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THE CULT OF THE Individual

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Francis X. Hezel SJ

The Individual and Society

All cultures, even traditional small island societies, recognize to some extent the importance of the individual, investing each person with a certain range of choices and protection. On the other hand, even fully modernized societies like the US make some allowance for the social dimension of the individual self, so that personal choices are modified somewhat by the demands and expectations of the community. Nonetheless, a real tension exists between the individual and the social everywhere, and each culture is weighted toward one or the other pole on this sliding scale.

As Pacific Island societies struggle to modernize, we are likely to attribute all of the bumps in the road to cultural conflict between an island society and the West. This may be true, but it sheds little light on the precise nature of the problem and so offers us little help. My suggestion is that we use another filter, one that allows us to see many, if not all, of these problems as rising from differences in the relative weight given the individual and the society.

Consider these examples.

An economic planner from abroad suggests that in order to encourage business, persons need freedom to use land in a way that will maximize its productive value. Since communally owned land requires general agreement over the smallest details of a land lease, it is an advantage to have the land individually owned. In the same way, a person who has control over his own savings is more likely to be motivated to



New Video

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CHASING THE DREAM



Whether on a pathway to the Olympics, regional finals, or just having fun, sports can be a healthy and satisfying outlet for all. The video explores a broad range of athletics in the FSM.

New Article

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Is That the Best You Can Do? A Tale of Two Micronesian Economies

We once had such high hopes for economic self-reliance in Micronesia. The formula seemed clear to us: with a cutback in cost of government and increased economic productivity, the islands might not be rich, but they would at least be able to pay their own way. Whatever happened to these high hopes?

This article, published as an East-West Center Pacific Islands Policy monograph, takes us on a 40-year personal journey exploring the highs and lows of economic development in the FSM and the Marshalls. Even as the author admits his own changes in thinking before settling into more realistic expectation for an island economy, he challenges others to do the same. Is the formula that financial institutions propose today any more viable than the ones we clung to decades ago?

We have changed our email address!

See the back cover for full list of new email addresses.

resentment in solitude. As the spate of shooting sprees by snubbed high school students and disgruntled employees in recent years has demonstrated, the dangers are too great. Someday the nation will realize that the best way of preventing such tragedies is not by beefing up the police force but by working to reestablish that safety net known as community. Likewise, we can hope that the US will someday recognize that the most effective step it can take to prevent terrorism is not by plugging its "porous borders" (they'll always be porous), but by encouraging the sort of vigilance best exercised by neighbors and community.

Meanwhile, Micronesians who have migrated to the US, along with other ethnic migrant groups, may represent the wave of the future for America. Visits with these families, as our "Micronesians Abroad" article in the last issue of *Micronesian Counselor* points out, reveal a pronounced sense of the individual, but an equally strong emphasis on building up the community systems needed to an island-
support that are establish style



For questions or comments, please contact Francis X. Hezel SJ at fxhezel@micsem.org

seek profit from his business than one whose bank account is open to any and all in his family.

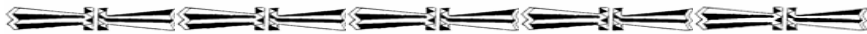
A social worker from the US urges that laws be enacted to enforce provisions of the Treaty on the Rights of Children. Parents might have once enjoyed the right to discipline their children in any way they chose, but physical abuse presents such a serious threat that the government should be empowered to protect the child from its own parents if need arises. The rights of the individual child, in other words, trump the traditional authority of the family in which the child is raised.

A medical consultant who has come to discuss the HIV/AIDS threat stresses the importance of confidentiality on testing results to protect any individuals who may have tested positive for the virus. Others in the group wonder whether the rights of the community to protect itself should not require that some warning be issued, especially if the victim is sexually active, but the consultant insists that confidentiality to protect the individual has the prior claim.

The issue in each of these examples might be viewed as simply one of cultural conflict, but the real issue goes much deeper than that. In each of these cases, and in so many more besides, the critical point is where the boundary between the individual and society should be drawn—how much weight the individual should be given in making a decision.

