

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-58591-1 - Society and Solitude
E. T. Campagnac
Excerpt
[More information](#)

THE ETERNAL SOCIETY

IF by the slow steps of plodding research or by the quick passage of poetic imagination, we make our way back to the earliest time of which we have any records, or to the simplest forms of human existence which we can picture to ourselves, we find that already men lived in a society composed of different elements, each one of which justified its existence by contributing what it was best able to contribute and drawing from the others what they could provide more richly and abundantly in order to make good its own defects. But these services rendered and received, however various they were, had a common end, and that end was the maintenance of human life; and it is quite clear, whether we have recourse to the evidence of historians or to the more penetrating and subtle evidence of poets, that man's life did not consist even in its barest, rudest form in the things which he ate, the garments with which he was clothed, or of any or all of the material things without which, it is true, his life could not have been maintained. The labours, super-human as we sometimes call them, which primitive people endured in order to live, they endured not merely in order to live, but in order to live in a certain way which seemed to them good. To be men, they must be more than men: the work which they did was directed towards an ideal, and it was

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-58591-1 - Society and Solitude
E. T. Campagnac
Excerpt
[More information](#)

2 THE ETERNAL SOCIETY [CH.

this ideal which co-ordinated and gave unity to the various special kinds of work into which their general and common labours were already divided.

The progress of civilisation is marked and tested by two criteria; first, we may say that it is a natural and proper ambition for men to achieve the things which are necessary to the maintenance of life so effectually and so speedily as that they may have an ever increasing security and an ampler leisure for the enjoyment of their ideal, whatever it may be; but, and this is the second criterion, we may with equal truth affirm that the progress of civilisation is marked by the vividness and reality with which men can apprehend (not only when their labours are done, but in the very process of those labours) the ideal itself for the sake of which they were undertaken. For a man cannot be content unless he is able both to delight *in* his work and to rest *from* his labour. But these conditions of happiness depend upon other conditions, or, rather, they need to be more fully stated. If, then, a man is to delight in his work, he must be convinced that the particular occupation in which he is at any moment engaged, and all the occupations in which he is successively engaged, contribute every one of them to that general end which he calls life: and what is more than this, that his life is not limited by the satisfaction of his individual needs or the fulfilment of his personal desires, but is itself a part of a life at once higher and wider, to the level of which it is raised, in the amplitude of which it is merged, the common life, that is to say, of his society. And, if rest is a legitimate

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-58591-1 - Society and Solitude
E. T. Campagnac
Excerpt
[More information](#)

1] THE ETERNAL SOCIETY 3

object for him, a man must interpret it properly; it must be itself an activity of a spirit, well and completely equipped with the fruits of the various detailed occupations which have engrossed him.

Now in a primitive and elementary form of society men certainly were confronted with some difficulties, but by way of compensation may have had some advantages, which are not ours. No doubt when our early ancestors had wrested from the untamed fields or caught in trackless forests the food on which they had to live, when they had with rough implements built their modest dwellings, clothed themselves with the skins of the beasts they had slain, and thrown up rough defences against their enemies, they must have had little leisure for anything but a weary sleep, little opportunity for such rest as we have described. Yet it is remarkable that they found time for waking dreams, for the building not only of houses but of hopes, and it was in these dreams and hopes that they found their encouragement for work and their refuge and their reward. And we may conceive that, hard bestead as they were, they had in one respect the better of us who live in a later time a more complicated life. For, though their needs were urgent and they had little store laid by on which to draw, if on any day their search for food was unsuccessful, and no second line of defence within which to retire from the attacks of an insistent foe, yet these urgent needs were few and simple and the relation of each of them to the supreme need of keeping alive was definite and easily understood.

