

The Age of Specialists

or the Beginning of the Era of Mediocracy

Introduction

Many years ago, a renowned piano professor at the university of Indiana decided to undertake a sensational change in his working environment. Despite all his colleagues having signs on the doors of their teaching-rooms saying “*Professor of Piano*” or “*Professor of Clarinet*” in the good case and “*Professor of Baroque Violin*”, “*Professor of Electronic Composition*” or “*Professor of Ancient Keyboards*” in the worse case - he decided to replace the sign on his door with a very simple title - “*Professor of Music*”.

Decades before the technological revolution and the era of the internet, this very perceptive individual already noticed that something is going terribly wrong around him and decided to alarm his surroundings in that very subtle manner. Of course, nobody noticed. At most, they chuckled. But in a way he symbolised with this gesture of silent protest the beginning of the *Age of Specialists* – he was warning against what was to become the start of the most dramatic decline in culture our western civilisation has yet to experience, at least since the beginning of documented times. Those were the seeds of the downfall that led to a world where *Wikipedia* is Knowledge and where a piece of paper claims to guarantee expertise. A world merely interested in headlines and summaries, black or white, sentences of less than 10 words and a clear punch-line. A world where *information* is knowledge and efficiency is the key to success. But what is success?

Success represents public recognition, it embodies power and should bring with it the much sought-after material wealth. But isn't success more than anything else the key to freedom? Isn't it actually freedom we are all chasing, the freedom to do, feel and experience life to our heart's content? The freedom to choose, the freedom to move freely, the freedom to be? But we shall not attain our freedom through mere actions. We will only come close to freedom through a truly free identity. It is through our thoughts that we construct our identity and it is exactly that basic and most essential right which we have been robbed of – we have been deprived of the freedom to think.

Have our spirits collapsed into a mere silhouette of unintelligent existences, that we have actually become afraid of freedom? Have we started chasing the illusion thereof, as a mere replacement for real fulfilment, as a temporary, soothing drug that keeps us oblivious to our true longings? Have we replaced the thirst for true intellectual and spiritual freedom with a dependency on repressing reality and the addiction to a delusional existence?

A bird can only fly freely when it doesn't have to constantly think about moving its wings. If it did, it would probably fall or collapse of exhaustion after only very few miles. Its wings are its identity and its nest is its origin, regardless of whether it has consciously or subconsciously abandoned it. It came from there and it could never deny it.

Our freedom is based on our identity and our identity as an intrinsic result of our culture. Since we have been subjected to the most brutal and massive campaign aiming to entirely swipe away our culture, and since we were so successfully manipulated that we started becoming the silent accomplices of this objective, we have no wings anymore. We have no nest. We don't know our names nor can we remember our past. It is our memory that we have been robbed of, our history, our heritage, our culture and therefore any prospect of a future.

Freedom is only possible when based on a clear spiritual and intellectual self, a solid yet constantly evolving core, a harmonious synergy of culture, identity and heritage, which are ultimately nothing but the very same thing. A base so strong and rooted that one actually has the possibility to *question everything* and know that one shall land a few inches further along the path of understanding, even if

the way thither will be painful and distressing. It is only through a process of doubting that a strong identity can emerge, because each new step it reaches is stronger than the one before – stronger mainly through knowing that it will question its own validity in the very next moment.

But we are not encouraged to question. Doubting is the biggest danger for those manipulating us, because masses can only be controlled when they are kept ignorant, predictable and ultimately remain oblivious to their destiny. So we are fed with an illusion of an identity. How can we wonder that culture is disintegrating? A culture based on a non-existent identity is as valid and sturdy as a feather in the middle of an ocean-storm. The only thing which most people nowadays have in common is fear – a penetrating, often subconscious form of existential fear.

People will not seek a shaky notion of culture to help them deal with this fear. They will go on pursuing the illusion of freedom through earning money, only to realize that the more of it they earn, the further they get from their original goal. They will try to earn more of it and repress this irritating intuition of theirs telling them that it is bringing them nowhere. They are simply too afraid to be aware or to question. They will go on trying to earn more money because society brainwashed them into believing that money is freedom.

We will never evolve through material success and the illusion of power. We can only evolve through real freedom, and there is no freedom without a solid base of knowledge and the constant questioning thereof – a perpetual cycle of cultural metabolism, an eternal process of redefining one's own identity.

