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## Collective meaning making: Or, making the private public

**Robert E. Rinehart**

New Zealand

In these times of ‘individual pandemics’, where the rantings and ravings of a Boris Johnson (UK), a Donald Trump (USA), a Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), a Kim John-un (North Korea), a Vladimir Putin (Russia)—and the list continues—have captured remarkable audiences, aided and abetted by mainstream media’s for-profit incentives, academics and intellectuals and other critical thinkers find themselves in a quandary. A pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) explains, is “the worldwide spread of a new disease” (WHO 2019), but and however: its spread does not *kill* the population affected.

We can trace the individuation, the self-aggrandizing of this particular pandemic, to Ronald Reagan(omics), Margaret Thatcher(ism) and, in New Zealand (NZ), Roger(nomics) Douglas, and their insistence upon a form of ‘trickle down’ economics. Reagan, Thatcher and Douglas either thought their system (writ large: the privatisation of public entities, the use of taxation to, ultimately, serve private investors) to be better, or—and this is more cynical—knew it was only better for a select, self-anointed few members of an aerie class. Those economic systems were meant to nudge social democracies back towards private ownership. Many entities were earmarked for this privatisation campaign: not only corporations and manufacturers, but also social systems like health, education, public news programmes and prisons. All were deemed for-profit industries, ways to create wealth. Through the profits made, so the ‘trickle-down’ theory went, more wealth would accrue to the middle and lower classes (Harvey 2005).

We know that the ‘trickle-down’ systems failed—spectacularly—to deliver such benefits to either the now-diminishing middle classes or the shockingly-abandoned lower classes within the worldwide economies that adopted it. The wealth, as Roy (2014) puts it, has “Gushed-up” to those already too wealthy: it has concentrated in fewer and fewer individuals, who are more and more suffocated with resources and power. The beneficiaries of these economies have stopped considering humankind, have shunned the age-old concept of Jeremy Bentham’s “greatest happiness [good] for the greatest number” (1996 [1789]) as a *summum bonum*—rather, they are mired in their own concentrations of wealth and influence.<sup>1</sup> This fiduciary divide has further separated economic classes so that those with inordinate amounts of money and power feel that, somehow, they earned their belongings and tangible artifacts. The so-called one percent tend to discount governmental, social, geographical, racial and cultural advantages built into the systems for much of their wealth and power accrual.

As antidote—or perhaps simply a fairer balance of resources—we (people, individuals, world systems) need to resurrect the values of cooperation, collegiality, group behaviours. These values are still present, albeit largely dormant, and reawakening them in everyday practice entails much more than simply writing a Facebook post or a Twitter tweet. Greta Thunberg, a 16-year old (at this writing) Swedish environmental activist, put it succinctly at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland: “I don’t want your hope. I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel

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<sup>1</sup> If we take Bentham’s philosophy of utilitarianism as a starting point, we may begin to see the first principles involved in keeping Earth habitable for human beings. If it is not livable, no amount of money will make it so.



every day. And then I want you to act” (2019). Action is key to living values like cooperation, collegiality and group behaviours.

The progressive activism may be done at the personal, local or universal levels. It may be, as Wright Mills (1959) long ago implied, about our own private troubles coalescing into public issues. The dynamic between self and society is a complex of wants, needs, desires, hopes, frustrations, accommodations and resolutions.

Individuals and individual behaviours begin to make up *the community*. Being a part of a large and diverse community (being ‘collegial’ and ‘cooperative’) ironically strengthens our own individual positions, though we sometimes, in the din of an educationally-co-opted ‘blaming and shaming’, neoliberal culture, forget this. As editors (and programme leaders, department heads, deans of faculties and so on), we shine in reflected glory from the accomplishments of everyone: we are all in this together, truly collegial. Despite the hegemonic pull of higher educational academic institutions towards individual rewards systems, goal setting, grant monies mongering; despite the uncritical, short-term, audit-culture thinking of university administrators and managements, there are still groups and progressive thinkers who believe in the collegiality of the professoriate.

For example, in putting out this issue (the third annual) of *TEE*, as editors we would be remiss in failing to acknowledge the supportive contributions of Bronwen Cowie and Linda Mitchell, former and current Directors of WMIER (Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research), respectively; Deborah Ryder, former Managing Editor for *TEE*; Margaret Drummond, current Managing Editor for *TEE*; the Division of Education at the University of Waikato, and its Pro Vice-Chancellor, Don Klinger; and, of course, the ‘family’ of the Association for Contemporary Ethnography Across the Disciplines. None of these ‘players’ would have had any parts to play if it were not for the intellectual labours of the authors of these journal articles. Their passion, thought and perseverance make academic journals the successes or failure they are.

