

Left and Right are Increasingly Irrelevant

by Bill Herbst

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In last week's commentary, entitled "Too Many Strangers," I wrote about the similarities and differences between human society and ant colonies or beehives. One of the most significant differences between humans and insects is that humans seem to be programmed to grapple with the paradox of individuality versus collectivity, while insects do not, at least not in any way we can perceive.

This paradox — that life can be simultaneously both individual and collective (and is for humans) — lies at the heart of various social and economic systems in human civilization that tend to be categorized as Left or Right. Systems based on personal ownership, such as feudalism, capitalism, and libertarianism, lean very strongly toward the individual and what we think of as the Right. Systems such as socialism and communism lean the other direction, toward the collective, which we characterize as Left. Totalitarian fascism occupies an odd middle ground that can include elements of both the individualistic and coercively collective.

Taken to the extreme, both sides of the individual/collective paradox become monstrous and inhumane. The downside to philosophical collectivity is in forced conformity and the sacrifice (really, the denial or eradication) of individual dignity. In the extreme, collectivist systems — communism and socialism — become something akin to the Star Trek *Borg* — a ruthless collective hive mind that brooks no deviation from a singular perspective and thus enforces total and coercive conformity. While that would simplify life in the direction that ant colonies and beehives seem to have taken successfully, I don't find it attractive for humanity and believe that most people would agree with me. We humans have a very hard time giving up our ideals of fully-realized personhood through what we think of as "individual freedom." The famous psychologist Carl Jung even went so far as to label his concept of full human maturity as "true individuation."

Philosophical individuality has its downsides also, although in America, one is not likely to be exposed to or hear about those inherent problems nearly as much as the objections to collective systems. Cheerleaders for capitalism don't admit to fostering an inordinate competitiveness (rather than cooperativeness) within

society. But yes, capitalism is indeed based on the idea that competition is both more natural than cooperation and also superior to it. In this it reflects a gender-based bias toward the masculine and away from the feminine.

These days people get bent out of shape if someone seems to “change teams.” To be seen as shifting allegiances is considered sinful. If you are supposedly on the Left and do or say something that could be interpreted as identifying with the Right, you open yourself to immediate excoriation in social media. The Twittersphere will light up with hateful calumny. The same can occur in the other direction with equally brutal reactions. Both Left and Right are now seen by their adherents as near-religious righteous causes, and apparent betrayal is traitorous — a hanging offense. And the lynch mobs don’t wait for a trial.

While I personally regard most of what I read, hear, and see coming from the Right as silliness, I’m also no fan of much of what comes from the Left.

For me, the issue isn’t ideology, but rather psychology. Left and Right are no longer particularly meaningful to me. They co-exist and are endlessly and paradoxically intertwined, like a perverse game of Twister. In the same way that individuality can never defeat or eradicate collectivity, so Left and Right are in a never-ending flux, the dance of the Tao.

What matters to me isn’t Left or Right, but Sane or Crazy. That’s where the rubber meets the road. And I fear that America is getting crazier by the month. On the one hand, I consider that a shame, but on the other hand, I wonder if the die hasn’t already been cast, so that our descent into insanity is now inevitable.

We are coming apart at the seams. We haven’t hit bottom yet, of course. We’re still a long way from that. That might take awhile or it might not, since the distance could conceivably be traversed in a relatively short time. All that would be required to speed up collapse are the right sequence of triggers.

Most of us are merely observers. We have effectively no say at all about how the country’s future will unfold. But then, those who are supposedly in charge probably aren’t in control. They may think they are, but I doubt it.

Something else is calling the shots. I don’t know what to call that something — fate, destiny, chance, the Gods. This may be another of those times in history when myth, poetry, and story-telling are better descriptions of reality than reason or facts.