4 THE ETERNAL SOCIETY [CH.

In a modern community, though little leisure is to be enjoyed by the great majority of those who belong to what are called the working classes, yet it may be fairly claimed that they have a leisure and a security which were not granted to early peoples; and beyond the borders of the working classes there are many individuals and even large groups of persons who have time and energy left over and to spare when they have satisfied the needs of life and done such work as they are called on to do. The average of leisure and the average of security are beyond all question higher with us than with our early ancestors. If we are in this respect in a position superior to theirs, it is not difficult to discover the cause of our advantage; it is that differences of function have been more and more closely adapted to differences of native ability, and that men have devoted themselves with a special and exclusive attention to those activities which they could best perform, and in which they could most readily render to their neighbours services in return for which they would receive those varied rewards which, put together, make up a "living." This specialisation of labour is a natural and indeed inevitable tendency, but, if it has had the result of increasing efficiency along several lines of work, it has also had the result of isolating those who work along one line from their fellow-creatures who work along others. And there is this further consideration to be noted: that, whereas the elementary needs of human life may be said to be always the same, the needs for food and shelter and clothing, yet the progress (and to be sure

1] THE ETERNAL SOCIETY 5

the decay also) of civilisation makes men aware of fresh desires which presently become fresh needs. Instead of demanding shelter, different men demand different kinds of shelter or of food or of clothing: they learn to live more delicately and themselves become more delicate, and what was sufficient and good enough for their ancestors is literally neither sufficient nor good enough for them; they could not maintain themselves alive with the few and simple things which sufficed for their predecessors. Accordingly, though our leisure may be greater than that which men in earlier times enjoyed, both our desires and our needs are more numerous and more varied. Though by multitudinous devices of specialised industry we have come to be able to satisfy our needs without leaving even our desires wholly unsatisfied, it is much harder for us to relate the special activity of any individual or the many varied activities of the many diverse sections of society to one common end. Yet we postulate a common end in which an individual may achieve the unity of his own life in harmony with and in subordination to the unity of a society capable of embracing both him and his neighbours and in its fulness transcending each and all of them.

The result is strangely disappointing. The increasing differentiation of the activities of men is to be justified, if it is to be justified at all, on two grounds; first, that it will tend to a beautifully articulated co-operation by which all men may be more and more fully released from merely mechanical labour and come to be conscious of their mutual dependence

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-58591-1 - Society and Solitude
E. T. Campagnac
Excerpt
[More information](#)

6 THE ETERNAL SOCIETY [CH.

and their corporate unity; and, second, that by allowing individual men to do whatever special work they may have special aptitude for doing they may be able to realise themselves, not only in the leisure which is the fruit and the prize of work, but in the work itself. But the result has been very different from this. Men have learnt, not that they are dependent on one another, but that they are divided from one another, and they have been so wholly engrossed each one, and each group of them, in the routine of their special callings that they have become what we call specialists, people, that is to say, who have learnt to do some one thing with remarkable dexterity and speed, but who are something less than complete and healthy human creatures able to enjoy themselves and the world. But for all this there remains in men a something native and ineradicable, the trembling but persistent belief that they are after all themselves something more than practitioners in various kinds of work, that they make altogether a total common unity which they call society or the state.

This belief, fearfully and doubtfully held, is rarely expressed and then fitfully and with apology; or if there are any who express it loudly they are those who identify their own calling or at best the callings most nearly kindred to their own with the sum of society and therefore find themselves in opposition with others whose voices are as loud as their own, their view being as narrow, who in their turn are determined to identify their own calling or special group of callings with the total. And they are all

i] THE ETERNAL SOCIETY 7

wrong for a double reason; first because they leave out of their account other callings and groups which actually have their place in the world; and secondly, because they have mistaken the nature of the only total or unity which can properly and effectively embrace men. This effective and proper unity is something more than the sum of what is actual, it is an ideal.

Now it must of course be admitted that all men are more truly idealists than they are generally willing to admit to themselves or to their neighbours; for indeed human life would not be tolerable to the most stupid or the most gross if they were not at times illuminated by the vision of an ideal which, though it pales, is never quite extinguished in their minds. But the difficulty under which they, the stupid and the gross, labour is one which oppresses others also, not stupid or gross but merely timid: and if we add together the stupid, the gross and the timid we shall have accounted for a large proportion of mankind. The difficulty may be simply stated: it is this: all men seek from time to time to escape from the actual into the ideal; but this language is itself misleading, for it indicates, not simply a contrast but a divorce between the actual and the ideal, it suggests a gulf fixed across which there can be no crossing made. The haunting ideal, of course, transcends the actual but is only to be found in the actual, and until it is there sought and found what we call the progress of civilisation will only be another name for the process by which men are divided

8 THE ETERNAL SOCIETY [CH.

from each other, and themselves become an ill-assorted conglomeration of diversified interests and aptitudes.