We learn from the world—from the people we come in contact with, the institutional structures that mould us, our daily and long-term interactions with life. Collectivity has always been one of the fundamental aims of successful and thriving, curious and vibrant living organisms. And make no mistake: it is people, collectively, who make organisations (and the individuals within them) weak or strong. Over-concentration on the sole individual, assumed ‘naturalness’ of competitive culture, without reference to what that singularity means to the group, has generally (historically) signalled a prelude to failure. (The over-simplified and populist case of a prospering Athens, with its ethos of social and economic intercourse with other city-states, and Sparta, with its focus on defence, isolationism and insularity, may be instructive in this regard.<sup>2</sup>)

It is with this paradoxical *caveat* in mind—that the individual is usually safer, stronger, more resilient within a cohesive group, and that the individual is notable, critical, the lens through which we collectively view the world—that we remind *TEE* readers that autoethnographers never exist in a vacuum. Their insights to and from their *selves* organise, tap into, refer to and conform themselves within larger collectives and within larger patterns. Like flocks of starlings or swarms of tuna, this sense of *emergence* begins to explain why groups contain characteristics that their members may not, individually, possess. It is not simply that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. In this case—swarms of tuna, flocks of birds, communities of people—the collective is a whole other thing, a life force in and of itself.

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<sup>2</sup> The Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) decided the ages-old conflicts between, primarily, Athens and Sparta. Athens was ultimately defeated by Sparta, and this effectively presaged its demise. Historically, these are the facts. However, the influence(s) of Athens on *ideologies* of western civilisation are profound: the groundings of an imperfect democracy, the idea of *paidia* (and Olympiad and other festivals), balance of mind/spirit and body, urban water management practices, systems of justice, some mathematics, the problems of slavery and brutalisation of indigenous peoples, philosophical discussions, among others. Sparta is known for its bellicose footings, its agricultural practices, but not for its thinkers (Malkin, 2004; Powell, 2016).

To carry the metaphors of group and collectivity in nature forward, trees and tree families “talk” with each other in complex systems (cf., Powers 2018).<sup>3</sup> In human terms, this is not unlike the emergence of women’s collectives after women managed to gather and communicate in western societies towards the end of the 19th century (Olsen, 1978). This collective effort, *communitas* personified (cf., Turner 1969), means that the greatest good for human populations on the planet *must* rely upon more critically-trained and educated citizenries (Giroux, 2010, 2019). By no means does this imply a ruling class; to the contrary, a critical mass of citizens of the planet must come together for their very existence. There is no single saviour.

I suggest that higher education has changed dramatically, and not in a positive way. Has it really? By many of the ways we measure *qualitative* difference, at least in my lifetime, it has changed. Of course, quantitatively, higher education boasts of more “bums [sic] on seats”, greater income for educational institutions (e.g., privatised), a statistically-larger number of graduates from tertiary schools. But qualitatively, has education ‘improved’?

Before I wax nostalgic about an imagined past that may have never been, a zenith that only remains in memory, I must say that I sense that the larger sheer numbers of students and graduates is, on the face of it all, quite reassuring. More complex thinking has always been needed, especially by a majority of citizen-subjects within a given nation-state. Unfortunately, the illusion of a more highly-educated middle and lower class is a neoliberal sleight-of-hand: while *numbers* of widgets produced (that is, graduates) increased, the *quality* of their ‘widgetness’ seems to have shrunk. I grew up in Sacramento, California, during what we ‘flower children’ used to label the very ‘golden age’ of *public* education: Edmund G. ‘Pat’ Brown was governor, and the system was thought of—that is, believed subjectively—as one of the world’s best educational systems extant.

There were three tiers of post-graduate education. The first was junior colleges (JC), not unlike NZ’s polytechnics in their orientation towards a trade-based experience. The JCs eventually taught the foundational associates of arts (AA) degree, leading for some like me to entry into a state college (which gave out BAs and BSs). The state college would roughly translate, in NZ, to Teacher’s Colleges. Finally, there were universities. Their primary function was to provide research-based, hands-on, learning through experimentation. But all three shared this core: post-graduate education was meant to provide a thoughtful, critical, intelligent citizenry.

As to individual teachers, the system (as systems do) encouraged both deep and broad learning. Several examples should suffice. English professors taught essay, fiction and poetic forms of writing, of course, but they taught *all* students logical thinking and how to present fact-based argumentation. Latin, geology, dance, fine arts and physical education were taught, simply because they formed the core of an integrated liberal arts education. The broad cultural knowledge—why does an English sentence require a subject and verb, how does a bill become law, how old is the earth’s crust—formed an agreed-upon set of cultural knowledges. As more and more *ways of knowing* have become known to western cultures, they have either been incorporated, assimilated or rejected. This is not necessarily a good thing. (Since business people, who aspire for profits, have become leaders, the values of an integrated liberal post-graduate education have faded.) And finally, some professors gave oral exams. In exercise physiology, the questions would begin with broad bases, then narrow down until the student could no longer answer. Frustrating, time-consuming, but very thorough—and very inefficient, by today’s standards.