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Boundaries around the individual are much more tightly drawn in the West than in the Pacific, as everyone knows. The individual is offered greater protection, invested with far more choice, and generally exalted beyond what would be expected in an island society. But as quickly as Micronesian societies are



adapting to keep up with expectations from abroad, the boundaries in the West are being even more tightly drawn, as we will later see.


Shadowy Boundaries in Times Past

Albert Sturges, a 19th century missionary to Pohnpei, penned a line a century and a half ago that might have echoed the sentiments of many other foreign visitors to the islands before and since. “Humanity here is one viscous mass,” Sturges wrote, “and there is no such thing here as individual action or individual responsibility.” Sturges would no doubt have written the same line if he had been in Yap or Palau or anywhere else in the region. How many times have we all heard visitors say “Why is everyone so deferential? Isn’t there anyone who will stand up and make his position known? Where is the sense of personal responsibility?”

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- *Albert Sturges, 1852*

But personal responsibility and strong individual positions were generally de-emphasized in traditional island societies that depended so much on harmonious community interaction. On the individual-society continuum much more weight was given to the social than to the individual. Personal boundaries were fuzzy, with ample room allowed for infringement of social demands on the personal. The upside of this is the charming island spirit, with the warm hospitality and the group-mindedness, that visitors to the islands are forever raving about. The downside is that the individual had little room to stretch his or her wings and fly. Personal aspirations and creative impulses were necessarily limited by the same cultural settings that checked the



lamented the loss of neighborliness and community solidarity. They reacted by creating an unprecedented number of new voluntary associations and clubs—the Red Cross, the Knights of Columbus, the Boy Scouts, the PTA, and the Rotary Club, among hundreds of others founded during these years. Similar efforts in the cities, aided by the influx of immigrant ethnic groups, resulted in the kind of close-knit neighborhood that I grew up in the early post-war years.

Even today, Putnam assures us, Americans are beginning to compensate for some of the exaggerated claims of the individual and are finding new ways to create the human community that all people crave. My own family, for instance, is making a conscious attempt to create opportunities to get the broader family, including our first and second cousins, together for

Perhaps in remaining a step behind Americans in embracing the cult of the individual, [Micronesians] are...prophets of a reclaimed sense of the social self.

holidays, family events, and even for a week or two during the summer in the Adirondack Mountains, where 70-some of them will enjoy one another’s company during vacation while strengthening kin ties. We can expect to see a surge in civic associations and a new awareness of the importance of neighborhood in the years ahead, if we can believe Putnam. Americans won’t be bowling alone, or net-surfing in isolation, forever.

Indeed, the re-invention of community in some fashion is imperative for the US; the cost of maintaining the status quo is simply too high. Functioning neighborhoods and social groups engender a spirit of trust, tolerance and empathy, while they also keep a keen eye out for loners and drifters, those individuals who lack the resources or the interest to create a personalized community around them. No nation can afford to let such persons lick their real or perceived wounds and nurse their

conversation often breaks down after this assertion, with each of the parties going his own way clinging tightly to his convictions. If we all leave the table confirmed in our relativism and unwilling to talk out the issues, what hope is there for the older American vision of a civil discussion among citizens to thrash out a common understanding that will result in community action? If radical individualism and the relativism that so often accompanies it reduces us to silence, what point is there to those town halls in New England? What hope is there of achieving the consensus that is so especially important in any community, whether in the US or on a Pacific island?



Where Do We Go From Here?

The emergence of the individual is a healthy development that has had many beneficial effects on the West. It need not efface what I have been calling the social self—the sense that the individual is partly constituted by society just as it is responsible to society. In recent decades, however, individualism has been pushing the limits, progressing to the point where the social self is close to being ignored if not discredited. This is what we could call the cult of individualism, with its failure to recognize the importance of the social element in the person.

