

# **The hyper-specialization of labor stifles freedom**

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I maintain that as modern organized societies are presently constituted, people who live in them suffer from a severe shortage of personal freedom. Further, I think it is very probable that individual liberty will gradually disappear completely and permanently.

I begin by explaining my first assertion. I am inclined to think that the kinds of freedom most commonly spoken of and taught in schools (vis, freedom of speech, of the press, of religion, the right to vote, and to have a fair trial, etc.) are more secure now than they ever were (in the English-speaking countries, at least). In fact, there seems to be in progress a renaissance of concern for these liberties. These kinds of freedom are important, but they are important primarily as means to an end; that is, we need them in order to defend our personal liberty. *In themselves*, they have very little direct influence on our everyday lives; for example, the average citizen in his entire lifetime never *needs* a fair trial, and he spends very little time discussing politics. His daily life would be changed very little if he had to refrain from criticizing the government or questioning the established religion.

In my opinion, then, it is not the possession of freedom of speech, religion, etc. which constitutes personal freedom. The *important* aspect of personal freedom is the ability to direct the course of one's own life, to influence the major events of that life, and to determine the texture of one's daily existence. This kind of freedom we don't have. There are a limited number of slots in society into which everyone must fit. Within the limits of our individual abilities, we are more or less free to choose our own slots, but once a slot is chosen, it is extremely difficult to move to another slot. Moreover, seen from what we may call the outsider's viewpoint, the slots present a depressingly limited variety of alternatives. Take me as an example. It took me 9 years of training to become a mathematician. Suppose I wanted to do something else for a living. If I wanted to switch to another area of science, I would need several more years of training. Moreover, I wouldn't really be changing slots. As a chemist, for example, I would still be living the same kind of life; only the details of my work would be different. The same objections hold with regard to other fields requiring a large amount of technical training. If I wanted to go into business, there would be 2 main possibilities: a position in a corporation, or a business of my own. I would not be likely to get a position in a corporation because I don't have the kind of past record they like (for example, no extracurricular activities in college); furthermore, I wouldn't want such a job because a large amount of social conformity is usually required. As for starting my own business, it would take years for me to save enough capital to do so, and I would have an excellent chance of losing it all. Everybody knows that small business is on the way out nowadays. The other possibilities are unskilled work or work requiring only a limited amount of technical training. In either of these cases, one is condemned to doing extremely boring, routine work, offering no real challenges. Moreover, unskilled work is on the way out because of automation and within a few decades (at most) jobs requiring only a limited amount of technical training will begin to disappear too. In any case, I would have difficulty getting work of that kind because I would be regarded as "overqualified" (That's a euphemism that means they think you're too educated to get

along with your comparatively ignorant fellow-workers), and my leaving a high-prestige field for a menial job would be considered highly suspicious. Not only is it difficult to change slots, but one's original choice of a slot may not be as free as it seems at first glance. Presumably a sort of law of supply and demand governs the number of positions open in any given field; also see the selective service memo quoted on p.16 of these notes. Almost any job outside the academic field requires subservience to an eight-hour-a-day, five-day-a-week schedule. Any pre-agricultural savage would regard this as degrading slavery. In fact, I have read that some of the Indians stated this quite explicitly when the white people tried to force them to give up their nomadic ways and take up agriculture. The pygmies of Africa have expressed a similar attitude, if my memory serves me. See a book called "people of the forest" or something like that, by some anthropologist whose name I don't remember. In any job, most of the important decisions are made by one's superiors, and even the minor ones have to conform to the policies they set. In short, while the employee follows orders, the preagricultural savage is in business for himself. Some smart-aleck anthropologist is going to pop up now and claim that the preagricultural savage is so bound by tribal taboos and customs that he really is no more free, or even less free, than a modern factory workers. For all I know, this may very possibly be true. I am certainly no upholder of "tribal customs", and I do not necessarily advocate a return to the stone age. What I am trying to point out is that a man who makes his own living with his own hands from scratch has (if he is free from restrictions of *social origin*) a kind of freedom that a gear in the modern social machine never dreams of.

[A digression: (I want to make it clear that, whether I am right or wrong in this digression, the point is in no way essential to my argument.) It is open to dispute whether the tribal customs of primitives restrict freedom as much as may be claimed: Did the Indians, for example, really have as many taboos to obey as we do? If some of their taboos seem unreasonable to us, probably many more of our taboos would have seemed unreasonable to them. Another point: My limited knowledge of anthropology suggests to me that among many pre-agricultured savages, the only punishment for deviation from tribal customs was expulsion from the tribe for a certain period of time. If my memory serves me, this was the only punishment inflicted by the tribe for even murder among some (or all?) of the plains Indians. (Personal revenge by the relatives of the deceased might be something else again.) Since pre-agricultural savages are capable of living off the country alone (though they have less security that way) the individual who had a strong dislike for some custom or social restriction could simply separate himself from the tribe. In practice, I gather, this seldom happened. But I cite the case of John D. Hunter, as recorded in his extraordinary book "Manners and Customs of Several Indian Tribes" (... originally published about 1828.) Hunter was a white who was captured by Indians at a very early age, was raised as an Indian, regarded himself as an Indian, and apparently remembered little or nothing preceding his capture by the Indians. At the age of 19 or 20, Hunter had a falling-out with the Indians and went to live all alone. I quote

