The Rise (and Possible Fall) of Networked Individualism

TOWARDS A NETWORKED SOCIETY

I have been writing in recent years about the transformation from a group-based to a networked society. Probably the most coherent text version to date is in Wellman 2001, although I expect to write more fully about this soon. I summarize matters here, and why the events of September 11 2001 and afterwards may have reversed the trend (see also Table 1).

1. Community is rarely a neighborhood phenomenon. Even before the Internet, community ties were predominantly non-local. Now, the Internet not only supports online-only communities, but more predominantly, it facilitates the maintenance of far-flung communities that interact both online and offline. Caroline Haythornthwaite and I have just edited *The Internet in Everyday Life* which documents this. The preliminary version is in the *American Behavioral Scientist* (Nov 2001); the expanded version will be published by Blackwells 2002. Keith Hampton and I argue that the predominant mode now is probably "glocalization" – far-flung networks with household and worksite home bases continuing to be important. I suspect that the trend has been moving to "networked individualism," in which the individual operator of his/her network is important, rather than the household or work unit.

2. Workers have more discretion about how they do their job. The report to multiple peers and superiors instead of staying solely within one work unit. Management by network is replacing management by hierarchal tree or matrix Participants inherently have multiple loyalties and partial commitments. They have other projects and task groups in which they are involved.

2. Corporations are less apt to be autarkic enterprises. They often link in complex networks of alliance and exchange with putative competitors. At times, members of different organizations come together in temporary virtual organizations to deal with specific problems or markets, while retaining their membership in (and loyalty to) their home organization.

3. Trading and political blocs lost their monolithic character in the world system. In the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, more complex network structures linked and cleaved nations (Snyder and Kick 1979; Kick and Davis 2001; Sacks, Ventrresca and Uzzi 2001; Barnett 2001; Bergesen and Sonnett 2001; Smith and Timberlake 2001).

BACK TO LITTLE BOXES

Veterans of the 1960s may remember Malvena Reynolds' wonderful "Little Boxes" song which saw endless arrays of identical suburban homes as a metaphor for a conformity society. My fear is that reaction to the events of September 11 2001, and continuing social and physical uncertainty since then, may lead to a move back from open, permeable, flexible networks, to closed, bounded, rigid little boxes – a group based society:

1. Fear of strangers can lead to negative stereotyping, and a drawing back within bounded, gated communities. This might entail more socially homogeneous friendship (and kinship) networks – wherever network members are physically located – as well as more physically-local, guarded communities.

2. Security-induced difficulties in travel can lead to more local involvement. There already are numerous often-unpublicized closures of expressways, bridges and tunnels in American metropolitan areas.

3. Even greater difficulties in flying has cut back on inter-metropolitan and inter-national travel. Until recently, a significant part of the economy has been based on air travel connectivity of knowledge workers, managers, and technicians. Many travelled on a more-than-weekly basis. Security delays make such travel more difficulty, and adoption of a thorough-going Israeli model will cause further delays. (Remember, that almost all trips through Israeli airports are relatively infrequent international trips.)

4. Security concerns have also slowed the flow of goods, internationally and to some extent internally. For example, the relatively open US-Canadian border had evolved towards just-in-time manufacturing divisions of labor. When the free flow of goods was greatly slowed post-September 11, many enterprises were without parts and materials.

5. Security issues and lack of international trust may lead to the reformation of inter-state blocs. In the post-Cold War period, international networks were fluid and un-blocked, with even Russia discussing joining NATO. Unlike the East-West Cold War, these are more apt to be more North-South.

What will this world look like? One possibility is to take Table 1 and reverse the arrows. Are we leaving our networks and retreating to the cocoons of little boxes?

Table 1: Comparing Group-Based and Networked Societies

GROUP-BASED SOCIETY	NETWORKED SOCIETY
United Family	Serial Marriage, Mixed Custody
Shared Community	Multiple, Partial Personal Nets
Neighborhoods	Dispersed Networks
Voluntary Organizations	Informal Leisure
Face-to-Face	Computer-Mediated Communication
Spaces	Public Private Spaces
Focused Work Unit	Networked Organizations
Job in a Company	Career in a Profession
Autarky	Outsourcing
Office, Factory	Airplane, Internet, Cellphone
Ascription	Achievement
Hierarchies	Matrix Management
Conglomerates	Virtual Organizations/Alliances
Cold War Blocs	Fluid, Transitory Alliances

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