INDIVOLLECTIVITY

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For most of human history, individuals and communities have lived in 'one present' and looked forward to 'one future', defined by one set of technologies. For most of human history, technological change was rare, slow, and the social and environmental consequences almost unnoticed. During most of this time, people lived and thought collectively in small face-to-face groups, not separately and individually. There was no concept of 'privacy' or 'my individual rights'. Some Greek and Roman philosophers eventually conceived of the ideas, but the overwhelming majority of humans neither imagined nor experienced privacy or individual moral freedom. Indeed, the social value and impact of the Greek and Roman philosophers was near zero until they were rediscovered in the late middle ages. Community-focused life dominated until the scientific-industrial revolution and events leading up to it (the Reformation, Renaissance, and Enlightenment) when people began using technologies that gave them first the experience and then the idea of individualism and individual freedom while rediscovering/inventing texts that explained and justified their experiences.

From the middle of the seventeenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, modern societies were increasingly dominated by individualising technologies, spurred by the printing press and culminating with the automobile and the telephone. During that period, each new technology seemed to free the individual from the confining traditions and bonds of the community, eventually creating free individuals each with their own unique sense of self and their future—their personal values and beliefs – (give me liberty or give me death; its my way or the highway) leading to the opportunities, ideologies, triumphs, and disasters characteristic of modern times.

From the mid 1950s, however, new technologies emerged that tended once again to collectivise, though often at a global level and certainly in conflict with values and institutions based on earlier, local, collectivising technologies. The first of these new collectivising technologies was television (creating what Canadian philosopher and public intellectual, Marshall McLuhan, called 'the global village'); the second was the personal computer when global networking began and expert authority died; and the third are the currently popular social media and the emerging hive mind (or, Noosphere, as French philosopher and Jesuit Priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, anticipatorily named it).

Something else unique also began to occur during early modernity, still accelerating today: technological and social change became so rapid that individuals and communities were caught for the first time in a whirlpool of conflicting technologies, values, and institutions, some of which were obsolete and vanishing, some were old and fading, some were current and thriving, others were new and emerging, and others still vividly imagined but not yet achieved. Until 150 or so years ago, everyone in a community used and were influenced by the same technologies. Not now.

At the present time, oldest age-cohorts live by vanishing and fading technologies, values, and institutions; middle age-cohorts by fading and thriving technologies, values, and institutions; while younger cohorts embrace emerging and imagined technologies. Nonetheless, each cohort, individual, and the community as a whole is possessed in some measure by all levels. This is new to human experience - each age-cohort living in substantially different worlds but at the same time and place with other cohorts. Intergenerational communication and easy understanding is difficult. Cultural chaos reigns in every part of the world.

Agricultural – indeed, pastoral – era metaphors, institutions, and values still persist. With the printing press as the iconic technology and, in the West, The Bible that the press liberated from the Church as the iconic text, we still say God is a king, with heaven ('above') and Earth ('below') as his kingdom while we are his subjects with no rights or will of our own. God is our Shepherd and we are His ignorant and wilful sheep in need of protection. Similar nomadic and/or agricultural myths and metaphors exist in every culture in the world.

Another very clear example of how the rhythms of long-dead agricultural societies still control us today is found in many school and legislative calendars and holidays worldwide. Both learning and legislating are still often part-time activities, originally happening in the Northern Hemisphere during the late fall and winter when the crops are in, to allow their participants to go home to help plant and reap from late spring to early fall. This once-sensible practice now makes no sense at all in the industrial or informational world, and yet seems impossible to change until all agricultural images finally die. Even though we live in a global world in many ways, we still retain local loyalties in sports, and admire, if not emulate, values of small communities depicted in TV shows and advertisements. Now, with the rise of Trump and other hyper-nationalists around the world, tribalism is challenging globalism as the dominant perspective once again.

For the most part, transportation technologies defined and dominated the industrial era, producing first the railroad, then the automobile, then the aeroplane, creating both the city with its suburbs and the (often continental) nation as its iconic institutions. The automobile, for the first time enabling true auto-mobility, was the iconic technology. Nothing provoked the sense of individualism, freedom, personal identity, and social irresponsibility more than the automobile. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that the fall of communism began when private individuals in communist countries were allowed to own automobiles instead of keeping them herded on mass transit.

The allure and power of the automobile is still extraordinary. Everywhere it spreads throughout the world, it transforms stable, obedient, community-focused peasants and workers into roaming, pleasure-seeking, death-provoking adolescents of all ages. Commuting, 'rush hour' traffic jams, horrendous deaths and injuries, environmental pollution, and oil wars are its side-effects, in spite of which the attraction of personal identity through sports car/SUV automobility is far too strong to allow telework to end commuting, or for other forms of transport, especially bicycles and walking, to end pollution and oil wars. The emergence of self-driving cars can only spur free-spirited individuality-- until the oceans rise and the oil runs out.

As individualising transportation technologies shaped industrial societies, so also do collectivising communication technologies define information societies. First movies and then television were the initial icons, followed by personal computers and the Internet, and now social media. Major social consequences of these technologies include the focus of life becoming advertising-fuelled 'shop till you drop', along with the mania of tirelessly working 24/7 at meaningless networked jobs in order to impress your fellow workers and your boss; the end of the human expert/authority and the rise of personal and peer facts and fantasies; and the dominance of entertainment, 'fake news', games, professional sports, and of virtuality over 'reality' in general.

Demographically, more and more adults in information societies everywhere are 'only children' now living seemingly alone with no children, spouses, or roommates of their own, but actually interacting with myriad other humans and (predominantly) smart machines via an ever-changing array of multitasking communication technologies, surrounded by the decaying remnants of take-away food. This novel form of individuality and community may continue to evolve as long as new electronic and molecular communication technologies continue to be produced and acquired.

The next step already underway is to lose the confining, stationary, built environment – the solitary room, apartment, house – and live in light, sturdy, mobile, self-sufficient, adaptable cocoons like the cushicle envisioned by the avant-garde architectural Archigram group many years ago: a kind of personal backpack with all of one's necessities in it that can be unfolded and joined with other cushicles whenever group interaction is sought, and then (after tidying up the common environment) folded back into one's personal backpack again.

The new nationalism sweeping the globe now is often seen as a revival of 'blood and soil' patriotism of the old industrial days, and many people may promote and strive for that. But at the same time, the forces of individualising-collectivising social media seem to provoking something different and perhaps new – indivollectivity.