

FREE-MAN'S PERSPECTIVE

How Life, Liberty & Sanity Can Win

Issue #36

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The Contentment Revolution



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Contentment... it sounds like such a drab thing... neutered, almost.

But by the time we've finished this issue, I hope to convince you that authentic contentment is such a radical, subversive thing that it could change the world, almost overnight.

A huge percentage of the things that make up our daily lives would simply stop if we were contented. And I am not talking about work, vigor, and progress; I'm talking about painful, wasteful, and stupid things.

We are in a strange situation: Almost all of us have adopted a feeling that if we were ever satisfied, we'd stop working, and that

the results would be horrible. The funny thing about this idea is that we haven't really considered it; we merely adopted it, as did generations of people before us. (Which is precisely the sort of curiosity we should stop and examine.)

Contentment – real contentment – is a revolutionary and subversive thing. It would quickly dislodge massive, old, and esteemed structures.

The truth is that happy and contented people are very hard to manipulate and very expensive to dominate. And so it happens that our current world systems rest primarily on their ability to cultivate our unhappiness, insecurity and fear.

In short, our unhappiness is not only unnecessary, but it is also the great tool of our enslavement.

So, this is a far more dangerous subject than you may have imagined. Let's get to it.

The Evolution of Our Discontent

Most of us grew up to assume that mankind is largely discontent by nature. This was not unreasonable, seeing that we've been surrounded by discontent all our lives. But neither is it true. We *do* stumble across individuals who are content, and we occasionally find whole groups of people who live without the permanent deficit mentality that Westerners now suffer, such as [the San people of the Kalahari](#).

We'll shortly explain why this permanent deficit mentality is so prevalent in our time, but first let's examine its origins. After all, if this is not inherent in man, it began somewhere.

The very first thriving culture that we can see appeared in the hills of Armenia at the end of the last ice age, at about 10,000 BC. We lack much good information on these people until some of them settled in what is now central Turkey at about 8,000 BC. (We covered them briefly in [FMP #24](#) and will revisit them in the future.) There are no signs of discontent visible from these people. In specific they left no signs of status or domination, and many signs of habitual cooperation. So it appears that Western man's long history of discontent began afterward, in Mesopotamia.

We also covered early Mesopotamia in [FMP #24](#), so we will not repeat that history here, but I would like to focus on a very distinctive aspect of Sumerian life: a perpetual discontent with one's status. The great Assyriologist Samuel Noah Kramer described this as an “ambitious, competitive, aggressive, and seemingly far from ethical drive for pre-eminence and prestige, for victory and success.”

This need to achieve status existed throughout Sumerian society. For example, there was great competition in their systems of formal education. “May you rank the highest among the school graduates” is found among Sumerian inscriptions, just as it can be found among ours. Again, Kramer describes the situation and its results:

The drive for superiority and prestige deeply colored the Sumerian outlook on life and played an important role in their education, politics and economics... which sparked and sustained the material and cultural advances for which the Sumerians are not unjustly noted.

In other words, the hierarchical systems of Sumer pushed men and women to strive perpetually for status. The way the rulers of the time promoted themselves shows how they were working to create this status hierarchy. For example, a Sumerian king named Culgi wrote this:

I, the king, was a hero already in the womb; I, Culgi, was born to be a mighty man. I am a fierce-looking lion, begotten by a dragon. I am the king of the four regions; I am the herdsman and shepherd of the black-headed people. I am a respected one, the god of all the lands.

In other words, “I am inherently superior to everyone.” Or, as we might say, “at the top of the food chain.”

The Sumerian King Lipit-Ectar repeats the same sentiment: I hold the highest place because I was born superior:

I am a king treated with respect, good offspring from the womb. I am Lipit-Ectar, the son of Enlil. From the moment I lifted my head like a cedar sapling, I have been a man who possesses strength in athletic pursuits. As a young man I grew very muscular. I am a lion in all respects, having no equal...

I am Lipit-Ectar, king of the Land. I am the good shepherd of the black-headed. I am the foremost in the foreign countries, and exalted in the Land. I am a human god, the lord of the numerous people. I am the strong heir of kingship. Holding my head high, I am established in my position.

Underneath these kings were hierarchical structures, each compartment of which gave its occupants a certain level of status – status that they fought for all their lives. Being below the great ruler was to be in a permanent deficit, but taking a step up in the hierarchy at least placed them above their neighbor.

So, this negative mentality began (so far as we can tell) in Mesopotamia and took full form at Sumer.

Following Sumer, top-down status structures continued, strongly, through to the end of the Western Roman Empire, where the desire to dominate (and to obtain status through domination) was encoded in the culture.

During the European Middle Ages, however, the West moved to a society built on individual human experience rather than glory in the eyes of others. This was a primary characteristic of the new Christian culture; a gift that was carried from the Hebrews to Europe. (See [FMP#33](#).) In this new society, the glory of being above others was reduced, and the need for self-experienced satisfaction was increased.