Part I – Education for everybody!
or the moment elitism became a swearword

It is no secret that we are in the midst of an unprecedented crisis. But despite the widespread conviction that it is a crisis of technological abuse, a crisis of privacy or a crisis of finances – I believe it is first and foremost a crisis of culture and the one most essential element sustaining it – education.

What is education? It used to be the process of passing knowledge and experience from one generation to the next. It used to embody the nourishing of those who were to take up the torch, the handing of life-experience from parents to children, the act of transmitting one's heritage to one's offspring. This is inseparably linked with the essence of reproduction in nature and can also be observed among animals – a lioness nursing her cubs gives them through every single act of motherly tenderness the feeling of safety and the tools for a future of survival. It is the safety of a heritage and the tools to create something out of it – it is an identity based on a common past and the prospect of a prosperous future. In educating our children and future generations we are supposed to pass on to them our heritage, their cultural identity. We ought to give them the sufficient safety required for them to be able to rely on their identity and reproduce.

I was quite shocked to bump into the definition of the word “education” in the Merriam-Webster dictionary the other day. I quote: “*ed-u-ca-tion* **noun**: *the action or process of teaching someone especially in a school, college, or university; the knowledge, skill, and understanding that you get from attending a school, college, or university; a field of study that deals with the methods and problems of teaching*”. I went on reading, desperately hoping to find the continuation of that page where the primary meaning of the term would be illustrated. To my profound astonishment, there was no continuation. We live in a world where education literally means “*the stuff you learn in school*”.

Ever since the student revolution of 1968, we have become much more modern and liberal. We are now more open-minded, pluralistic and highly interested in equal opportunities. We are truly

concerned about education being available to absolutely everybody and managed to successfully remove it from the hands of that evil, elitist, *bourgeoisie* who made us all feel inferior and unprivileged before the war. We became so good in bringing education “down to the people” that it went into a free-fall and landed absolutely nowhere. We have been extremely successful in crucifying elitism – we indeed managed to create the largest possible common denominator, available to everybody: the tempting, compelling world of mediocracy.

Traditional schooling in its actual form is quite a grotesque machine when looked at from the outside, when all taboos are ignored and when non-politically-correct opinions aren't frowned upon. One puts 30-40 children of entirely different personalities, mental and emotional structures, upbringing, tempo and sensitivity together, one leaves them at the mercy of an often socially-inept, underpaid and highly under-motivated teacher (who is nothing but a slave of the '*stuff-as-much-information-into-their-heads-as-possible-so-they-pass-the-exam-with-good-grades*' system), make sure they memorize a whole lot of unnecessary information (it doesn't matter if they forget it the day after their exam, it is of no relevance to their lives anyway) and then wonder why they become a bunch of jaded, insensitive ignorants who are nothing but a guarantee that our children and grandchildren will go on consuming masses of brand-products and reach enlightenment through the consumption of reality-shows on television. Putting irony aside, it is quite frankly not our children's, nor their teachers' fault, that we are raising a generation of zombies - the system gives you absolutely no choice.

We managed to eliminate any usage of the world talent – because it is elitist, and therefore old-fashioned and therefore, of course, evil – and avoided all territories where anything remotely resembling the notion of sensitivity, intuition or disposition could appear – because these notions are all dangerous, they might smell elitist or exclude somebody. Exclusion belongs to the devil, as we know (even if it is nothing but mere productive guidance and beneficial direction-giving which could help somebody find their true calling and fulfilment) so we decided to create a new creature, a whole new phenomenon, the crux of an era: the obsession with the countable, the categorisable, the *measurable* - where you can give everything a name, a number, put it in a box, predict how it behaves, then close the box – phew, you're safe. This way everybody can learn it and master it, as it requires nothing but trainable skills which are all measurable – and nobody will ever become really creative – so again, we are all safe.

Throughout literary history, the notion of a man creating a creature in its own image and that creature going completely out of control, ultimately leading to its creator's downfall, has been approached by many writers and documented in many traditional, ethnic and religious legends (the best example being of course Genesis and the creation of Man). The creator always assumes its disciple will be less intelligent than the creator himself and therefore would remain manipulable, obedient and predictable. And he is proved wrong every time and again. In our case too, we created *measurable mediocracy* and before we realized it, it took over and is about to ruin our civilisation.

The obsession with the countable and the definable proved to be a huge success for the engineers behind it as humanity is on a very good path to being dumbed down to brainless mediocracy through measurable elements and the extinction of real creativity. We taught our children to define themselves through what *everybody else* does because we must all become as standardized as possible (don't forget: sticking out is elitist) and now we are surprised why everybody looks the same, acts the same, feels the same and thinks the same. In fact most people are becoming more and more clones of each other.

