

A Treatise On Belonging, Its Role in Society and the Creation of One's Self

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As we drift further into the Age of Globalism and the Late Capitalistic melting, melding of identities/borders/differences/etc. by the markets and property; the topic of what we think ourselves to be a part of and the things we, ourselves own has become increasingly relevant. Among the plethora of crises that capitalism is currently undergoing -and in all likelihood it won't survive in its current form- such as the climate crisis, democratic backsliding, civil rights being chipped away at, the current international climate which will seemingly drive us back into the Cold War complete with nuclear threats and the consequences of all the aforementioned issues; the belonging/identity crisis does not seem to be debated or even recognized for that matter. This is the unseen threat at the very heart of our society, the issue of the soul that we'll have to solve if we are to solve the issues of the material. So, this is our treatise on the topic to offer whatever miniscule and ultimately insignificant contribution we can give to the conversation.

We shall start as any person that is serious about philosophizing should begin: by defining the terms of the topic down to its most basic components and then categorizing them if need be. The basic belonging is being part or property of something else. The human feeling of belonging can be defined as the affiliation/affinity/sense of resonance/loyalty one has towards an idea or a collective or to something equivalent. It may also take part/be instrumental in creating an identity for the being. This "human feeling of belonging" can also be divided in twain: the interpersonal feeling of belonging (your nation, ideology, religion, football, whatever) and the personal feeling of belonging (your family, your close relationships etc.). For the purposes of this essay the personal feeling of belonging matters not as we will focus solely on the interpersonal feeling of belonging.

The multiple versions of interpersonal feeling of belonging are being slowly eroded by the various things it helped birth. As these influences served as the -as Marx once put it- opiate of the people against revolutionary movements for a long time; Weimar Era German businessmen supported the Nazis against the Communists (and to a certain extent against the Social Democrats) as the scapegoat for the ills of their country and the inequality the Nazis provided was different from the ones that were provided by the SPD and the KPD. But by this point the capital undoes all that is not related by money or production method; the only true difference between people becomes their economic situation as all else adjusts the economic hierarchy or disappears. The only true struggle slowly turns into a conflict of class and inequality. In the modern age religion gets gnawed on by our relatively newfound faith in the natural and the scientific. The borders which define nations get screwed over by free trade and the ever increasing influence of the private companies. The slow ending to gender roles makes our ideas and the roles we have based around our sexes be absent. These rapid changes cause our society to polarize (or at least accelerate the polarization greatly) as we do not have the old rules set in stone. The reactionary forces try to prove that this is the fault of their boogymen of the moment (be it the Jews or the SJWs), who are the ones behind this "plot" that is causing the degradation of their sacred collective/ideal which they belong to; their cult if you will. That is broadly correct of every cult based around the feeling of interpersonal belonging. This obsession with a plot can have deadly consequences, as can be seen in the various shootings caused by the more fringe elements of the reactionaries (many of whom are misogynists who are obsessed with masculinity while others are obsessed with race; they think that their collective is threatened and try to do something about it). As Umberto Eco said: "Thus at the root of the Ur-Fascist psychology there is the obsession with a plot, possibly an international one." These "plots" the fascists/reactionaries see and the violence that is the result thereof is caused by the perceived or (in edge cases and in specific situations) real corrosion of the collective/ideal they create their cult around.

Moreover, in the modern age of consumerism one can apparently also "belong" in a brand. One can apparently be a dedicated fan of a single footwear company or a specific line of sunglasses. In this society, specific brands dissolve their names and logos into our collective subconscious, attempting to have us constantly crave whatever new designs or "new designs" they came up with. With this ploy, these corporations inject themselves into us and try to pacify the people's outrage against the great diversity of exploitative labor practices and their human rights abuses. For example, someone who constantly keeps an eye on the upcoming version of a phone, or the newest design of a piece of clothing that will be presented to him by fashion designers, cannot see the vile scheme behind these. All the consumers see is their brand-new phone or that shiny jacket. Not the production in the background that is -at best- morally dubious. They give the money, they devour what they want, and they go on with their lives with at best a temporarily satisfied hunger for the acquisition of more commodities.

The pride of being a “productive member of the society” and the euphoria that comes from the sense of belonging in this self-policing totalitarian culture and economic system is a whole other issue. Everyone is pressured into being an unoriginal cog in this machine of institutionalized intellectual death of the self which we usually refer to as “the system”. Being a hard working person is glorified as a good thing by itself and people are expected to be like that. This culture of workaholic-ness pressures all into being a machine of capital where we squeeze ourselves and sell our souls to the all-glorified dream of becoming a successful and perfectly fitting member of the society. Quoth Charlie Chaplin: “Don’t give yourselves to these unnatural men - machine men with machine minds and machine hearts! You are not machines! You are not cattle! You are men!” While the authoritarian regime may be different; the culture of machine men, productivity and being forced into a system of perpetual exploitation of all remains similar to this quote. Although alluring, the sad truth is that these dreams are merely dreams and will always be for many of us. This kind exploitation makes us alienated from our bodies, the folks around us and nature. It makes us into rusty clockworks, the parts of a larger machine that must function properly, no matter how high the cost may grow. That is essential, because under capitalism the economic growth is essential; damn the consequences (from colonialism to climate change); if (combined) wealth does not increase it will crash as the market becomes stagnant and the system slowly switches from being a market economy to a monopoly and new powers appear. Capitalism must constantly change and revolutionize to survive. Everyone has to be a perfect part of the machine to serve the new god of the new religion: Capital. All have to make sacrifices, from their humanity, their welfare, their mental health and their relationships to sustain the supposedly almighty god. It boils down to the mythology of the Aztecs in which blood sacrifices were required to maintain the sun. Our sacrifices may not be as literal but they are still sacrifices to our “god”. It has expanded from just being a practice on POWs to a society-wide ritual in which all must participate in or suffer the consequences of disobeying the traditions of the religion. This is modern asceticism, where we all have to be for our god and for ourselves. And like the ascetics, we convince ourselves that our suffering is good and justified. Capitalism may seem an unstoppable force right now, with very little we can do about it. “seem” is the operative word as nothing is unstoppable, and we can end this. Collective action -such as strikes and mutual aid-, international solidarity and changing the system from the inside. We, and only we can emancipate ourselves from the loop of exploitation. We have the strength to do it, together. The issue is we don’t have much time for peaceful change from the inside as the crises (most notably the ecological calamity currently breathing down our necks) do not wait. We have but one chance, if we botch this our only chance to remove this tumor goes down the drain. Otherwise -unfortunately- violent action (which is better than what we currently have) will be necessary. The words of Ursula LeGuin ring particularly well with the situation: “We live in capitalism, Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings.”