Will countries like the US continue on this course toward radical individualism in the future? Probably not. We know that societies have a tendency to correct for extreme social trends and make necessary course changes, if only to insure their own survival. Putnam points out that in the late 19th century and early 20th century, as the nation was trying to digest its productive and technological advances, America faced a similar challenge. Its citizens, many of whom had moved off farms to live in the city,

creation of kooks and eccentrics who could tear the island community apart.

Privacy and private property were not very high on the list of island priorities, as most of us haoles learned soon after our arrival. I remember an indignant Peace Corps Volunteer telling us that nothing in his rucksack of what he regarded as his private possessions was sacred in the eyes of his host family. He found that even his toothbrush was used when he was away. If even his toothbrush was to be regarded as communal property, he wondered what would be considered private. Certainly not one's underwear, as generations of Xavier High students learned to their distress when they tried to find the briefs they had just washed and hung out to dry.

As a matter of fact, even Pacific islanders, famed as they are for their communal ownership, have drawn the line somewhere. On many islands the head of the household placed the most valuable possessions in a locked trunk to which he held the key. On Pohnpei, valuables were stored in the rafters of the house to keep them safe, as the old proverb attests. In Yap the betelnut bag was inviolable, and anyone who reached into it was committing a serious breach of etiquette. All appearances to the contrary, islanders did have a few things that were regarded as private.

Personal boundaries were fuzzy...The upside is the charming island spirit, with the warm hospitality, and the group-mindedness...The downside is that the individual had little room to stretch his or her wings and fly.

Still, the social dimension of life in an island society absorbed so much of a person that there was relatively little of what westerners might call individual freedom. A man might have an indisputable claim on his betelnut bag or the key to his locked trunk, but not necessarily to his canoe or his adze or even his wife or daughter.

Emergence of the Individual

Over the years, islanders have staked out much more ground for the individual. As the society has begun to modernize, Micronesians are learning to expand their own definition of what constitutes private property so that it is more in conformity with the West. There was a time, I'm told, when Chuukese wage-earners would turn over their paycheck to their father or perhaps their wife's older brother. Most have long since begun pocketing the paycheck themselves. This doesn't mean that they are not obligated to share what the money buys, but the paycheck (like the toothbrush) has become labeled as private property.

Another example of the emergence of the sense of the individual is in the allocation of space in many homes today. With newer forms of housing, what was once a large communal area is now usually divided into rooms. Even in some of the older wooden structures, walls have been constructed to partition private space for each smaller family unit. Whereas, in the past, one's "private space" might have been confined to the area of the sleeping mat that was spread out for the evening, now that private space is both larger and more rigidly defined. Children often have their own rooms, and in some households they keep the keys to their locked rooms. Where once, in the open family estate of thatched roofs and outdoors living, there were few boundaries, and even these were permeable, private space is

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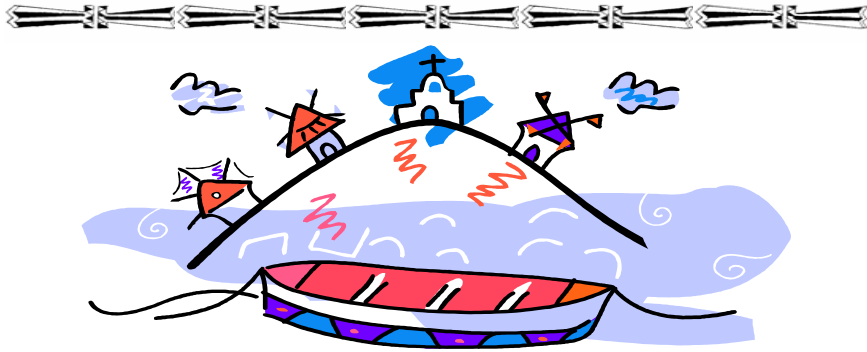
But the shift towards individualism in Micronesia embraces more than one's property and private space; it also includes

rather than "How will it effect *us*?" Last year a much younger American told me in the course of a conversation that he believed that a person had the right to terminate his life if he chose. "After all, it's his life," he argued. Shocked, I suggested that there were, in fact, many others with a claim to that individual's life—his parents, wife, children and friends. "No one has the sole claim on his own life," I contended. Perhaps nothing so well illustrates the difference between the person steeped in the tradition of the social self and the radical individualist as that argument. One is guided by the principle that "I am responsible for myself." The other holds that each of us belongs to others, and so we owe the impact of our acts upon others serious consideration before making any final decision.