Mediocracy is set as a standard and as a very desired common denominator - in a society where everybody has a degree in business management, no young european will work in a field or clean toilets. This way we can go on taking advantage of unprivileged foreigners, pay them exasperating fees and make sure the gap between the poor and the ... mediocre becomes larger and larger. And

what happens at the top? we *specialize*. We have the world's-best-expert in *how-to-make-this-information-travel-from-A-to-B* come and bring their undoubted expertise to the game, collect obscene fees and give way to the next expert when it gets to the question of *how-to-make-this-information-travel-from-B-to-C* because - how dare you expect one expert to know anything more than his or her little spot? that wasn't called for in their education. They specialized in *this-and-that*, and wrote their PhD on *that-and-this* and published a paper on.... exactly *that-and-that*. The renaissance man died with the age of technology. We just google the next expert and make him solve our next problem.

In the fifteenth century, people traveled for miles in order to reach a library and read some books written by great masters. After weeks of research and reading, they were absolutely certain of one and only thing – that they knew very little. Nowadays we pull out our smartphone, surf to *WikiPedia*, look up a term and quickly “scan” the first 3-4 sentences – we have mastered the subject, we are knowledgeable. Nothing more than a summary of headlines is called for when the understanding of a subject is desired. How come we are surprised that we have doomed ourselves to mediocracy?

We have entirely failed to understand that it is the *connections* between different *kinds* of information that create real understanding. It is those links, this network of direct and indirect implications - not mere masses of one-dimensional information - that create knowledge, and in turn, real innovation.

But one cannot define these links. One cannot quantify them or give them labels. So it means they might only be understandable to some and not to others. Therefore we avoid them altogether, make sure we stick to a definition of 'knowledge' which everybody can attain, where everybody can be trained, because their training doesn't depend either on talent nor on intelligence. Everybody can memorize and specialize, if they try hard enough. And as we know, this isn't about anything having real substance, depth or a chance of true innovation. It is about making sure we all stay mediocre enough that nobody feels inferior or under-privileged.

So yes, we have been unbelievably successful in revolutionizing education. It is not elitist anymore, it is not ambitious, nor is it concerned with *true* innovation. No, it has simply disappeared. If we continue like that we will very soon turn into a society of empty-headed zombies who consume mass-produced brands blindly and define themselves through the mediocracy of their neighbour. We have become individuals who don't challenge, don't question and don't doubt. We eat everything we're fed with and resort to the quantifiable, the measurable and the immediately-fulfilling as often as we can. We took away education from the 'elite' and made sure that it is now lost on all of us.

Part II – We Are All Individuals

*The transition from collectivism to delusional individualism
or what the Icarian pursuit of self-fulfilment brought upon us*

I would like to make a brief detour and portray a different process that has taken place over the past century. This process is not at first glance directly connected to the one described above but it is ultimately strongly linked to it.

As a direct result of the approach to education described above, we have reached a level of proficiency in all-levels-measurable of far superior degree than ever before. If this sounds like a contradiction to everything I've just described, do read again. Taking my field as an example, musicians have never been more proficient in executing musical pieces to the highest possible level of clinical perfection as they are now. The measurable, pragmatic and specific approach to training has created such a high level of mediocracy that nowadays every specialist is better at their job than

anybody could have been 50 years ago (and that is not even taking in account the technological developments in their respective fields).

On top of that, the sheer access to information, the ease of mobility and 'education' being basically accessible to anybody, we ended up in a world where thousands of people compete for one position – and strangely enough (or not), so many of them are equally qualified for it. It all depends on how we define 'qualified'.

People are motivated by very different things nowadays than they used to be decades ago. Let us not be blindly nostalgic and face the fact that humans have always been materialistic creatures and idealism was as complex and rather misleading a phenomenon a century ago (where hypocrisy was equally present as it is now, it just had a completely different disguise) as it is now. People were ambitious and wanted to achieve recognition, material wealth and general stability from the beginning of time – it seems to be a direct result of the instinct of reproduction among humans. But one notion has come along over the past century, a notion only a very small, privileged (or perhaps cursed?) part of society was familiar with beforehand, if at all – the craving for *self-fulfilment*. Or at least what we are meant to consider as such.

