

THE INDIVIDUAL IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

I'm on the road, it's been raining in Paris, time for something new. I've been posting here for a long time, this is number 334, and almost all of them have been about some aspect of our national life. Lately I've been thinking about what it means to be an individual person in contemporary US society.

Vignettes

Should we define ourselves in terms of our work lives?

1. Neoliberals talk about homo economicus. Humans are rational agents competing against each other for necessary resources and desired objects.
2. This is from a 2019 article in Scientific American, *How the Brain Reads Faces* by Doris Y. Tsao, a professor at Berkeley.



I believe at each stage in life one has a duty. And the duty of a college student is to dream, to find the thing that captures one's heart and seems worth devoting a whole life to. Indeed, this is the single most important step in science: to find the right problem.

3. Dr. Tsao's view isn't reserved for college professors. I recently sat in the Cloisters of San Marco in Florence, an open courtyard surrounded on four sides by a slope-roofed portico, supported by arches on pillars of pietra serena topped with Ionic capitals. It is a quiet space. Tourists seem muted as they pass through. It was designed by Michelozzo in the mid-15th C., but I was thinking about the builders, the working men who carved out the

pillars and the capitals, built the arches, coated them with plaster, and whitewashed them.

Maybe they felt like the Kentucky coal miners described in the book *Stolen Pride* by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild. Here's an excerpt from a book review; the quotes seem to be from the author.

For more than a century, eastern Kentucky was one of the centers of the American coal industry. Though back-breaking and sometimes deadly for its workers, the sector employed thousands of people, lifted many out of poverty, and brought railways and other infrastructure into the region. Men took pride in their work, which required courage and knowhow, and the people of the region were proud that their coal fueled America.

"[People could] proudly say, 'We kept the lights on in this country; we won world war one, world war two by digging coal,' and the coalminer was kind of like a decorated soldier – he faced danger. Many died young, of black lung. But it was like a trade passed down from generation to generation for men, and then suddenly it was cut off."

Should we look for something sciencey?

The is from *Possession* by A.S. Byatt; this part of the story is set in the mid 1980s.

Roland had learned to see himself, theoretically, as a crossing-place for a number of systems, all loosely connected. He had been trained to see his idea of his "self" as an illusion, to be replaced by a discontinuous machinery and electrical message-network of various desires, ideological beliefs and responses, language-forms and hormones and pheromones. Mostly he liked this. He had no desire for any strenuous

Should we be looking for meaning?

1. From the Baltimore Catechism. It's slightly different from my memory from St. Joseph's Grade School.

2. Q. Who is God?

A. God is the Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things.

3. Q. What is man?

A. Man is a creature composed of body and soul, and made to the image and likeness of God.

6. Q. Why did God make you?

A. God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in heaven.

2. This is from *The Myth Of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus. It was, as I recall, the first serious philosophy book I ever read. My mother gave it to me when I was 16, and I have thought about it ever since. We all know the myth, at least the part about the punishment meted out to Sisyphus, which is the subject of this essay. This is the concluding paragraph of Camus' essay:

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. P. 78.

So what?

None of my vignettes involve any of the conditions under which we humans evolved. None of them deals directly with food, clothing, and shelter, the requirements of survival. None of them takes up the question of the relations between and among people. Admittedly I was only looking for pieces about individuals, but that was easy, because there is little in our literature related to human solidarity.

There's something else missing. Here's a bit more about Roland from *Possession*. He is a barely employed researcher into the life of a fictional Victorian poet, Henry Randolph Ash. He's uncovered a previously unknown connection with the poet Cristabel LaMotte. He shared this discovery with Maud, an expert in LaMotte and in feminist theory. Byatt writes:

He thought ... of Maud's faintly contemptuous look at their first meeting. ... [T]here was little real connection between them. Maud was a beautiful woman such as he had no claim to possess. She had a secure job and an international reputation. Moreover, in some dark and outdated English social system of class, which he did not believe in, but felt obscurely working and gripping him, Maud was County, and he was urban lower-middle-class, in some places more, in some places less acceptable than Maud, but in almost all incompatible. All that was the plot of a Romance. He was in a Romance, a vulgar and a high Romance simultaneously; a Romance was one of the systems that controlled him, as the expectations of Romance control almost everyone in the Western world, for better or worse, at some point or another. P. 459-60.

Are we all caught up in systems that control us?
Is that what it means to be an individual? I am
nothing more than a crossing-place of a number

of externally generatedJ systems that control me? It doesn't feel like that, but

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The front page pic is a detail from The Expulsion From The Garden Of Eden by Masaccio in the Brancacci Chapel of Santa Maria Del Carmine in Florence, Italy. It was painted about 1425. Source.