as "drones," which is roughly analogous to the castes of workers and soldiers in earthly ant colonies. The Borg's catch-phrase, popularized by the show into a cultural meme, was "Resistance is Futile."

Those on the political right — Conservatives and Libertarians — tend to characterize all leftist political systems as Borg-like, and thus evil. Socialism, Communism, and Marxism are seen as completely and utterly opposed to any and all individuality. In a world reduced to absolute black-and-white, such a characterization may make sense, but it doesn't in my more gray-scale world. I see left and right politically or culturally not as innately good or evil, but instead as paradoxical but mutually necessary elements within the duality of individuality and collectivity. They seem contradictory but are not. As in other similar dualities — for example, day/night, summer/winter, or masculine/feminine — the ratio of either to its apparent opposite may morph and change, but neither of the pure elements can ever exist by itself. Nor can it eradicate its opposite. They co-exist.

The case has been made by some that the increasing and bitter polarization of the political Left and Right over recent decades is false flag propaganda, a manipulative distraction to keep Americans from focusing on the real struggle in America, namely, the class warfare between the economically well-off versus the not-so-well-off, i.e., the rich versus everyone else. I go back and forth with that argument, sometimes buying it and other times not.

What I do believe without question, however, is that our misguided hatred for one another is an unhappy result of the fact that most of us are strangers.

Many downsides exist in small, relatively rural village life: small-mindedness, gossip, and mistrust of outsiders among them. The upsides of rural village life (and there are many) emerge from what I asserted earlier in this commentary — that human beings are biologically programmed to achieve our greatest intimacy and maximize our social competence within small kinship bands of about 75 people. Fewer and fewer of us are born into such circumstances. Although large multi-generational families of origin still play a vital role for some people, these stabilizing familial situations are increasingly dwarfed and usually overwhelmed by the invasive impact of mass culture and social media.

Stated bluntly, there are too many of us.

That idea has become controversial. Back in 1968, publication of Stanford professor Paul Ehrlich's book, *The Population Bomb*, both sparked and reflected widespread social agreement about the earth's limited carrying capacity and the potential ecological devastation of too many humans living at once on the planet. Today, however, many "experts" argue that Ehrlich has been proven wrong, and that humanity needs *more* people rather than fewer. Their arguments are made, I think, mainly from an economic perspective, which I take to be astonishingly narrow and tragically misguided.

For purposes of this commentary, my belief that there are too many of us is psychological, spiritual, and poetic rather than scientific or economic. I come to this as the cultural luddite that I've been for most of my life. I worry about our spectacular "success" as a species (fearing that it presages our sudden downfall, which I believe to be happening now) Although I'm a creature of my times — I spend most of my day in front of one of the eight Macs and five iPhones I own — I'm scared to death about the overwhelm of our out-of-control technological "progress." I don't regard algorithms as my friends, and the acceleration of Artificial Intelligence that's now akin to a rampaging tidal wave takes my breath away, and obviously not in a good way.

Mostly, however, I worry about our sanity, or rather the lack of it. Humans have always been crazy. We get lost inside these big brains we have (or that have us), losing both our minds and our hearts all too easily. We succumb to madness. It's always been that way, even in the best of times, and it's more and more that way as civilization barrels down the tracks like a runaway train. Collapse is underway, and we're not handling it well. The prospects for our achieving anything close to collective sanity seem to me ever more remote and unlikely.

My hope for all the people I love is that they might be lucky enough to find shelter from this terrible storm, so that they are able to protect and foster their maturity as sane and wise human beings.