In the 19th century, very few people ever thought of self-fulfilment. In fact, I doubt many people had ever heard that term before 1960. Life was full of very basic challenges and people were much more pragmatic. They were concerned with their survival, they had no choice. Of course, artists and people of letters have always practiced their craft out of a complex mixture between selfless contribution, egotistic urges and an unexplainable 'something' that simply made them do it – but the notion of *self-fulfilment* as such was not as socially accepted and highly widespread a phenomenon as it became later on when it, in fact, shaped to a large extent the state of our society nowadays.

Before the early revolutions of willpower and creativity (around 1900), as well as later on the wild 1920s and finally the rebellion of the 1960s, people could wish for nothing more than to belong to a collective of renown. If you worked for a great company with a decent reputation, you were 'stamped' by society as decent, alongside the obvious benefits of a privileged income and its practical implications. If you belonged to a country which was powerful and culturally innovative, you were 'stamped' as enlightened and culturally refined. People had very little access to information (we mustn't forget that only a few centuries ago very few people had access to books, not to mention the knowledge to understand them) and as such their expectations from life mostly corresponded to the degree of their education.

I shall give a short example from my field: in let's say 1920, a musician could wish for nothing more than belonging to a great, renowned orchestra. Most orchestral musicians didn't necessarily emerge from the higher classes where children received individual tuition and were exposed to the highest and broadest kind of education – perhaps this was the case in Berlin or in Vienna – but very often musicians came from families elsewhere where talent was discovered by sheer accident and seen by the parents as a potential source of income to save the family from poverty.

If a violinist could get a job with a renowned local orchestra – let alone a legendary international group – this person would have been socially seen as a very successful individual. Belonging to a collective of renown was the highest goal one could strive for – and it was with delight, awe and complete submission that these people subordinated themselves to these institutions and their direct authorities within them, whose objective superiority was never to be challenged. This was hardly unjust - those people (in this case, for example, orchestral conductors) *were* simply superior to their subordinates due to the undeniable fact that they were exposed to a far more comprehensive education and were usually substantially more knowledgeable and qualified than orchestral players would be.

Nowadays the situation has changed drastically. In theory, anybody can seek musical training. If you are gifted, you will probably (at least that's we want to believe) have all the chances in the world to get a decent education, have access to a huge bank of information and ultimately be exposed to a wide array of opportunities which suit those qualifications. If in the past a violinist could barely rely on his local "master" to teach him the craft of fiddle-playing, nowadays almost anybody from the developed world (and slowly more and more people from developing countries too) can use the internet, inform themselves, seek further resources where their skills will be honed and ultimately, if appropriate and wished for, seek higher education in their field and constantly be confronted with inspiration and exchange from all over the world.

A young violinist in Germany or England will consult *YouTube* at the age of let's say 12 or 13 and compare themselves to their Korean or American counterparts. A student of let's say 20 will challenge the authority of their teacher by seeking guidance in masterclasses with other people. A young professional will experience other styles of performance in other countries and will challenge the tradition in his or her home country. A professor would meet his or her counterparts in conventions abroad and exchange knowledge on a very regular basis. And so on and so forth – and this obviously applies just as well to any other profession.

The combination of the complete change in our approach to education (the rise of the '*monster-specialist*' and its almost inhumane skills which I've described in *Part I*) and the sheer limitlessness of opportunities to broaden one's own training and consume endless information (described above), led to a fascinating phenomenon and the birth of another tendency, utterly different yet highly connected to the one described earlier in this essay – we have seen the birth of the *Age of Individualism*.

Ever since the end of the 2nd World War – where it has become rather dubious to wish to belong to a collective, to say the very least – individuals from all over the globe ceased to define themselves only through the prestigious object they belonged to and started trying to create such objects out of their *own beings*. Ever since people have seen where their collectives have led them to and ever since technology, politics and mass-psychology enabled people to aspire to higher education and greater qualifications, people have been aiming higher and higher and have been seeking more and more self-fulfilment (a notion fed to us ever since people realized they can make money out of it) through their own achievements.

Nowadays a violinist in an orchestra is likely to know just as much about music as their conductor does because they have both been exposed to a similar training which is now accessible to everybody. Employees in a corporation might be equally (if not more) qualified than their superiors. Why should people be content when submitting themselves to the authority of somebody whose competence and superiority they have all the rights in the world to question?

Sure, some people are more suitable for leading positions, others less (although again, we mustn't exclude anybody or we might be labeled elitist). But now that orchestral conductors go to the same university as the last-desk-2nd-violinist, CEOs have the same degree as their just-starting-out-interns and everybody has been through the system of measurable, quantifiable training and has ticked all the boxes – that is, they are (seemingly) all equally qualified - why should *they* tell *me* what to do? Why is *their* opinion more valid than *mine*?