“the time and labor necessary to procure food for myself was very inconsiderable ... Not withstanding this solitude, many sources of amusement presented themselves to me, especially after I had become somewhat familiarized to it ... I ... took great pleasure in regarding the dispositions and habits of such animals, as were presented to my observations ... the conflicts of the male buffalos and deer, the attack of the latter on the rattlesnake, the industry and ingenuity of the beaver in constructing its dam, etc., and the attacks of the panther on its prey, afforded much interest and engrossed much time. Indeed, I have lain for half a day at a time in the shade to witness the management of the ants ... the manoeuvrers of the spider ... I became satisfied with the loneliness of my situation, could like down to sleep among the rocks, ... and almost feel the venomous reptiles seeking shelter and repose under my robe, with sensations bordering on indifference.”

Let this also serve as an answer to those who will claim that the preagricultural savage is a slave to the vagaries of nature and that his life is always one of unremitting toil and terrific hardship — though perhaps it would seem so to us, because we have been brought up to be abnormally soft and flabby. Remember also in this connection that the preagricultural savages who survived long enough to be studied by anthropologists were the ones who occupied the most inhospitable regions — because all the land that was half-way good was taken by more advanced peoples. So the preagricultural savages that we hear about are mostly those who had the hardest lives. End of digression.]

To get back to my subject, in this society, whether one lives or dies is not one's own responsibility. The *important* things in life are all taken care of by society. You won't go hungry even if you don't work, because some welfare agency will feed you. If you get sick, you're in the doctor's hands. The risks and rewards of life are all dealt with by society and cannot be combatted by the individual *except insofar as he does so by simply following orders*. All you can do to prolong your life is: obey traffic laws; eat what the doctors say is good for you; obey orders on the job; etc. None of the decisions you make that require any initiative or intelligence have much chance of preserving your life. They may affect, for example, your financial status, but that is primarily a matter of prestige rather than of physical safety or even comfort.

The whole texture of life is determined by society. Consider all the evils that are imposed on the individual by the system. To mention a few: air and water pollution; the threat of atomic war; overcrowding and traffic congestion; noise; bureaucratic red tape; the draft; destruction of the wilderness; the omnipresence of vulgar, intrusive, manipulative advertising; etc...Furthermore, the individual living independently can at least reasonably attempt to alleviate his hardships. If he is cold he can make a fire or build a better hut. If game gets scarce he can try, at least, to find an area where it is more plentiful. His decisions *count*; he is not *helpless*. But what can the *individual* do about air pollution or overpopulation? Sure, we can complain about it,

because we have freedom of speech. We can yak about it all we want, but looking at it realistically, we have to admit that it is a very rare *individual* who manages through his own *personal* efforts to even create a significant change in a public matter of this kind. The most we can do is contribute what we can to the cause, knowing that what *we personally* do is trivial and insignificant. The point I am trying to make here is that the *important* things in an individual's life are mainly under the control of large organizations; the individual is helpless to influence them.

And consider all the innumerable restrictions that are necessitated by the complex structure of civilization — restrictions that people are so accustomed to that they don't even think of them as limitations on their freedom. Some examples: I like to take long walks. On these walks I can't take a piss when I want to. I can't sit down if I get tired, lest people think I'm a bum. I am restricted to walking in certain permitted areas, *viz*, the sidewalks; most of the land area is taken up by private property or by streets filled with cars. In the woods, if you see a little glade that attracts you, you can turn aside and explore it, but in the city you can't stray from the sidewalks. I often have to stop for traffic lights, which gets irksome if there are a lot of them. I have on several occasions been stopped by cops and questioned as a suspicious character, apparently for being out too early or for walking where there is no sidewalk or in the rain. Busy thoroughfares are so numerous that it is difficult to avoid these [CROSSED OUT: messy] [ADDED later: noisy], smelly places. If I want to go to the woods to walk, I have to drive, and the traffic congestion often makes the drive more troublesome than it's worth. Perhaps these restrictions don't worry most people, because most people are too lazy to walk anyway. But here are some more popular activities that are subject to restrictions: For city dwellers — hunting is at best a once-a-year vacation activity; fishing is usually hopeless because there are so many fisherman and so few fish; shooting can only be done at a shooting range — and that just isn't any fun compared to shooting at tin cans in the field; because of the restrictive traffic laws that congestion makes necessary, car-driving cannot be considered as a recreational activity; horseback riding is out; so are people who like to keep, say, chickens; sailing is out for most people in Chicago because it's extremely difficult to get a place to moor your boat. "O.K." you say, "so you can't keep a house in the city. Why be so upset about such a little thing?" But it's not any *one* restriction that bothers me — it's the whole pattern of restriction that makes life sterile. About the only activities available, recreational or otherwise, one of the packaged variety — movies, TV, bowling alleys, golf courses, concerts, etc. The individual has little opportunity to determine the structure of his own activities — he has to just choose one of the packages that's offered. Almost every aspect of our lives is hemmed in by restrictions — what clothes we wear on what occasions, what time of day we have to work, etc. See Vance Packard's *Naked Society*. In some passages he describes the problem much more eloquently than I could, though in my opinion his stand is not sufficiently uncompromising.