For we cannot but be aware that as there are divisions which separate men from men and groups of men from other groups of men, so there are divisions within a man himself; and just as the divisions which mark off men from their fellows prevent them from becoming all together a single self-conscious society, so these other divisions within the individual prevent him from becoming and realising himself. Specialisation, to use a current term, commonly means not the devotion of the whole of a man's powers to some end which is worthy of them and to which he is specially attracted by his special aptitude, an end which might at once satisfy him and enable him to satisfy the claims of a composite but unified society. It means something quite different from this: the exercise and absorption of some particular power or faculty in a man which nature or training or accident has brought to greater strength and a higher development than his other powers or faculties, and the cultivation of this power or faculty to the neglect of the others.

It may, of course, be said that however exclusively a man may in this latter sense have specialised, the necessities of ordinary human life compel him to engage in more activities than one and therefore to exhibit himself in several, if only a few, rôles. For example, a man may be a dog-fancier or a gas-fitter or a professional politician and may devote himself to

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-58591-1 - Society and Solitude
E. T. Campagnac
Excerpt
[More information](#)

i] THE ETERNAL SOCIETY 9

the special work which is indicated by these titles and yet be obliged, for all his pre-occupation with the matter which he conceives to be most appropriate to his distinctive gifts, to play the parts also of a householder, a rate-payer, a father, a son; he may exercise his special gift and yet cultivate a taste for roses or for wine, or beguile his leisure with collecting Jacobean furniture or decorating his drawing-room. And to a neighbour or a friend who knew indeed what his special calling was, but was not acquainted with him merely as a practitioner in that calling he might well appear to be a man whose life exhibited a remarkable variety of interests. Even to himself such a man may appear to be admirable for the range of his own activities: but if he will contemplate, as from time to time he is forced to contemplate, himself with a more critical eye, he may find that what he was proud to call the range, the variety of his interests is, in fact, evidence of the confusion and purposelessness of his life. For he may readily discover that he turns from his politics or his plumbing or his dog-breeding to the pruning of his roses and the arrangement of his house simply by way of escape from the fatigues of those engrossing avocations, and again that he passes from one to another of his diversions because he is tired of each in turn. In each of these several forms of his varied activity he may become sadly aware that he is missing what would give to each an enduring interest and relate each to each. He is, in fact, missing himself.

Now the self which a man seeks and is ill at ease

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-58591-1 - Society and Solitude
E. T. Campagnac
Excerpt
[More information](#)

10 THE ETERNAL SOCIETY [CH.

until he finds, is something other and more than the sum of the activities in which he is actually engaged or of any other activities which he might substitute for them or add to them; in them he may no doubt strive to express himself; in them he may with lengthening experience and increasing skill learn more and more completely to express himself; or once more he may discover that by changing or diminishing or increasing his activities he comes more perfectly to express himself. But if he hopes ever quite satisfactorily to express himself in these or any other activities, his expectation is foredoomed to disappointment. For himself must always transcend and baffle any form or any number of forms of expression, since form must be definite and the spirit is infinite.

Unwilling to yield unquestioningly to this belief (though unable to free himself from its hold) a man may pretend to be or to have several selves according to the several occupations in which he is successively employed. At home he may be one man, out-of-doors another, with his family a different person from what he is with mere acquaintances and so forth, and he may even pride himself upon his versatility. Just as in the roughly organised group which either prophetically or ironically we call society the grooves or ruts in which men run become so deep that it is difficult for them to look over the edge and see their neighbours, so a man may plough so deeply the divergent furrows along which his varied interests move that it is difficult for him, that partial self which he tries