It is clear and understandable that the more qualified people become, the higher their expectations from life, as well as from the degree to which their professional situation challenges them, tend to be. But it goes much further than that.

Nowadays, many young violinists of average quality deem the prospect of an orchestral job the absolute symbol of failure. "Me? A mere element in a big machine? No! I'm a soloist, I'm an artist! I

want to express myself and leave my mark!”. Millions of people graduate every year from thousands of universities all over the world (and again, this can apply to any other field as well) aspiring to become the world's next Soloist-Superstar and believing – and quite understandably – that they are going to make it, that they are not going to be mere team-players, they will play the Lead Role.

It seems like not only qualifications raise people's expectations of how much they should achieve and how much power (a synonym for success) should be granted to them, it is their quest and aspiration for *self-fulfilment* that has taken a completely new dimension since society put a degree in the hands of every plumber. People let those qualifications (delivered by a flawed system) along with the illusion of knowledge (confused with information) drive them into unprecedented ambitions and a delusional pretence for individualism. But it is hardly their fault – they are victims of a system where one is brainwashed almost from before being born. It has become our second nature to adhere to this system so we don't even see it is a system anymore, we take it entirely for granted.

Do not fool yourselves – the *Age of Individualism* has in fact very little to do with real individuals. It is not individualism in the sense of independence, creativity and a diverse pool of identities – it is individualism in a very cynical, fallacious sense. It is the endless and impossible pursuit of artificial self-fulfilment by often utterly confused individuals who are manipulated into seeking something that doesn't exist. The system doesn't actually empower them to rise to the new expectations they have been forced to develop and reach this goal. It in fact robs them, through it being the way it is, of any chance to ever coming close to it.

It is quite odd to realize that so many institutions and doctrines simply fail to adapt to the modern age and clumsily execute cosmetic reforms which aren't even touching the surface of their monumentally anachronistic systems. These institutions desperately try to compress modern Man into a corset of a completely different 'creature' which has very little to do with its modern descendant in anything beyond its mere genetic core.

Museums, Universities, Orchestras, Political Parties, Publishers, Religions and many other culturally-related (or less so) institutions have been falling into one of two models of action over the past few decades, both equally worrying – either the persistent, utterly unrealistic obsession with retaining the status-quo in its current state and the desperate fight against modern age, or the equally distressing approach where the commercial, accessible and superficial, i.e. ready-made-to-consume overtakes substance and content.

So few institutions have dealt with the problem at its core – knowing that it would most likely deprive them of the validity of their existence. Short-term survival has overcome long-sighted pragmatism and the result is going to become tragic. The problem is not *what* we do. It is also not *how* we do it. It is strictly and only about *why* we do it. So many orchestras have revolutionized the form of their concerts. So many museums have introduced interactive, accessible platforms for younger visitors. So many theatres have revolutionized the language and style of their performances to attract less conservative audiences. But it often seems to me like most of them neglected to deal with the most important reason for which none of those changes will *truly* make a difference in 20 or 30 years time – the million-dollar-question of *why are we doing this*.

I am convinced that most of them never even dared questioning that, fearing they might not find an answer. At least not a more valid one than “because it's paying our salaries – for now”. And that is exactly why so many people are convinced culture is or could become superfluous.

We must realize that we are living in an entirely new reality, where people are motivated by completely different incentives. Our hierarchical institutions have long reached the limit of their effectiveness. People join institutions nowadays first and foremost out of the very basic need of an

income. They are either at the point where they have lost all ideals and expect nothing from their job except paying their bills, or they will most likely reach that point within a few years after starting out. It is very rare nowadays to find people in the cultural sector who are motivated on the long-term by a situation where they are merely expected to obey to orders and where they have little influence on the result and hardly any room to express themselves.

But in fact, can we really expect people to deliver a result with all their heart when they cannot stand behind one single product they are offering? Can we expect a musician to sit in an orchestra, follow the orders of a person hardly more qualified than him or herself, have literally no influence on the result of their work – and do it all with all their heart and wish to reach their listeners with a message?

