

Juvenilia (from 2006) from Notes of an Underground Humanist
By Chris Wright

American society, and increasingly the whole world, comprises, arguably, more schisms than any in history. Even societies torn by civil war have not had as many schisms as ours does. Theirs have simply had more dramatic consequences. The “culture wars” that afflict America and the world—between religions, ideologies, ways of life—are merely one manifestation of late capitalism’s divisive character, and not the most fundamental. Not only has every major empire suffered from culture wars of some sort; more importantly, they’re an utterly predictable reaction to the international hegemony of a single country. After all, a nation’s imposition of its economy and culture on the rest of the world is bound to have repercussions. The American empire is the most powerful and wide-ranging in history, so the ideological conflicts caused by its advance are naturally going to be widespread and recalcitrant. To be surprised by them, or to treat them as signs of the apocalypse, is to be myopic.

Similarly, the so-called culture wars in America, exemplified by the debates over gay marriage, abortion, and evolution, are not particularly shocking or ominous. They’re just another manifestation of the millennia-old conflict between tradition and progress. Fanatical Muslims fight against liberal democracy and equality, fanatical Christians fight against science and equality. Religion is usually conservative, like most humans (who remain enmeshed in tradition their whole lives). Progress eventually triumphs, though; mere bigotry cannot indefinitely dam the flood of technological and scientific advance, nor of the social equality that tends to follow in its wake. Conservatives are always, in the long run, on the wrong side of history.

So, I’m not referring primarily to ideological schisms. I don’t find them particularly disturbing or even suspenseful; I think that wise political leaders could temper their vehemence. And economic evolution will, in the very long run, tend to reduce cultural differences anyway.¹ My concern here is with a more fundamental kind of schism, grounded in the nature of the economy rather than the thoughtless inertia of humanity. Far from being mitigated by economic progress, it is exacerbated. In a word, I mean *atomization*. Atomization between individuals, and between professions, and between facets of the individual’s psyche/personality. Such divisions are closely interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and are grounded ultimately in the neoliberal economy’s demands on social life.

¹ This is partly why some Muslims embrace jihad. They resent America’s cultural imperialism, i.e., the erosion of traditional ideologies, and so they fight it. Ultimately they’re impotent, though: nothing they can do (short of nuclear war) can stop globalization. [Needless to say, American foreign policy is another major cause of Islamist terrorism.]

Atomization is the real neurosis of the age, the fundamental cause of all the others. The “culture wars” are comparatively transient and unimportant; in fact, one of the unconscious functions of an individual’s immersion in an ideology is precisely to escape atomization. The psyche will construct labyrinthine defenses against the loss of community, elaborate illusions to hide it from view, artificial means to restore interpersonal bonds, but “neuroses,” on an individual or collective level, are always in some way a reaction against communal deprivation.

What do I mean by “atomization,” “loss of community”? I’ll address this question in depth later; for now, I’ll let the reader rely on his intuitive understanding. He has but to open his eyes to see examples of the problem. Communities all over the world are deteriorating every year; video games, television, the internet, urbanization, privatization are all causal factors. Similarly, schizoid personality disorders are increasingly common, far more so than a hundred years ago. (One has only to compare the psychoanalytic literature of both eras. Freud treated more cases of “hysteria” than schizoid-related disorders; more recent psychoanalytic theorists, such as R. D. Laing, Heinz Kohut, W. R. D. Fairbairn, and D. W. Winnicott, have been more interested in the schizoid/schizophrenic and narcissistic personalities.²) As the community disintegrates, so does the self.

At the moment, though, I want to focus on the other form of atomization I mentioned, namely professional specialization. Which generally amounts to specialization of the personality. People embark on a career, develop a few skills to machine-like perfection, and let the rest of their potential atrophy. Even in fields that would seem to lend themselves to, or even to require, a breadth of competence in their practitioners, such as political punditry or, indeed, any kind of intellectual endeavor, few people break out of the narrow mold. There is very little mingling between professions. An economist doesn’t write about psychology; a poet doesn’t write philosophy; a politician doesn’t write at all (except puerile polemics or memoirs). People are becoming more specialized every year, less intellectually and “spiritually” ambitious, more dehumanized.