Legislation today in the US, as throughout the Western world, is bound to reflect this radical individualism. Laws look to protecting the rights of the individual—the mistreated child, the HIV/AIDS victim, the abused wife, the business investor—even at the expense of the family or community. Indeed, legislation of this sort reaches deep into the family or community and plucks out the threatened individual to provide the security that society can not be expected to offer. This type of legislation betrays a lack of confidence in social systems to provide for persons what they have done in the past, even as it reinforces radical individualism.

The question is more likely to be "What effect will this have on *me*?" rather than "How will it effect *us*?"

The consequences of radical individualism go even further, as Robert Bellah's book, *Habits of the Heart*, suggests. We who are shaped by forces that we regard as unique, see ourselves as the measure of our own belief systems, the author notes. The way it is commonly put goes something like this: "He might think that way, but that's him. I see life this other way. Each of us is entitled to his own view." There is undoubtedly a great deal of truth in this contention, but Bellah's concern is that the



This new generation of Americans, of course, is bound by the same human need for companionship and support that we all are. People today need friends no less than people of earlier generations. The difference is that Americans today increasingly choose their own support groups and friends. No longer are they stuck with those who happen to live nearby, but they will select from a broader pool those with whom they will spend their leisure time. More and more today persons shape their own personal networks: a group with whom they may do rock climbing and another that shares their interests in wine tasting, each drawn from different parts of town. Other leisure time activities might include gym workouts (alone), catching a recent movie, and surfing the net. Their marriage partners may be drawn, not from their work place or a house on the other side of the street, but a match made through an on-line dating service. The point is that individuals today take more responsibility than ever before for shaping their own social circles and creating the networks they need for survival. Increasingly, then, they will view themselves not as products of their own community, but as creators of it. After all, the community they have assembled to suit their personal needs is the product of their own choices. Hence the erosion of the social self.


If the person sees himself as defined by his own choices, then his society's claim upon him will diminish. Whether the person is considering an abortion or a divorce, he or she is more likely to take an individualistic perspective of the issue than those who were raised with a stronger sense of the social self. The question is more likely to be "What effect will this have on *me*?"

personal rights over one's own body. What could be more intimately associated with the individual than this? Consequently, we may assume that individuals in a traditional island society enjoyed control over at least their bodies, but this was not always

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the case. Marriage partners were often assigned to the young, so that even what we today consider the most intimate parts of the corporeal realm were overseen by others. Indeed, sexual access to women in the family were often accorded by the head of the family to guests, while wives of absent family members were customarily entrusted to the care, and the sexual intimacies, of older brothers. What could it possibly have meant to declare that a person ought to enjoy control over one's body in those days? Today, however, much of this has changed. Arranged marriages are rare, and the sexual intimacies that were once imposed on the women in the family are largely self-chosen today.

The political rights associated with the individual are also being exercised very differently today. When elections were introduced to the islands by the US Naval administration after World War II, it was understood that each person was to have a vote that could be used to choose elected representatives in government. What was not always understood, at least by the Navy, is that the head of the family often took it upon himself to instruct the family members as to how they were to cast that vote. For years it was common for a family to vote en bloc for a candidate that the head of the household favored. Today, however, family members increasingly vote as individuals, thus fulfilling the purpose of the ballot but at the same time creating serious rifts within the family that can not be easily healed.



(Politics is taken seriously everywhere in the islands, with emotions running very high in some elections.)

Overall, we can say that the status of the individual has been elevated in the islands in recent years. The individual Micronesian today enjoys a much larger personal sphere than he or she would have had forty years ago, or even twenty years ago. The person has more privacy, more personal choice, greater claim to private property, and a stronger sense of individuality.