Of course not, because it is not their *individual* message. It is a message of somebody else which is automatically and unquestionably imposed on them. The result is very often no more than a large group of employees doing their job to the best of their ability. There is nothing personal about it, and there is very little passion involved. And this is understandable! How can people seem committed to a cause they very often cannot identify with? How can they play with personal conviction if they are transmitting the conviction of somebody else? And how can we expect our audiences to feel moved by people sitting next to one another executing a whole bunch of notes which mean relatively little to them, or at least do not result from a true, personal conviction?

People do not seek to experience a group of specialists drawing *meticulously-carved-long-sticks-with-hair-on-them* on *weird-shaped-stringed-wooden-boxes* when they go to a concert. They want to be emotionally moved, they want to be spoken to. And that can only happen when those on stage actually have something to say, a *message of their own*, a message they can identify with. People will only be moved by music when musicians become truly interested in coming in front of an audience, telling their story, have somebody *truly* listen to it and receive their feedback. People are moved by communication, by an exchange – not by a clinical display of virtuosity. This is the way Art has evolved from the beginning of times and it is the only way real progress can take place – the endlessly nourishing, cyclical process of mutual exchange. But how can musicians do all that when they are expected to obey to orders of an authority they in most cases neither respect nor esteem?

Of course, I am drawing a very extreme picture. Many orchestral musicians respect the one or other conductor, many still love their job and cherish it with tremendous passion up until retirement. Some of them even manage to bring passion to their performances out of sheer love for the music played, regardless of the manner in which this is being done and its relative little relevance to them. But the large majority of orchestral players, just as much as of any group of employees in a hierarchical structure, have lost motivation because their work doesn't represent their message, because the *individual* in them has no way to express himself or herself.

The commercial world has largely adapted to this reality a long time ago. The artistic domain is trailing behind and is therefore losing relevance in the social landscape. Many companies in the corporate world have already realized that the old-fashioned approach to management must change. They have introduced a new form of governing which replaces the hierarchical, single-authority-based leadership: an approach where *everybody* is involved, where everybody shares both the duties as well as the rights, an approach where people feel *personally responsible* for what they do and can therefore *identify with it*. This *democratic* approach to management is the only way to keep ambitious, qualified employees motivated in the *Age of Individualism*. Only this way they will produce *truly* great results, results which are of actual relevance and long-lasting quality and substance. It is their personal identity that must be represented by their product for them to feel responsible for it and thus *really* give their very best and invest themselves passionately in every single phase of the process.

In a way, we must employ the same mechanism in the cultural setting. We must encourage all

individuals who contribute to our cultural texture to question authority and to take initiative, we must give them space to express their own message. We must reach a situation where each single person involved in an artistic or cultural exchange is able to stand behind what they do. They must be able to feel *personally* responsible for it and therefore *identify* with it. Only this way their public will be able to identify with it as well.

It is possible, as I have personally experienced in the professional setting that I have developed over the past eight years, to create true democracy even in an artistic setting involving a large group of very creative individuals. It is possible when these people feel *true* and *sincere* respect for their individual message on behalf of everybody involved. When they feel an authentic wish to give them space to develop a real identity, they start investing those long-forgotten chambers of their spiritual and emotional 'DNA' where sincerity is actually called for. It is only then that pseudo-individuals start becoming real individuals.

We must empower people to dare, to take risks and to become real individuals. We will only manage to keep culture alive if we, those who create it, as well as those who consume it, who are – in essence – one, are able to identify with it. If it becomes a separate being, utterly unrelated to anybody involved with it, it will fulfil its own prophecy and make itself redundant. We are offering culture to people who mostly are struggling to have an identity, if we do not have one either we will be offering them a mirror of their biggest fear.

Part III – Post-Individualism and the Art of 'Sticking Out'

It is quite fascinating to observe the way both notions I have described in *Parts I & II* have merged and led to a phenomenon even more absurd (yet highly comprehensible, given the context) than everything I've described until now. On the one hand, we have been educated by a system which imposed on us *measurable mediocracy*, turning us into *clones* of one another and sentencing us to a destiny resembling a creative desert; on the other hand, we have grown to question our authorities, our institutions, our heritage, we have ceased to define ourselves through the collectives we belong to and embarked on the journey of becoming true *individuals* and define ourselves only through our *own* merits.

Most artists, those individuals who should (in an ideal world) be the actual engineers of the cultural sector, were raised in a world where up until the end of their college education they were on the one hand encouraged to pursue measurable, predictable training and reach the highest possible level of standardized mediocracy, and on the other hand, they were brainwashed into aspiring to become “*something special*”, an individual, a real artist. Can one really expect anything except complete confusion and frustration with that contradiction as a background? And this is only an example – if you look carefully you will recognize this mechanism in every single field.