I have now finished my case for the thesis that liberty in this society today is severely curtailed. I will proceed to explain my assertion that the situation will get worse and that individual liberty eventually will completely disappear forever.

In the first place, of course, there is "progress", as it is commonly called. The more highly organized society becomes, the more necessary it is that individuals fit smoothly into their assigned places in order to keep the machine working. It is commonly said that scientific and technological progress increases man's power over his environment. This is true enough, but the power in most cases can only be exercised by large organizations, because the sophisticated equipment required is usually too expensive to be owned by any ordinary individual; and even in cases where individuals can own the equipment (e.g. automobiles, radio transmitters) its use is generally subject to many restrictions and is dependent on facilities provided by society. Thus this power over the environment is kept under the control of society and can be used only in the ways that society provides for and under the surveillance of society. Technological advances have the effect of increasing the power that large organizations exercise over individuals, of making individuals more dependent on society, and thus of decreasing the power of the individual. Have computers, for example, increased John P. Doe's power over *his* environment? No, but they do help the government to keep a dossier of information about him. How about say, airplanes? Sure, John Doe can fly from New York to Los Angeles (once or twice a year, if he has the money) in a few hours; but his environment in Los Angeles will in its essential aspects be very similar to his environment in New York. It is probably safe to say that an 18<sup>th</sup> century person could find more adventure and variety through travel on foot or horseback than a modern man of average financial resources can find through air travel.

Still more dangerous are scientific advances which make it possible to control people's minds. Scientists have already had great success in controlling animals by means of electrodes inserted in their brains, and these techniques have even been successfully applied to human mental patients. No-one who views the matter objectively can doubt that scientific capabilities in this direction will increase faster and faster, as they do in all other directions. Psychological techniques for manipulating people also are meeting with increasing success. In short, it is obvious that within a few decades, at most, society will have in its hands the capacity to control everybody's minds at will. The question remaining is: will this capacity be used, and, if so, how will it be used?

It seems virtually certain that it *will* be used, and, if it *is* used, it doesn't matter how it is used, because people will be nothing but robots and not humans at all, so who cares what happens to them? The danger that occurs to most people first is that mind-control techniques might be used by cynical, power-hungry, authoritarian personalities to seize control of the country and establish a totalitarian dictatorship along the lines of fascist or communist governments. This kind of thing is probably fairly likely to happen in certain unsophisticated Asian, African, or Latin American countries, and there may be some possibility of its happening in the U.S., but I think it is quite unlikely here. In this country, I think that liberty will be destroyed by

ordinary honest or half-honest people, and that the change will come gradually and smoothly without any disruption of the structure of society. Bureaucrats, psychologists, educators, etc. will want to begin manipulating people's minds "for their own good" or "for the good of society", and no doubt they will honestly believe that these are their true motivations. In part these *will* be their true motivations, but there will be other factors as well; e.g. it will gratify their egos to control people, and it will also make their jobs easier. Quite likely the invasion of liberty will proceed most quickly in the "education" of children and the "rehabilitation of criminals and insane people", and, in fact, the invasion has already been begun by those who attempt to apply psychology in these areas. Mind you, these manipulators don't usually start with some cynical idea that people's minds should be controlled or manipulated; they merely start from the premise that children should be brought up to have "good" values, that they should abhor violence, that they should "relate" to other people, etc.", that criminals should be "cured" and made into "useful members of society", etc. Of course, people have always wanted to educate their children to have such and such values, but as long as the techniques used to direct children into certain channels are naïve and of low effectiveness, there is no loss of liberty. But when psychological and/or physiological techniques become so effective (as they will in the future) that it is possible to reliably endow each child with a specified set of values, then people will no longer be human — they will just be man-made artifacts. Of course, the majority of educators today, including those who presume to concern themselves with the psychology of their words, would probably be repelled by the idea of having children's personalities engineered in detail. But this behavioural engineering will be introduced by little bitty stages, so that nobody will think of objecting to it.

