

An Evolutionary View of Individuality

by Garry Jacobs

Humanity is in the process of evolving from collective uniformity to increasing individual variation and diversity. This movement has gained impetus from the growing recognition that the overall strength and sustainability of the collective is proportionate to the value it accords to each individual human being and the active support it lends for full development of each individual's unique, creative potentials.

The relationship between the individual and the social collective is a crucial determinant of social development. The two are microcosm and macrocosm of one integrated whole which we call Society. The collective initiates social change through the actions of pioneering individuals – thinkers, artists, inventors, explorers, entrepreneurs, innovators – who give expression to the collective's unrealized aspirations, unformed conceptions and unexpressed initiatives. Formed individuals seek to fulfill higher aspirations, express new conceptions and initiate new actions which are eventually accepted, imitated, organized and assimilated into the subconscious of the collective.

As humanity evolved from its animal ancestors in pre-history, Society emerged as an amorphous mass struggling to consolidate itself into a single viable, integrated entity. Once it succeeded in molding itself into a unified entity, it refused to tolerate divergent behavior among its members which might jeopardize that integrity. Even harmless attempts at variation were prohibited. Thus, gradually the collective emerged with a unified identity.

Beyond this stage of assured survival of the social collective, society has evolved subconsciously, by which I mean its development has occurred by sporadic, spontaneous and uncontrolled variation rather than by the conscious, concerted, organized and coordinated effort of the social collective. Survival being the main objective, once it was assured, other activities were allowed to emerge and spread within strict limits but without conscious direction by the collective.

During this latter phase, the accumulated subconscious experience of society leads to the acquisition of collective knowledge, but it remains unnoticed or unformulated and is not made conscious or explicit by the collective until it becomes conscious knowledge and is given conscious expression by one or a few members of the collective, such as the visionary individuals who first conceived and gave expression to the idea of a United States of America or the CERN scientist who gave expression to the potentials for a global information system based on hypertext, i.e. the Internet. Neither of these events sprang out of nowhere. Both were being prepared for by the cumulative collective experience, but realization of their potential required them to be given expression by a conscious representative of that collective.

When society reaches the requisite stage of maturity, it waits for a representative member to emerge as a pioneer. If the collective is sufficiently prepared, society supports the pioneer's initiative. The military leader, entrepreneur, social innovator are some expressions of this principle. Should the individual emerge ahead of his time, society ignores, resists or crushes him. The emergence of several pioneers helps the society convert its subconscious knowledge into a conscious possession.

The pioneer, leader, entrepreneur, genius and all its other versions are various expressions of a common principle, the Individual who consciously embodies in himself all that the society has developed subconsciously. Each does it in his own unique way, formulating his thoughts as a

strategy for action, but carrying with it in its substratum the substantial strength of the social collective from which the original inspiration has emerged. Such a thought-strategy has the potential to express itself in terms relevant to each specific field. *As a TV broadcast reaches a wide audience, the actions of a representative pioneering individual ripple outwards to reach the whole society.*

Europe rebelled against the stifling social structure of the Middle Ages to develop Mind and mental individuality of thought in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom, but it was not able to fully translate the mental freedom into action because of the pressure for social conformity to religious, class and political structures. The ideas born in Europe took root and sprouted in the New World where a vast unsettled territory, the absence of established tradition and formal social structures made it possible for new ideas to express freely in innovative activities. Thus, *individuality of thought born of intellectual freedom in Europe evolved into individuality of action born of physical freedom in America.*

The evolution of individuality remains incomplete. At the level of society, convention and conformity stifle individual freedom and creativity. Scientists hesitate to express ideas that have been rejected by their peers. Political leaders eschew new ideas in catering to the unenlightened and misguided self-interest of the electorate. Detroit's carmakers compete to produce the car of yesterday for the world of tomorrow. The need today is for individuality of social action with the creative capacity to fashion more positive human relationships. It can be aided by mental individuals who give voice to the ideas that will guide social development in the future, such as global financial management, full employment, new economic theory, the abolition of nuclear weapons, the end of competitive security paradigms, democratization of the UN and global action on the environment.