This is in fact the core of yet another age, more distressing and virtual than the two described previously – it is the *Age of 'Specialness'*. We have become so obsessed with being *special* that we now live in a world with 7 billion special people. We must be recognized as being *different* from our peers, otherwise we have failed. It is not mere quality that we seek anymore, it is not substance or excellence – it is the chance to “stick out”, to be different. It is all about comparison and sticking out from the mass, being even more provocative, even more unusual, more eccentric – all these notions where fake creativity becomes quite handy.

Unfortunately for them, the recognition earned by being special doesn't usually last very long. Very soon somebody else will come along who is even more special, even more different, and the previous

owner of the title will have vanished as if never existed.

But is this phenomenon really surprising? It is a mere reflex of survival to try and offer something that nobody else can offer – what choice do people have, when there are so many of us doing the same thing, being trained the same way, having the same qualifications? And then when all these people coming from an identically indoctrinating background start believing that they are individuals, that they have to “make it”, they search for means to achieve that. Being recognizably-different is the only way, it is exactly what the market calls for in an age where there is more offer than our brains can grasp – it is all about showing the world why *you* should succeed, what it is that *you* have, that your colleague doesn't. Nobody has time to look for real individual variety, you must scream your 'specialness' as loud as you possibly can. Then somebody might give you a call.

In fact, not only it is not creativity, what these people pursue – it is the absolute opposite of it. It is the obsessive search of innovation for the sake of it, it is the choice of the gimmick over the substantial, it is the peak of mediocracy wearing a cloak of innovation.

And then comes the next step – because, of course, there are so many extremely special, unusual, different people around, that one must stick out from the mass of the special people. People seek self-fulfilment, they try to carve a niche to express themselves, they manage to stick out, they are something special, something irreplaceable – but what is left? They must not be *forgotten*. How will I be fulfilled if my name will not be inscribed on a big wall for all future generations to remember that I was creative? That I was different? It is not anymore about belonging to a collective, it is now about actually defining the collective. It is in fact about the collective defining itself through you.

The notion of attaining self-fulfilment through *recognition of “unprecedented specialness”* is by definition impossible – for two intrinsic reasons: for one, you will never feel fulfilled but what you have achieved because your achievement will be void of true content, being based on the mere desire to stick out, to be noticed. This desire automatically cancels true creativity – its meaninglessness will therefore *always* be unveiled (at the latest by yourself); second, there will always be somebody out there who will run faster, who will be more special, who will be remembered longer. It is a pretty ungrateful race to run.

All human beings are born special and will die special for the simple reason that they are human and therefore unique. But they will only be truly fulfilled if they stop seeking fulfilment in having the world recognize them but start recognizing and better understanding the world. People have stopped questioning and are just emitting answer after answer. They will only make progress when they start doubting again.

If we would like to fill the age of pseudo-individualism with real individuals we must start encouraging people to question and doubt. In the first instance they must doubt us. In fact I wish for nothing more than each and every one of my readers to question every single word I wrote in this essay. Let people challenge everything, encourage them to not take any truth for granted – and first and foremost realize that there is not only one truth!

Epilogue

We have obviously been very successful this past century in making many changes. We have revolutionised practically everything, we have been so good at it that we have brought our civilization to the most dangerous crossroad it has ever been at. It is arguable whether this accumulation of mere information has actually brought us to the next step of our cultural evolution or set us back in centuries.

We were desperate to remove education from the hands of the evil nobility, those dreadful people who were merely lucky and were born in the right families. We didn't want to have any more differentiation between the talented and the less talented, we didn't want any more social or any other classes, we wanted justice! We wanted equality, one big mass of people, all having the chance to be successful, the chance to become good at *something*.

Well, we have been quite successful at that. Very soon we will have signs in our universities saying “*Professor for the White Keys on the Piano* (for any queries on the black keys please refer to the colleague next door)”. We have specialized in documenting our own decline, it is quite extraordinary.

We were so appalled by the idea of one part of society being more privileged that we have now ended up exactly where we started. Wasn't sticking out elitist? Was the 'unusual talent' not considered 'exclusion'? Did we not see any element of *out-of-the-box* originality as the beginning of all evil, the danger of only one part of society having access to and control over education? Well, we ended up somewhere where *another* part of society has exclusive control over it. Now it's not the rich and those well-born, it is the false, the mediocre and the talentless who brainwash us all into trying to be special.