Yes, specialization is a form of dehumanization. It is a form of the dehumanization that Karl Marx saw was a product of capitalist economic forces (with the commoditization-of-everything that they entail). For the narrower are one’s activities, the less one is exploiting one’s human potential, and the less one feels like a human being. A person, after all, has almost limitless potential. This is the glory of being human. One can spend the morning playing sports, the afternoon reading or writing, the evening conversing with one’s family and friends, and the early night playing the piano or reciting poetry. And the next day one can do something different (like, say, go

² See also Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), pp. 34–43—or, indeed, the whole of chapter two.

to one's job). The possibilities are endless; and the more you exploit them, the more satisfied you feel with yourself. This is just common sense. It's a shame, then, for the privileged among us not to take advantage of living in a society that allows for more leisure time than any other in history, and is constantly allowing for more leisure time as economic productivity increases. It's a shame to conform and fall in line with everyone who lets himself be stunted by the habits of social life.

For the masses of the less well-off, who have to work all day in a mind-numbing job just to make ends meet, capitalism is a curse. It ruptures the communal support-system that the peasantry traditionally enjoyed and doesn't compensate that loss by permitting an all-round development of the individual. The laborer's life consists of ceaseless drudgery, thankless chores, an unremitting struggle to escape from poverty. One has but to read Barbara Ehrenreich's book *Nickel and Dimed*—or just try washing dishes in a restaurant eight hours a day—to see how appalling are many people's working and living conditions in even the most "civilized" of countries. These are the people on whose shoulders rest all the affluence and leisure of the privileged classes; and one can hardly expect them to do much more than what they have to do to survive.

But even, or especially, when one's life consists of endless drudgery, a diversity in occupations is infinitely more satisfying than staying chained to a single activity. Consider these observations of a French worker in the 19th century who traveled to San Francisco during the gold rush: "I could never have believed that I was capable of working at all the trades I practiced in California. I was firmly convinced that I was fit for nothing but the printing of books.... Once I was in the midst of this world of adventurers, who change their jobs as often as their shirts, then, upon my faith, I did as the others. As mining did not pay well enough, I left it for the city, and there I became in succession a typographer, a slater, a plumber, etc. As a result of this discovery that I am fit for any sort of work, I feel less of a mollusc and more of a man."³ No matter what one's station in life, a breadth of experience is almost always more satisfying, and ultimately more human, than narrowness.

Psychoanalysis also upholds that claim. Carl Jung's notion of "individuation" is relevant here. The individual, he thought, must become, as it were, an in-dividual: he must integrate himself, all the unconscious facets of his psyche and his latent capacities, into a coherent whole. He must realize himself, in all his potential breadth. This process is, to an extent, inevitable and involuntary as the person lives more and gets older, but by bringing it under his conscious control he can forestall neuroses and realize himself more completely and happily. Individuation is indeed, in a sense, the meaning of a person's life, of *every* person's life. On the deepest level and of necessity, it is his main existential project, though it is never completed. No one ever fully realizes himself; his potential is too great. But some people do a better job than others—people like Goethe

³ Quoted in Karl Marx, *Capital* (London: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 618.

and Da Vinci, Bertrand Russell, Simone de Beauvoir, even Albert Schweitzer. It is they who should be our role-models: we should adopt more or less the attitudes toward life that they adopted. (I say “more or less” because they too were a little stunted. Athletics, for example, is as important for mental health as—if not more so than—art and thought. Humankind was meant to live mostly outside, not cooped up in a study.)

These thinkers themselves have self-consciously pursued the ideal of self-breadth. From Confucius to Montaigne to John Stuart Mill, philosophers have understood its value and preached it—preached the gospel of self-cultivation, self-realization. No one expressed it better than Nietzsche in §290 of *The Gay Science*—where he put a slightly different spin on it than I have—but they have all had essentially the same idea in mind: the idea, namely, of creating and controlling oneself, of “molding” oneself in as many directions as possible and thereby affirming one’s humanity. Intuitively everyone understands the value of this ideal. It’s sad, then, that few people follow it in practice.

One of the crimes of our social system is that it prevents millions of people from enjoying the freedom without which genuine self-realization is impossible. These unfortunates are like the French worker quoted above before he had come to San Francisco, when he was forced to print books day in and day out. Not only have communal bonds been shredded, but the individual, in being denied means for the development of his personality, has been denied the opportunity to achieve self-respect. However, even the lucky ones among us—the intellectuals, the successful businessmen, many of the “white-collar workers”—succumb to the dehumanizing effects of money-driven routine, thus ensuring that our self-respect is more fragile and fickle than it has to be. In atomizing social relations, economic relations have also divided us from ourselves, from our psyche’s self-imposed imperative to “*Become who you are!*”, with the result that we don’t *deeply recognize* ourselves in our work or our relationships, or even in most of our leisure-activities. We do things just because we have to, whether to make money or to get momentary release from the daily grind. They aren’t experienced as spontaneous expressions of our sense of self, as intrinsically enjoyable affirmations of who we are, which make us feel “less of a mollusc and more of a man.” –We’re alienated, in short, from ourselves, from our work, from the community.