First, perhaps, children's minds will be adjusted so that every single one of them will abhor violence — and how can you argue against that? After all, people who commit crimes of violence *kill* and *maim* people! How can you let this continue to happen just for the sake of some silly sentimental idea that children's personalities should be allowed to grow like Topsy? Next, perhaps, kids will be fixed so as to have a strong motivation to study hard in school. And you can't argue with that, either. How can you allow a child's whole life to be blighted by school failure, just because of some irrational, puritanical idea that educators shouldn't influence his personality? How can you allow those precious intellectual resources to be wasted? Later, kids will be brought up to be more docile, more willing to fit into the place that society assigns to them — and you can't argue with *that* either, because it will present all kinds of tragic maladjustments and psychological problems. And so it will go. More and more aspects of the child's personality will be engineered.

Of course, if they started off fixing kids by some disgusting cold-blooded means like sticking electrodes in their heads or injecting hypnotic drugs into them, people would object. But the means that will be used will simply be highly sophisticated psychological educational techniques, and it will all be done in the name of giving kids "proper values", improving their "mental health", and "helping them relate to other

people". Eventually, once this kind of thing has been accepted and has made people docile enough so that they will accept quite a lot, then the electrodes and chemicals will come into use as being more efficient and effective. Most intellectuals won't object to the gradual introduction of behavioural engineering in education. They *would* object if the kids were engineered into a type they don't like; but if the kids are engineered to be more like *them* (the intellectuals), then they (the intellectuals) won't object. If the kids are fixed so as to have a greater appreciation of arts and sciences, to be more nonviolent, and all that stuff, the intellectuals won't think of it as brainwashing, they'll think of it as progress in education. But once you start manipulating the kids, where will it stop? It won't stop, because somebody will always find a really compelling reason to start engineering just one more little aspect of the kids personalities; just as lawmakers always find a compelling reason to pass one more law. And the reason really *are* compelling, because as society gets more and more complicated, more laws become necessary; and for the same reason, more manipulation of people's personalities will become necessary. It seems people are always willing to give up one more little piece of their freedom in exchange for one more little piece of physical security. [CROSSED OUT: then extinct(?)] Gun control laws are a case in point. Proposals for stricter requirements for drivers licences are another.)

With "rehabilitation" of criminals it will be the same story. No doubt it will start with "rehabilitation" of people convicted of crimes of violence. who, after all, can object to "curing" a murderer of his violent propensities? Then the class of criminals subject to "rehabilitation" will be gradually widened. Eventually, all people will be screened for violent propensities, and those who have them will be subject to compulsory treatment to prevent violent crimes from happening in the first place. And who will object? Would you actually let people be *killed* just because of your irrational reluctance to have your mind investigated? And besides (they will say) only potential criminals will be subject to treatment, and they are "sick" anyhow. But next, perhaps, anyone with erratic propensities of any kind will be treated, because erratic or irresponsible behaviour of any kind can physically endanger people, even if only accidentally. And so forth. Eventually people will be just biochemical machines.

Once this situation has come about it will last *forever*,<sup>(1)</sup> because social turmoil and uncontrolled change will have become impossible. All desire for autonomy will simply be programmed out of people's minds.

One myth that certain wishfully-thinking intellectuals like to believe in is that people of very high intelligence would be necessary to keep society going and that such people would always be rebellious and hard to control. Actually, there is no reason to believe that individualistic tendencies are an *unavoidable* concomitant of high intelligence, even though they may tend on the average to accompany high intelligence

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<sup>(1)</sup> That the situation would last "forever" was certainly too hasty a conclusion. To engineer such a system of society so that it would have a high degree of stability is probably a far more difficult task than I imagined when I wrote those lines.

in our still relatively uncontrolled society. Undoubtedly there exist today many highly intelligent other-directed people. [CROSSED OUT: One point worth noting is that high intelligence and a high degree of hypnotic suggestibility tend to accompany each other.]

Despite the fact that the youthful social and political rebels of today are constantly demanding “freedom”, I don’t think they provide us with much hope. They have always appeared to me to be intolerant and unwilling to look at things from the other person’s point of view. In the unlikely event that they ever gained control of this society, I think they would permit us less freedom than we have now. They too would use mind-control techniques, though they would no doubt use them in a somewhat different way than the present establishment would.

Note: In this little essay I have occasionally made comparisons between modern society and various societies of the past. This is not to be taken to imply that I regard past societies better than the present one. I am not very interested in the past, except in so far as it may be useful for purposes of illustration. My main concern is with the present and future.

Lest the gloomy prognostications above be regarded as merely the ravings of a fevered imagination, I call attention to the fact that a number of highly respectable people share my worries. For example, see Aldous Huxley’s important book “Brave New World Revisited”.

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suggested title.

One footnote was added from Ted's Notes on his Journals (Feb. 1996)

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