A drive for education to make profits means larger class sizes, less focus on the individual student as critical thinker and, ironically, a lower standard of practice. Students pay more for less. In Cape Town, South Africa, the ‘Fees Must Fall’ movement meant that students rose up against administrators and administrative policy that reflected neoliberal mindsets and, sometimes violently, demanded more rational educations (Booyesen, 2016). A rationality within higher education, with a ‘hive mindset’, means

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<sup>3</sup> Though many of my references are grounded in fictional discourse, *their* sources are in the ‘sciences’. The bifurcation of sciences and creativity, or sciences and humanities, is a social construction and has been deconstructed by many scholars (e.g., Brady, 1991; Heshusius, 1994; McCrary-Sullivan, 2000, 2004, 2005; Richardson, 1994; Rinehart, 2010).

that, again paradoxically, idiosyncratic, out-of-the-box, avant-garde types of solutions must prevail in order for the planet to continue to allow for human survival. The private troubles (e.g., higher education contemporary *raison d'être*) resonate with the public issues (e.g., planetary collapse for human survival). This nihilistic state of affairs, unsurprisingly, runs counter-hegemonic to much of the neoliberal audit culture that now exists within higher education (Shore & Wright, 1999; Shore, 2008; Rinehart, 2016).

So a fundamental question we should ask ourselves (probably on the anniversary of each succeeding decade of our lives) is: why are we alive? Not biologically, in a herd-impulse kind of way. Not in a way that our procreation works to preserve a given species. Species die out, and the Earth maintains. But why are human beings—*homo sapiens*, if you will (Harari, 2015), meaning ‘wise man’—alive? What is our purpose beyond perpetuation of the species? Are we meant to seek and husband long-term (preservation of wetlands, for example) or short-term (accrual of individual wealth, for example) rewards? The question is complex, actually unanswerable definitively, might change and, as Shakespeare famously stated in his ‘seven [st]ages of man’ [sic] speech within ‘As You Like It’, is dependent upon context.<sup>4</sup>

This existential question is one that has likely haunted humans since they first began the process of reflective thought. Alan Watts (1989[1966]) has pointed out that the

... sensation of oneself as a separate ego enclosed in a bag of skin is a hallucination which accords neither with Western science nor with the experimental philosophy—religions of the East in particular the central and germinal Vedanta philosophy of Hinduism. (ix)

Watts’ 1960s sense of why humans are alive resonates with many human occupants of the planet over a half century later: we are meant to “overcome ... our feeling of alienation from the universe” (ix–x). We are, in short, meant to become one with physical forces, other living and non-living beings, to strive for *communitas*, to move towards harmonic assonance and congruity with everything and everyone we encounter.

Each of the following pieces negotiates community in differing ways. Janette Kelly-Ware’s “Position and perspective: Research connections and tensions in a kindergarten community” explores power and other dynamics between and among kindergartners, their families, teachers, and researchers. Of course, communication and mis-communication stories engage us with how they impact upon the various ‘players’ within this key educational environment.

‘Fear and silence meet ignorance’, a complex and multi-layered biographical and autoethnographic piece by Kris Tilley-Lubbs, dances between Spain of the 1960s, Franco’s 1939 Catalonia, the memories of a young man, and the recollections of a select group of survivors in present-day Barcelona. In this piece, in some places hauntingly echoing current world-wide political stances and an incipient fascist trend in both Europe and North America, Tilley-Lubbs shows us how memories can waver and waffle, and how community meaning-making is such a difficult but important task.

Each in their own way, these authors have contributed to a rich TEE and ACEAD community, but they have also elevated their work to contain meaning, creativity and relationships. Enjoy these pieces and the pieces, edited by Jacquie Kidd (her introduction follows), in the Indigenous section of this third volume of *The Ethnographic Edge*. –RER

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<sup>4</sup> The speech, given by Jaques (the fool), famously begins with “All the world’s a stage ...” and declaims about a life course: first the “mewling” babe, next the “whining school-boy”, the lover, the soldier, the justice, the wearer of “lean and slipper’d pantaloons”, and, finally, “second childishness and mere oblivion” (Act II, Scene VII, lines 139–166).

Tēnā koutou  
 Ko Te Ahuahu te maunga  
 Ko Omapere te roto  
 Ko Ngātokimatuwhaorua te waka  
 Ko Ngāpuhi te iwi  
 Tēna koutou katoa

It is my pleasure to introduce the first Indigenous Voices section for the Ethnographic Edge. The section emerged from discussions at CEAD 2018 in Santiago, Chile as an idea for enhancing the visibility of Indigenous ethnographers.

In the first paper Cathy Kanoelani Ikeda, Stephanie Hauki Kamai and Michael T. Hayes from the University of Hawai‘i West O‘ahu evoke a sense of place and space as they describe how engagement with a hale, a traditional native Hawai‘ian building, has changed their teaching community.

In the second paper, Katarina Gray-Sharp from the University of Waikato reflects on her experiences of CEAD 2018 in the context of the police shooting of Camilo Catrillanca, Indigeneity and privilege.

In the third and final paper, Jacquie Kidd from AUT University with Shemana Cassim, Anna Rolleston and Rawiri Keenan from the University of Waikato explore the issues that arise when research is Western but attempts to reach Indigenous participants through the use of language.

I am reminded of the whakataukī *Ahakoia he iti he pounamu* (Although it is small it is a treasure); with only three papers in the section we are, indeed, small. However, I invite you into this precious space to walk with us in our worlds for a time. –JK

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