In order to attain the complete self-respect or -contentment that we’re always half-consciously hankering for amidst our daily frustrations, we have to experience our life-activities as freely chosen by us—as free “objectifications” of our ideal self-perception, which is intuitive and never fully articulated. These objectifications would bolster our concrete sense of self, bringing it closer in line with how we ideally (would like to) see ourselves and our potential. But our potential—not only objectively but also as we subjectively experience it—is broad, branching out into many different spheres of inter- and intrapersonal interaction. The more we “diversify” ourselves, then—the more directions in which we develop ourselves—the more we’ll feel as if we’re integrating our real, concrete self with our ideal self(-perception), and are thus “in-dividuating”

ourselves (unifying ourselves). We'll come to recognize our full sense of self in the world, in our activities and in how people react to them; and the recognition (of who we ideally/concretely are) that others will show us will contribute greatly to our rich self-respect. It will, in fact, be perhaps the *foundation* of our self-respect, and as such will be an important cause of our ever-greater self-diversification (which is not only a cause, but also an effect, of deep self-esteem). More generally, though, individuation is nothing but the process of becoming profoundly well-disposed toward oneself, which, for reasons I'll go into later, requires that one be well-disposed toward others, which in turn requires that one be recognized or affirmed by them. For all these reasons, individuation can fully occur only in a fairly tightly-knit community, a community not riven by divisions, selfish competition and atomization.

As it is, though, what Marx wrote in 1844 is still true in 2006:

...What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?

First, in the fact that labor is *external* to the worker [whether blue-collar or white-collar], that is, that it does not belong to his essential being [or his sense of his ideal self]; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel well but unhappy, does not freely develop his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker, therefore, feels himself only outside his work, and feels beside himself in his work. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His work therefore is not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labor*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need, but only a *means* for satisfying needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that labor is shunned like the plague as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion. External labor, labor in which man is externalized, is labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Finally, the external nature of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in that labor he does not belong to himself but to someone else [or to some corporation]. Just as in religion, the spontaneous activity of human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual, i.e. as an alien divine or diabolical activity, so the worker's activity is not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.

The result, therefore, is that man (the worker) feels that he is acting freely only in his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his shelter and his finery—while in his human functions he feels himself nothing

more than an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal.⁴

(If anything, this description is more universally true now than it was in Marx's time.) The unfree character of most work, which consists in its not being desired for its own sake—i.e., in its not emerging organically from an individual's "sentiment of [his] being" (in Rousseau's terminology)—causes the individual himself to feel unfree, which means that he does not experience himself as truly himself, which means that he is not in-dividuated.

I'll expand on all these thoughts in subsequent chapters. As I've said, my purpose right now is to look at a specific form of dehumanization (or atomization), namely the modern stultifying of people's potential breadth. Most of us are practically forced to specialize, both in our jobs and in our leisure-activities (which usually consist of watching TV or surfing the internet)—the latter because our whole way of being is saturated with a kind of self-laziness and one-sidedness. The type of social conditioning that results from (and is) "bureaucracy, the proliferation of images, therapeutic ideologies, the rationalization of the inner life, the cult of consumption,"⁵ as well as the hectic pace of modern life, the commercialization of sex and love, the constant forging and breaking of shallow friendships, the deterioration of education, the widespread retreat into video games and television, the degradation of politics into spectacle, and the fact that all these developments (and more) have become common knowledge and are widely deplored but seem impenetrable to understanding and cannot be remedied—indeed, are intensified every year, snowballing according to their internal logic—all this conditioning churns out individuals who suffer from a certain shallowness and discontentedness.

[...] We're anxious about how others perceive us, and we're so self-conscious that we constantly worry about how we perceive ourselves. Hence all the self-help books. Our lives are fundamentally divided; we can't decide who we really are. We don't have time, as it were, or stability enough, to lay out an abiding foundation for our identity, on the basis of which we could act in the world in a basically (self-)affirmative way, by aggressively exploiting our potential in ways that might even appear to be (superficially) contradictory. That's the paradox of self-realization: if it is undertaken on the basis of some sort of durable, intuitive sense of self, no amount of apparent conflict between the ways in which we realize ourselves can cause "identity crises." We can be athletes, poets, musicians, activists, parents, lovers, without ever wondering what our

⁴ *The Portable Karl Marx*, edited by Eugene Kamenka (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 136, 137. The thoughts in that passage are dramatized by many pop-cultural creations, for example the popular show "The Office."

