Only Enlightened Collectivism Can Save Us

We are witnessing a mass extinction and no amount of rugged individualism is going to solve it, writes Caitlin Johnstone.

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Individualism cannot save humanity from the crises it faces. It’s not the right tool.

There is a widespread belief that if we just eliminated all collectivist impulses within our society, we could eliminate all our problems. That the government which causes so much bloodshed and oppression wouldn’t be harmful if we can shrink it down to a minor role, or even to nonexistence, and the corporate powers which attach themselves to governments would thereby lose power over individuals. Let individuals take care of themselves however they see fit, with no collectivist power interfering in their affairs, and the world will sort itself out in a harmonious way.

This will never happen.

The most common argument for why this will never happen is that the world is full of awful people, and if you place the will of the individual over the will of the collective, the awful people will be able to do a lot more awful things. The people who are sociopathic enough to destroy the environment and exploit others for profit will be able to exert more
influence over the total wellbeing of the world than those who aren’t, and there’ll be no safety nets in place protecting those who are born into under-privileged situations. Individuals like mothers who aren’t as capable of earning money would frequently find themselves dependent on the kindness of a man who may or may not be kind. Such a society would claim to be just, since it makes the same demands of everybody, but due to real circumstances could only ever be gravely unjust.

This argument is of course true, but it’s not the primary reason that individualism cannot save us.

**Looming Ecosystem Collapse**

The primary reason individualism cannot save us is that it depends upon competition. If everyone is an individual whom the collective will neither help nor hinder, we’re all going to have to compete for opportunities and resources on a shrinking world of limited opportunities and resources. A society that is pouring all of its energy and creativity into the drive of the individual to get ahead of the other individuals will never be able to overcome the fundamental problem of looming ecosystemic collapse, setting us instead on a massive rat race to be the first to destroy the environment for profit before someone else does. Which is why strict adherents to individualism must tell each other fairy tales about the ecosystem being fine in order to avoid cognitive dissonance.

In reality, we are witnessing a mass extinction the likes of which we haven’t seen since the end of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago, with some 200 species going extinct every
single day. The very ecosystemic context in which we evolved is vanishing underneath us. More than half the world’s wildlife has vanished in 40 years, and the worldwide insect population has plummeted by as much as 90 percent. Fertile soil is vanishing, and so are forests. The oceans are choking to death, 90 percent of global fish stocks are either fully fished or overfished, the seas are full of microplastics, and phytoplankton, an indispensable foundation of earth’s food chain, have been killed off by 40 percent since 1950. Science keeps pouring in showing that global warming is occurring faster than previously predicted, and there are self-reinforcing warming effects called “feedback loops” which, once set off, can continue warming the atmosphere further and further regardless of human behavior, causing more feedback loops.

We’re never going to compete our way out of this situation. We need to turn around, all of us, together. Now. Sure, in an entirely individualist paradigm we’d see some people inventing renewable energy sources and new materials which would compete with more ecocidal existing models, but that wouldn’t suddenly make it unprofitable to keep destroying the rainforests or pouring poison into the atmosphere. If we had centuries for more environment-friendly models to rise to the top we might have a chance, but we don’t have centuries to turn this thing around, we have years. Relying on human ingenuity directed by nothing other than competition and profit will not focus our efforts with anything like the necessary urgency.

Human-Carbon Link
Individualists know this, which is why their ideology relies so heavily on denialism of scientific consensus regarding the disappearance of the ecosystemic context in which our species evolved. I’ve studied the arguments of this denialism closely, and personally have found nothing that couldn’t be swiftly debunked with a little research. The science showing the warming effect of man’s carbon-releasing industrial activities has been public knowledge since it was discovered in 1896 by a man named Svante Arrhenius. Nobody accused him of being a pawn in a globalist conspiracy at the time; the scientific world simply noted his discovery with an “Oh cool yeah, that makes sense.” One of his colleagues even suggested setting fire to unused coal seams in order to increase global temperature, because back then milder winters sounded like a nice idea. It wasn’t until this line of scientific inquiry became threatening to the fossil fuel industry that it turned into a radically politicized debate propelled by Koch-funded research teams and Fox News.

The door is closed to solving our problems via rugged individualism anyway. The arguments for individualism have been used by right-wing mainstream political parties to cut taxes, slash social programs, kill minimum wage hikes and roll back regulations on corporations, but never, ever actually end up shrinking government beyond that. The war machine continues to swell, as does the increasingly militarized and surveillance-happy police state and all the other aspects of government which do actual harm to actual people. The arguments for individualism are only ever used to make things more comfortable for the oligarchs, never less.
We’re never going to overcome the oligarchic oppression machine and create a healthy world without extensive, mass-scale collaboration. Individualists argue “Hey, we can collaborate too! We just don’t want to be forced to by the collective.” Okay, but you don’t. And even if you did, how much energy would you have left over to throw into extensive mass-scale collaboration after having to spend so much of it competing with your neighbors to survive? Probably very little.

So, collaboration by the entire collective is the only answer. The problem is that malignant manipulators come in and hijack our healthy impulse to collaborate with each other and get us collaborating in the interests of power instead. That’s all the so-called “Resistance” to Trump is in America; it’s the herding of the populist left into support for the Democratic Party, which has no agenda other than the preservation and profit of existing power structures. All of our healthy impulses toward collectivist solutions to our problems have been thwarted by the fact that the ruling class is so adept at narrative control, which they are able to use to manipulate us into collaborating in ways that benefit them instead of collaborating to toss them out on their asses and build a healthy world.

So, collectivism by itself is worthless. What we need is not just our healthy impulse to collaborate, but to collaborate in a wise and intuitive way that is not manipulated by the propaganda narratives of the powerful. We need an enlightened collectivism in which we all collaborate toward the good of the whole, not because we’ve been
manipulated into it, nor even just because we’ve been convinced to by compelling arguments, but because we’ve become wise and compassionate enough to understand that that’s what’s best for everyone. This means fundamentally changing how our minds operate. It means a collective evolution into a wildly new relationship with thought.

Is that a big ask? Of course. Evolution always is. But it’s either that or extinction. We will either change from an ego-driven species that can be manipulated by fear and greed into an enlightened species that is not bound by mental narratives, or we will die. We absolutely have the freedom to pass or fail this test, but we’re necessarily going to end up taking it. In fact, we are taking it currently.

This transformation might be called “socialism” or “communism” or some other “-ism” in the future, but in reality it will be something unlike anything we’ve ever tried before. It won’t be merely a change in how power and resources are distributed, it will be a fundamental change in what humans are and how we operate, both as a collective and as individuals.

The belief that humanity can and must undergo a profound psychological transformation if we’re to survive isn’t flaky “out there” spiritualism, nor is it in fact “spiritual” at all; it’s a political position just as mundane and valid as the belief that the working class can and must rise up against the plutocracy. There isn’t actually any mechanism in place preventing us from doing this; the only thing stopping it is our not wanting it badly enough yet.

Humans were never meant to operate as individuals. We’re not
descended from solo creatures like tigers or polar bears, we’re descended from monkeys, group-oriented throughout our DNA. We need each other. It’s how our brains and nervous systems are wired. There’s no getting out of this. We’re going to wake up together or not at all. We’re going to evolve together or die together.

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