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Hannah Hightower
Collin College

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BALANCE OF POWER

Hannah Hightower
Winner of Writers' Bloc Prose Contest

GIVEN THAT SOCIETY HOLDS MASSIVE INFLUENCE OVER ITS CITIZENS, IT IS NOT UNREASONABLE TO ASSUME THAT IT IS MORE POWERFUL—MORE VITAL—THAN THE INDIVIDUAL. THE INDIVIDUAL, AFTER ALL, SEEMS VIRTUALLY POWERLESS TO STAND AGAINST SOCIETY'S TYRANNY, FOR DOING SO OFTEN YIELDS DISASTROUS RESULTS. For instance, a man who defies his society's gender roles will most likely be rejected by his society, an occurrence that he will certainly find unpleasant. Consequently, the negative outcomes of his defiance could make him hesitant to attempt socially-unacceptable behavior, robbing him of his power to influence society. However, the same situation could have the opposite effect: instead of stealing his will to defy society, his rejection by society could motivate him to further challenge societal norms, and could even result in him asserting influence over society. He could, in fact, begin to change his society, exerting the same power over it as it once did over him. In this way, then, the individual and society are equal, for each has the potential to overtake the other.

The influence of society—its ability to overtake the individual--stems from the fact that most individuals are not conscious of society's influence. Unlike government, society is not an institution that humans intentionally create; humans do not officially set societal decrees and mandates, for instance. Instead, society arises from the shared paradigms, customs, and traditions of a majority population. This means that it is rarely established formally—and although it must be taught to the individuals living within it, society is seldom learned through official means. Indeed, the laws of society are usually absorbed through simply observing the behavior of others. For instance, a girl learns which behaviors are socially acceptable for females by seeing her mother's actions rewarded or punished by society.

Because they are imparted in such a subtle manner, social norms are difficult to identify—and consequently, equally difficult to resist. The American social norm of affording others—especially strangers—"personal space" is not immediately

recognizable as a social norm because it is so commonplace. It is, in fact, almost instinctive, so most people do not give a second thought to the behavior. It is simply accepted without question, allowing the norm to be further entrenched in the minds of individuals. In a way, it is not unlike the parable of the frog in the pot: those who live in society do not recognize the rules and regulations that are being imparted on them, just as the frog in the parable does not realize

he is being boiled alive when the water's temperature gradually increases.

The unconscious adherence to society's laws means that individuals are prone to be swayed by whatever societal "voice" is strongest. That is, the opinion that is most influential—the one that is heard by the majority of those in a society—will be almost unquestioningly followed, like a steer being goaded to the slaughterhouse. For instance, the values and opinions

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explicitly and implicitly shown in media are likely to be adopted by the society that views it because it cannot fathom questioning it. It is used to not questioning things, after all; as mentioned previously, society is accustomed to following implicit laws such as the rules of “personal space.” In a sense, society has a veritable “hive-mindset,” the shared paradigms of society forcing it to think as a single organism. If society’s loudest voice instructs society to take a certain stance on an issue, society will willingly oblige, a muscle that cannot resist the instructions of the nervous system.

This “hive-mindset” tendency of society is both its greatest strength and most devastating weakness. It is a strength when the “voice” agrees with society’s values and customs; it is a weakness when the “voice” diverges from the societal

norms. For instance, the rhetoric of Donald Trump does not threaten the particular society he panders to, for his words do not contradict its norms and beliefs. In fact, his rhetoric reinforces that society’s paradigm, strengthening the overall influence society holds over its citizens. However, it is likely that that same group could be implicitly influenced by a different opinion via media; that society could watch a television program, for example, that subversively contradicts their paradigms. Given its vulnerability to influence, the group could begin to accept the subtle rhetoric without question, weakening its own paradigms while instituting others.

Like Trump’s influence over a particular society, a single person can become the “voice,” altering society’s norms. When this occurs, the balance of power between



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individuals and society begins to shift; instead of society holding influence over a single person, the single person holds influence over society. Rather than reflecting the image of society, mirroring its beliefs and traditions, the individual molds society to resemble his own likeness. Prior to the influence of William Wilberforce, who was instrumental in the abolishment of the English slave trade, 18th-19th century England bore the image of its society, which was deeply entrenched in the notion that the slave trade was morally permissible. After Wilberforce's death, the society had begun to mirror Wilberforce's anti-slavery ideals. He overtook society rather than it overtaking him.

Of course, the ideals of individuals can be equally unjust—that is, they fail to render “to each man his own rights”—as those

imposed by society (qtd. in Lewis 85). Like a painting that is incomplete, each entity, whether it is society or a single individual, has the potential to become unspeakably beautiful or obscene. As a corollary, the ideals of modern American society urge citizens to be tolerant and respectful toward those who are different. On the other hand, the rhetoric of Adolf Hitler, a single man, persuaded a nation to slaughter those who did not fit his concept of normalcy. The distinction between angelic benevolence and demonic tyranny lies merely in the nature of the entity, not its structure, for each entity has an equal potential for control. A man can just as soon shape an entire society as an entire empire can mold a single man.

Works Cited

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REHEARSAL Samantha Mills