⁵ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 32.

“true” identity consists in, as many of us do now. If, on the other hand, our psyche has not had an opportunity to construct a durable sense of itself—due to constant social conflicts, responsibilities, all the distractions in which contemporary life consists—then sometimes we can’t even have a single job and a single child without feeling torn apart by conflicting loyalties and identities. Far from being able to luxuriate in multifarious self-molding, we can barely do what survival dictates without succumbing to neuroses or psychoses. We just go to work, pay the bills and then watch TV, grateful for a respite from ourselves and the dissatisfaction we hide behind our masks.

A certain kind of person has managed to cope by making a virtue of necessity: he embraces the modern person’s insecurity, his obsession with how he is perceived by others and his consequent lack of an authentic self (i.e., of a firm sense of himself), by attuning his whole being to “the signals sent out by the consensus of his fellows and by the institutional agencies of the culture, to the extent that he is scarcely a self at all, but, rather, a reiterated impersonation.”⁶ In his famous book *The Lonely Crowd* (1953), David Riesman called this kind of person “other-directed,” contrasting him with the “inner-directed” person. “What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual.... This source is of course ‘internalized’ in the sense that dependence on it for guidance in life is implanted early. The goals toward which the other-directed person strives shift with that guidance: it is only the process of striving itself and the process of paying close attention to the signals from others that remain unaltered throughout life.”⁷ For whatever reason, this kind of person is able to adapt to the schizophrenic conditions of modern life less painfully than other people are, though he too lacks a secure sense of himself—i.e., a palpable “sentiment of being,” of being himself in and through all his activities, of being fundamentally free on account of his sense that his acts are his own. Indeed, “one prime psychological lever of the other-directed person is a diffuse *anxiety*.”⁸ That he is able to make some constructive use of his anxiety doesn’t refute the fact that he has not attained authentic selfhood, which always has an element of inner-direction. Thus, far from being (able to be) well-rounded—which he often seems to be—this person doesn’t even know who or what he is, and is therefore fundamentally alienated from himself.

It’s time I ended this preliminary discussion. I’ll make only one more observation, or rather a response to a possible objection. I can imagine a postmodern intellectual shouting at me, “You keep talking about self-realization, individuation, authentic selfhood and whatnot, but it doesn’t even occur to you that the self is a fiction! There is no entity called the ‘self’ behind appearances!” This objection is confused, like all postmodernism, but it obscurely grasps a truth. The injunction to “Be true to yourself!”

⁶ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*, p. 66.

⁷ David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953), p. 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

is misguided, for it postulates a dualism: it assumes that there is a specific self to be true to, a self that is somehow buried within each person and only requires a little coaxing to show itself. There is no such thing, no “already-given” self. Nietzsche’s “Become who you are!” is better—as is his statement that “Your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you usually take yourself to be.” These maxims, rather than encouraging you to navel-gaze (“Who am I *really*? Am I being true to myself right now? If I could only introspect deeply enough, I would know who I really am!”), encourage you to fix your gaze on something outside you—on the world, on your activities, on your freedom to throw yourself into life. One can realize one’s potential in many ways. Authentic selfhood is not a matter of acting in a way that accords with some sort of deeper, truer self; it is, rather, defined by an attitude one takes toward oneself and the world. This attitude isn’t chosen; it spontaneously emerges in the course of a healthy life. It is opposed to what Trilling, following Hegel, calls the disintegrated consciousness—the anxiety-ridden, self-doubting, self-contradictory, overly self-conscious consciousness, the alienated consciousness. The consciousness, in short, of modern man, who is what he is not and is not what he is (to quote Sartre). The “authentic self” is such not by being true to itself but by being deeply well-disposed toward itself, by being one with itself and its objectifications. –Questions surrounding the concept of authenticity have fascinated innumerable thinkers and poets, and I cannot settle them in one paragraph, but suffice it to say, for now, that the truly “authentic” self is integrated with itself and the world, is far along on the path of individuation, recognizes itself in its environment, has the capacity to exploit its potential, and feels free in everything it does—approaches life in the spirit of play, of spontaneity. The most “authentic” person is he for whom questions about authenticity don’t even exist, being totally superfluous and unconsciously understood as basically meaningless (especially for him). [...]