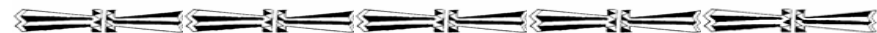
Still One Step Behind

No one I speak to seems eager to return to the old days when the tension between the individual and society was weighted so strongly in favor of the community, when the individual had so little protection against the incursions of family and community. It's not that islanders today are heedless of the claims of society on them; it's just that most of them would prefer to be in the position of deciding for themselves such matters as how much and what they should share with family and friends. To the relief

No matter what adjustments islanders make, they keep losing ground in the struggle to accommodate the individual.

of most island people, the new boundaries on private property, space and bodily autonomy are on their way to being well established.

Still, as Micronesians redraw the boundaries between individual and society, they seem to be running a race they can never win. Not because they're not trying hard to adapt, but because the Western world is changing at least as quickly as they are. While islanders push back the limits of the society to allow individual prominence, the West is galloping toward what

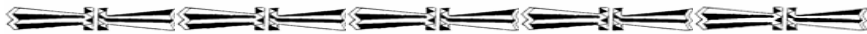


and even from the type of social visiting that once was a major recreational outlet for them. Putnam discounts many of the standard explanations for this phenomenon: changes in the family, the growing number of working wives, increasing suburban sprawl, and the mounting pressures of work. He admits that the popularity of television might have had a modest impact on the decline of civic engagement, and accepts the notion that increased mobility of Americans could mean shallower community roots and thus less involvement, but he denies that Americans move around any more frequently now than they did forty or fifty years ago. In the end, Putnam can only assert that the loss of the social self is the result of a generational change whose cause remains a mystery.

The Denial of the Social Self in the West

The decline of the community—at least as we used to understand it—is a sociological fact. Americans don't join the Rotary or the Kiwanas, or attend PTA meetings, or engage in grassroots political work, or even join sports leagues, as they once did. Increasingly Americans are bowling alone rather than as a member of a team, as they would have in the past. Nor do they have the links with their neighborhood that an earlier generation (my generation) would have had. They aren't going next door to borrow sugar or chat over coffee, much less organizing block parties or barbecues. Even if the causes of this change are not clear, the consequences certainly are: the emergence of a new sense of the individual self.

If radical individualism and relativism reduces us to silence...what hope is there of achieving the consensus so important in any community, whether in the US or on a Pacific island?



we might be identified by the section of town (Kensington-Bailey area). These designations were real, not just points on a map of the city used to locate where we lived. After work the men would often stop in at the neighborhood tavern, their usual haunt, for a

Americans today increasingly choose their own support groups and friends. No longer are they stuck with those who happen to live nearby.

beer or a boilermaker to unwind and chat with a roomful of others whom they knew by name. We all knew the name of the police officer who patrolled our neighborhood, and he was often called on to settle minor family disputes or talk to parents whose child had misbehaved. On Christmas Eve each year my father

would dust off his violin and do a duet with the man who played the trumpet next door as the neighbors gathered around to sing "Silent Night" and exchange Christmas greetings. We didn't necessarily have high regard for our neighbors, but we knew who they were and felt that, like it or not, we and they shared a common lot. We understood that the people in our neighborhood had a claim on us, and we on them.

The sense of social self in the US, like the neighborhood spirit that nourished it, survived the rise of technology, the development of new means of transportation (the railroad and the automobile) and communication (telegraph, phone and radio), the migration from rural farms, the growth of large cities, and the shrinking of the standard family size. So, let's not imagine that the decline of the social self is the direct result of technology or the changes that it has wrought.

What, then, happened to bring about the decline of the social self and the advent of radical individualism? In his sociological best-seller *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam documents the decline of the US community since the end of World War II. He shows how Americans have drifted away from neighborhood associations and participation in local clubs and organizations



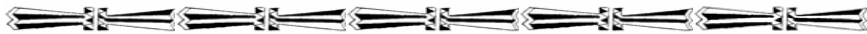
could be called the cult of the individual. Micronesians may be checking the limits of the social self, but the West is coming dangerously close to denying it altogether.