And they have been quite successful. We are spending our entire lives trying to be as special as possible. No, even more special than that. We must be super-special. Unforgettably special. The most special of all super-special people. Unique. And while we are chasing this inherently unreachable goal, those same people whom we have literally handed control over our cultural heritage are having a great laugh and are earning an awful lot of money.

The pursuit of real knowledge has disappeared and made way to our consuming information just as we consume underwear. It has to be attained as quickly, inexpensively and easily as possible. *Measurable mediocracy* worked out incredibly well. People aren't particularly good at anything anymore except *exactly* what they are doing. They will therefore rarely question the competence of anybody else around them.

At the same time, we have fed people with so much information and qualifications that they have grown out of those beautiful things that used to do a pretty good job at fulfilling them. Now they are all seeking a completely different degree of fulfilment, they are only seeking unattainable goals. But isn't this a genius mechanism? It makes sure the cycle of manipulable ignorance will forever continue.

The atrocious combination (and contradiction!) of *dogmatically trained specialists* and *brainwashed pseudo-individualists* led to a society of jaded, constantly frustrated people who are all on an eternal journey, an impossible search, pursuing those impossible ideals they are being fed with. People mistake qualifications for real knowledge, they mistake achievement with freedom, they mistake 'special' characteristics with an identity. They have obtained an identity void of anything real. An identity which is just as much an illusion as everything else we are surrounded by.

They are so concerned about leaving a mark, being special, that they haven't realized that everybody around them is doing *exactly the same thing* and that they have landed exactly where they had started, that dreadful place they wanted to leave, the place where everybody was united by a collective common-denominator. It seems like it doesn't matter whether it is excellence or mediocracy, collectivism or individualism, authority or independancy which unites us – we simply cannot escape from being human.

We eliminated real knowledge, the most essential ingredient for freedom, cloned our identities and created a social texture which is an illusion from A to Z. It definitely seems like we have a problem.

So, is there a solution? Well, we will not turn humans, who are essential egoists, into selfless, altruist beings. It is futile to engage in pseudo-moralistic preaching on people “having to care more about society”, “having to change things otherwise it will end badly for all of us”, etc. That will not be the catalyst for any kind of progress. It is not through seeing the benefit for *society* that most people will seek real knowledge, it is through seeing its benefit for *themselves* as well as the inevitability of a change for their *own* survival that they will be forced to challenge the status-quo. We must invest our energy into a system where every person engages in a multilateral process which brings them closer to their own personal fulfilment and *at the same time* enriches the social texture around it.

We must encourage people to question and doubt and aspire to *real* knowledge. Only then they will be able to reach actual self-fulfilment rather than a pale illusion of it as well as a never-ending quest for a goal which is by definition unattainable. These will then be *real* individuals who will look beyond the boundaries of measurable mediocrity because their own freedom will show them how limited that realm is. By that point they will themselves seek an alternative, wish to go beyond that limited horizon, because their consciousness of real self-fulfilment and true creativity will not be satisfied by a realm only full of answers, and no questions. That wish in itself is already the first sign of an authentic, natural identity. Those individuals will be unavoidable mirrors to their surroundings – those who are still busy comparing themselves to their fellow beings will have no choice but to compare themselves to those more enlightened and seek real freedom.

It is exactly on that level of *real* individualism that people must be motivated and sought. Once they are free and their identities are based on the common quest for real knowledge, their own fulfilment will tremendously contribute to society. If everybody frees the way for a real, common identity of freedom to emerge, there is a chance culture (and with it our civilization) might be saved, for it is real identity that we must bring into our culture in order for it to be indispensable.

Civilizations have mainly collapsed and turned extinct throughout history because they lost their culture, not through wars and plagues. Nowadays' western civilization is about to become yet another one of many, simple because it is not the measurable, the programmable and the predictable which creates culture - it is the spirit which makes us creative, it is our spirit which brings us forward and it is culture which gives us the only platform to have a healthy form of identity.

We must start approaching people where they are and motivate the *real* individual in them back to real creativity, otherwise we will end up in a society where there will be no more need for culture anyway, since through our aspiration of individualism we will have become all exactly identical. It is so sad that our politicians haven't realized that society depends on its culture in order to survive. Our true danger doesn't lie in Iraq or in Afghanistan. We are our own worst enemies. If we allow the extinction of our culture, we will have announced the extinction of our civilisation with it.

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Written for the Nexus Institute, dedicated in friendship and admiration to Rob Riemen