

# Taylor Chapter 10

Against Fragmentation

## Organization of the chapter:

1. Soft despotism
2. Fragmentation - the condition that fosters soft despotism
3. Common purpose - the argument for authenticity comes full circle

## Soft Despotism

Taylor argues that modern capitalism and large bureaucratic states tend to favor “an atomist and instrumentalist stance toward the world and others” (111) and to “weaken democratic initiative” (112).

This brings us back to the third malaise, that modern society will generate a kind of “soft despotism” in which the individuals will be powerless against the vast and impersonal forces of the market and the state (recall deTocquville from chapter 1).

## 2. Fragmentation

This soft despotism is not the development of a totalitarian state, but rather an increasing fragmentation of the populace rendering it “less capable of forming common purpose and carrying it out” (112) (It should be noted that this fragmentation is fostered by the first two malaises).

The fragmented society that results is one in which people “find it harder and harder to identify with their political society as a community” (117).

# Taylor sees the US as an example of this kind of fragmentation

Taylor argues that fragmentation is concretely manifested in the United States in terms of the inability of Americans to come together in common purpose except for the defense of individual rights. The focus on individual rights in turn has led to three consequences:

1. More emphasis is placed on judicial review to solve great societal issues as opposed to more democratic methods of legislation and compromise (Taylor 114).
2. Most political energy is “channeled into interest or advocacy politics” where people are encouraged to see public affairs through the lens of a single issue - the abortion issue, for example (Taylor 115). This leads directly to the third consequence:
3. The “atrophy” of the ability to form “democratic majorities around meaningful programs that can be carried to completion” (Taylor 115)

As a result, only small narrowly defined interest groups have any chance of making significant political change, so people “give up” and stop participating meaningfully in the political process. Cynicism regarding the efficacy of political participation leads people to withdraw into themselves which leads to fewer people voting and meaningfully participating in the political process (again note the connection with the previous two malaises) (Taylor 113, 115).

### 3. Common Purpose - The argument for authenticity comes full circle

The only way that this fragmentation can be fought is through “successful common action,” in other words democracy guided by a common purpose:

Fragmentation grows to the extent that people no longer identify with their political community, that their sense of corporate belonging is transferred elsewhere or atrophies altogether . . . A fading political identity makes it harder to mobilize effectively, and a sense of hopelessness breeds alienation . . . Successful common action (on the other hand) can bring about a sense of empowerment and also strengthen identification with the political community” (Taylor 118).

Recall that this is a variation of the same argument Taylor made in chapter 9:

Decline is not inevitable as “the mechanisms of inevitability work only when people are divided and fragmented. The predicament alters when their comes to be a common consciousness” (Taylor 100).

Thus the Iron Cage and the Loss of freedom are subject to the same remedy.

### 3. Common Purpose - The argument for authenticity comes full circle

It is at this point that all of the strands of Taylor's argument come together. Such common action requires us, as individuals, to recognize the essentially dialogical nature of our existence and embrace the idea that meaning comes not from completely internal sources but also from external "horizons of significance". It also requires us to measure our instrumental reason against the yardstick of the moral principles that gave rise to instrumental reason. To do so works against fragmentation and facilitates the development of community:

The force that can roll back the galloping hegemony of instrumental reason is democratic initiative [that emerges out of] ... common understanding and a common sense of purpose (Taylor 112).

The root of that common understanding must be a conception of the self that sees its own significance in terms external horizons of significance. The self as seen from the perspective of self determining freedom (debased authenticity) must necessarily pursue fragmentation, as its definition of selfhood depends on being unbound and atomistic.

### 3. Common Purpose - The argument for authenticity comes full circle

Successful democracy requires us to see ourselves as parts of a whole. Democracy fails when we see our interactions with others in purely instrumental terms, for in such terms there is only individual purpose - there is no common purpose (think of Smith's butcher).

## Conclusion

Modernity is characterized by both grandeur and misery and “Only a view that embraces both can give us the undistorted insight into our era that we need to rise to its greatest challenge (121). Both boosterism and knockerism of modern society are dead ends. Only an honest understanding of modernity and its roots can lead us to “the good society.”