Perhaps some examples might help to illuminate this.

Over the past several decades, Micronesian societies have generally conceded to young men and women the right to marry whomever they wish. Today, however, many young people attending college in the US do not even feel obligated to ask permission to marry, as they once would have. They simply inform their family of the marriage after the fact. Marriage, as it is understood in countries like the US, is a contract between two individuals rather than a linkage of two families, as it is viewed throughout the Pacific. And so, young people have not only gained the right to choose their spouses, but under the influence of the US cultural environment they may marry without even the formal consent of their parents.

The boundaries between the society and the individual are constantly being renegotiated...

Women in the islands have been "liberated" to a degree that would have been unthinkable three or four decades earlier. But they have also been "liberated" from the protection of their brothers and other male relatives when their husbands mistreat them. Like any other individual under threat of mistreatment, a woman is expected to call the police in the event of domestic trouble. Hence, it is the police rather than her own family members who are expected to intervene and restrain the husband's behavior if necessary. In the US, however, some communities have taken it a step further and now require that police officers who have been called to intervene in a domestic abuse situation actually make an arrest. In short, the protection of the woman, once entrusted to her own family, has been appropriated today to law enforcement officials. In their zeal to protect the safety of the individual being mistreated, they are required to confine the guilty



party rather than resolve the dispute and attempt to reestablish social harmony in the family. Women are certainly accorded more rights than ever before, but in contemporary US law the protection of the individual victim outweighs the need to preserve the family unit.

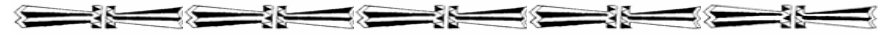
Children at home in the islands are probably freer than ever before. But Micronesians residing in the US are learning not to lock their young children in a car unattended or leave a visible mark on their school children when they discipline them. Otherwise, the law may intervene and either punish the parents or possibly even withdraw the children from the custody of their parents. Even parents who have learned to avoid some of the extreme forms of punishment they may have once exercised over their children can find that they have not gone far enough to avoid the long arm of the law.

These strictures are not necessarily bad; they are certainly intended to provide for the safety of persons who are thought to be incapable of defending themselves. The point, however, is that the US, like most Western nations, has taken the protection

Increasingly Americans are bowling alone rather than as a member of a team, as they would have in the past. Nor do they have the links with their neighborhood that an earlier generation would have had.

of the individual a step ahead of the accommodations that Micronesians have already made. In its zeal to safeguard the individual even from its immediate family, the US has moved beyond the adaptations that islanders have already made. No matter what adjustments islanders make, they keep losing ground in the struggle to accommodate the individual.

The boundaries between the society and the individual are constantly being renegotiated—in the West as much as in island cultures. Just when we might think that the social claims on the



person have all but vanished and the individual has emerged triumphant, the society calls for a further roll-back in the social boundaries.

The Vanishing Community in the US

Why the radical individualism in the West? Some believe that the US was a shrine to the individual from its very birth, since the US Constitution is prefaced with a Bill of Rights guaranteeing each person equal protection. It's true that individual rights were taken very seriously in the US from the outset, but so was the social dimension. Every New England village, for instance, had a town hall in which people met to debate and decide local issues of all kinds. There were clubs and organizations that people joined to educate themselves or simply for entertainment. While such affiliations did not cancel the sense of individuality that people felt, they modified it by generating a sense of the social self—the understanding that each person was the product of society and therefore was responsible to society in some fashion.

Even as the US evolved from a nation of farmsteads and rural communities into a network of large cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, its citizens did not lose the sense of the social self. The grange halls and village churches might have vanished, but people somehow found a sense of community within the large urban setting. In the late 1940s, when I was growing up, there were clearly defined neighborhoods within Buffalo, our city of over half a million people. In that largely Catholic city, we could define ourselves by our parish—for instance, as being from St James or Holy Trinity or St. Gerard—or

