

Zeeshan Mahmud

May 9th 2006

Triumvirs versus Troika: The Debate for the Individual

Attitudes towards the individual's pursuits and growth vary in degrees, intensity and directions depending on where you are in the world. In addition to that, the hypothetically geometric distance between the individual and the trinity of family, friends and community is also of significance. One can only be objective if one has indulged at the extreme poles of cultures. Simply put, the individual's growth and pursuits are discouraged in some cultures and encouraged in others, and objectivity comes from marriage and eventual divorce with both. As a general note, the prevailing approach to the individual in this country is far more encouraging than found in other countries. In collective societies, the approach is contrary. The United States and several other western countries are individualistic societies, and the eastern countries in Asia, as well as nations in South America, are collectivistic societies.

To draw a circle, one begins anywhere. Objectively speaking, the influence of friends, family and community are a blend of both positive and negative. While the triad of family, friends and community can have a nurturing and encouraging effect on people, the level of their involvement is directly proportionate to the effects. The highest involvement will not inspire individuals but followers. Communities are bound together on a number of rules and operate on a basic set of assumptions. Interestingly, the larger the community the more stringent the game rules. It ties into the liberality of the community, families, and friends. When armed with a conservative attitude, the three can be a triumvirate, literally meaning three administrators, who

will impede individuals until they are brought to their ethical, moral and intellectual standards. When freethinking, they can be a troika, literally meaning three horses drawing the carriage forth, and one can assume that the individual is the carriage. The individual understands community and friends as extensions of family. Communities bound by ethnicity arrogantly prioritize things for their members by placing those outside it as the out-group who may not necessarily be a hostile enemy. Thus a pecking order is established, which only polarizes ethnicities. Communities then, quite like nations, become great dividers and in most cases establish in extreme cases the discrepancies in the value of human lives. An example of this would be emphasis placed here on the loss of American life versus the loss of Iraqi civilian life. Division would seem inevitable in people and individuals, but not all individuals are egoists, and communities in some way are, as they always serve the larger ego, the collective self.

Persian Sufi poet Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi is presumably referring to the individual when he says, "If the foot of the trees were not tied to earth, they would be pursuing me... For I have blossomed so much, I am the envy of the gardens" (Divan 1740:3). Rumi's idea of blossoming treats the individual like a flower that blossoms, which can of course only occur in the right conditions. The right conditions for the individual must come from fostering independence, which is vital to the individual. Friends and family play a crucial role in the germination of the individual, though the departure towards true individuality can only happen when friends and family clear paths. The individual on some level understands that the inescapable relation to external forces and the management of external resources is essential to the pursuit of his/her own needs. Friends, family, and community depending, on their altitudes of liberality, can then be either external oppositional force or oppositional resource.

There are not a lot of positives for individuals to harvest from when the triumvirs (again, one must think administrators instead of horses acting in concert for the carriage's progress) come into influential proximity, as generally there is hardly any individualism for the person to attain when that happens. People can only mature into individuals when independence is either awarded them from a young age slowly graduating into a total autonomy, or if they reject all external forces to mature into intellectually autonomous organisms.

In my experience, I became a Muslim simply because my family was Muslim. My former country was and remains 98% Muslim, meaning all my friends were Muslims. The society then equated community. Islam frowns upon, if not outrightly condemns, friendships and relations with non-Muslims, specifically Jews, Hindus and Atheists depending on how you interpret the texts. Even then there were hardly any non-Muslims to pick friends out of. The political and social landscape was totally eclipsed by Islam and the constitution, drawn from Islamic law, and it was generally thought that the near complete lack of activist judges meant non-Islamic laws would be ignored. I had questions about the dogma as early as eight, but the voices of the triumvirs were so loud and harsh that I was forced into silence. Even my mind could not privately pursue metaphysical questions independently or any diversions from the holy text. Any individual interpretation of the text was unacceptable and was constantly discouraged. "You are not a scholar and therefore too stupid to interpret the Quran!" were words I heard to one ruthless effect or another innumerable times.

Individuals attempt to maintain intellectual vacuums. Collective societies (Pakistan remains one) not only disallow the existence of these, but they also actively ward off individuals by claiming they suffer from the disease of philosophy. If it wasn't my family that policed the regularity of my praying and their idea of stringent moral and social standards, my friends,

school, and just about everyone would. Any controversial questions raised towards the triumvirs could lead into violence depending on the level of one's resistance towards the "correct" answer and the impertinence of the question, despite its validity. In essence it would forever have been impossible for me to pursue a spiritual and intellectual journey without being rejected by all, presuming I did not submit to beatings, threats of homelessness, unemployment and so on.

This snapshot of the influence of friends, family, and community could be criticized as being far too extreme. But this is not an aberration of the triumvirate but a pure expression of how the individual cannot peacefully co-exist with them. In collective cultures, there is nothing positive to be said about the threesome. Alignment of mentalities and goals is absolutely necessary in collectives, but in individualistic societies alignment is not crucial and the individual can exist and more often than not, quite peacefully.

Comprehensively it can be said that if one happens to be geographically and politically fortunate to be immediate to noninterventionist troikas, the positives are several. They include a higher chance of personal and social satisfaction as well as higher rates of intellectual and emotional evolution. And that is specifically what individualism is all about.

Alternatively if one is not quite so geographically and politically privileged to be born into an interventionist triumvirate, the negatives are several. They on the other hand include hive mind, meaningless have-nots, and higher chance of personal dissatisfaction, not to mention lower rates of any sort of evolution.

What the individualistic and collective cultures share in common is their nurturing, which is not quite so dissimilar. The individualistic society nurtures independence and creates individuals while the collective nurtures dependence and destroys individuals. So ironically enough, the individual's pursuits incidentally are more strongly determined in most cases by

nurture instead of nature. If one needs proof, one need only look as far as religious institutions, countries, and families, and the rates of blatant attrition within them. The individual is always at the heart of two wars. One he fights with other individuals for their freedom, while the other is waged on him by the triumvirate. Alone against all.