

# The Dangerous Luxury of Claiming You've Rejected Society

by Ellen Balleisen

June 19, 2020

"I live outside of society," a friend of a friend asserted to me at a party about 10 years ago. I don't remember what prompted him to say this but I do remember I didn't feel like starting an argument and therefore didn't say what I wanted to: Did you sew every piece of clothing you're wearing right now? Did you manufacture the elastic in your underwear and attach it to the cotton? Did you plant and pick the cotton?

In April I found out that my friend's friend had died of Covid-19 in an overwhelmed Manhattan hospital. Of course I am sorry that he died in this way; no one should die in this way. But I also keep thinking about an irony of sorts, that a person who believed himself to exist outside the web of society died partly because so many people have imbibed versions of this toxic kool-aid that we're all individual islands best off without the strictures or protections of organized society.

The man who died came of age in the sixties and could be said to have drunk the countercultural version of the kool-aid. I didn't know him well, but well enough to imagine he felt the word "society" meant rules and regulations trying to hem him in, rather than a complex network of interdependent relationships at the level of nations, neighborhoods and even families.

There's also the libertarian kool-aid version, the kind swallowed by a woman who not only refused to wear a mask recently at a Trader Joe's, but called fellow customers in masks "sheep" and explained her actions by saying, "We have individual rights, we don't have community rights." Her words imply that individuals have no responsibilities towards other individuals who share their community. I wonder whether she feels those annoyed by their neighbors' loud music have no grounds for denying anyone the right to enjoy heavy metal at 120 decibels. Or, more consequentially, how she feels about a driver who insists the community has no right to demand that he not drive on the sidewalk at 70 miles per hour.

We have a president who has mixed his own distinctive kool-aid cocktail. In a nod to Hugh Hefner, Trump's drink includes a hedonistic disregard for 1950s norms that dictated a veneer of respectful behavior towards women. In a nod to Ronald Reagan, there's a dollop of contempt for government's ability to help those in distress.

And in a curious echo of 1960s counterculture's disdain for authority, there's a hefty scoop of hostility towards experts in science, economics and international affairs. Had there been less hostility, preparations for Covid-19 might have taken place in the two months between the time when China first made the Coronavirus public and the first Covid-19 case was reported in the U.S., and perhaps my friend's friend would still be alive.

There's definitely a place for individuals who are outside accepted norms and who question authority. If no one ever questioned conventional wisdom and practice, we would still think the earth was flat and slavery would still exist worldwide. But Galileo and early abolitionists went against the beliefs of their societies not because they saw themselves as outside society, but because they wanted to bring about change within it.

George Floyd's death and the subsequent protests made me see yet another angle to the phenomenon of those who consider themselves apart from society. If you are living in a nation where you belong to a group that is not in the majority, you don't have the luxury of declaring yourself outside society because it suits your perception of yourself. Instead you are often literally outside of society, but at the same time subject to the control of that society, whether or not you choose to be. Those who are protesting are interested in re-making society and changing the way the rules are made. People who think they are "outside" society get to think this way only because they already belong to the dominant group. In the US, it's one aspect of white privilege.

And as that dominant group gets smaller, relative to the overall population, some people in that dominant group are digging in their heels. When it suits their purpose, they call on the rules of society, the rules of law and order. When it doesn't suit their purpose, they deny the existence of society. Donald Trump embodies this contradictory way of seeing the world, as well as the refusal to acknowledge the contradiction.

Meanwhile Covid-19 marches on, not caring about anyone's views on belonging or not belonging to society but inflicting its greatest damage on those outside the mainstream who didn't choose to be outside. I can only hope with the thinnest thread of tattered optimism that once this virus has burned itself out, there will be a greater understanding that we all breathe the same air and have both responsibilities and rights towards the others who share this air with us.