The West always retained some lust for dominance, of course, though at a much lower level than under Rome.

But whether in the case of the ancient “domination-status” cultures or the newer “self-satisfaction-status” culture, restraint mechanisms naturally formed. In the ancient world, attempts of domination had to be controlled; in the modern world, excesses of display and lust for scarce objects had to be constrained.

Let me clarify a bit with examples:

- In ancient Greece (Rome also), the need to be a great one was satisfied in each freeman by owning slaves. (And yes, I am bypassing the injustice done to the slaves for now.) The freeman was the big man to his slaves.
- If the Greek slaveholder became abusive of even that situation, by wanting to be even more of a superior man, he could not behave badly in public, as it was expected, by custom, that he justify his position by using it for higher ends.

- The Greeks were deeply opposed to any one of them ruling over the rest of the freemen. They called any ruler *tyrannus* – tyrant. This did not mean “vicious ruler” to them, it meant any person who wanted to set himself up above everyone else. No top position was authorized.
- Likewise the Romans forbade anyone from trying to make himself king. It was the obligation of every citizen to kill such a person.

In these ways and others, the impulse to dominate was kept within bounds by the Greeks and Romans.

Likewise, the modern world once had restraint mechanisms. Again, a few examples:

- The virtues of prudence, fortitude, and temperance, as well as the vices of avarice, greed, and gluttony, were continually preached to Europeans, especially between 800 and 1700 AD. The vices included excessive personal grasping, and continued preaching against these vices had a strong effect on the general populace.
- Commerce tended to be less about naked acquisition than it is now. For example, large Virginia planters of the early colonial period had a very significant advantage over small farmers. Because English cities were their nearest supply ports, trade was conducted in large quantities, sometimes the cargo of an entire ship at once. The large planters could deal with this, but the small planters couldn't afford to. Even so, the large farmers didn't take advantage of the situation, but “broke bulk,” to help the small farmers. This was an effect of the cultural bias against gluttony and for temperance.
- The West, by custom, remained a need-based culture for a long time. That is, people desired things that provided actual and clear benefits to their lives, rather than things to show off to others. For example, following World War One, the industrial leaders of America (who had made huge profits supplying war goods) did not want to go back to the days of normal (needs-based) demand. One of them (Paul Mazur of Lehman Brothers), said this:

We must shift America, from a needs to a desires culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old is entirely consumed. We must shape a new mentality in America; man's desires must overshadow his needs.

How Our Restraint Mechanisms Failed

As we've covered in detail previously, our civilization reached its form in the years around 1000 AD, following the failure of Rome and the reset of the early Middle Ages. That culture – including the restraint mechanisms mentioned above – began to change dramatically in the 17th century. Some of the changes were positive, but others were not. And from that time till now, a great negative was the loss of restraint mechanisms.

We'll save a detailed explanation of this transition for some other time, but the sequence of events, especially as they pertained to the loss of restraint mechanisms, was approximately this:

1. The Roman Catholic Church (or simply, “the Church”) was the seat of legitimacy during the formation of Western civilization and for the first half of its run. Because of its many excesses and evils, reformers arose, finally separating altogether. By the 17th century, Christian Civil Wars were being fought over their separation. Eventually the forces of the Church lost and the reformers were allowed to secede. This was codified in 1648, with a treaty called The Peace of Westphalia.

2. At the same time, states were becoming larger. Previously, rulership had been local, relationship-based (as opposed to territory-based), and highly decentralized. Now, rulership was consolidating.
3. Because rulership requires legitimacy, the new nation-states had to take over legitimacy from the Church... and the Church was not eager to give it up. As a result, the new national governments went on a publicity war against the Catholic Church. They needed to transfer legitimacy from the Church to themselves.
4. As this publicity war continued, the Church was demonized in educated circles. (Their leaders had indeed done horrible things, but the accusations often exaggerated the crimes.) Writers who lambasted the Church were lavishly rewarded, as were those who legitimized the new nations.
5. As a result, “anti-Church” developed its own inertia, becoming anti-Christian, anti-God, and anti-traditional culture. But again, this was mostly confined to the more educated circles, and not in Catholic countries like Italy and Spain.
6. This continued and grew through the 18th and 19th centuries. For example, the historian Edward Gibbon – who placed himself deeply inside this stream – concluded that it was Christianity that had ruined the great Roman Empire, utterly ignoring the fact that the eastern Roman empire survived as an overtly Christian culture for a thousand years after the West failed. Anti-Church and anti-tradition inertia was strong.
7. In the early 20th century, these ideas, especially anti-tradition, made their way from the intellectual class to the entire society, through the new channel of mandatory public education.

On the heels of this process, the culture of the West began to shift as a whole.

The Shift

By the 1920s, Western culture was in a full shift. The anti-tradition ideas of the intellectual elite were being forcibly transmitted to all levels of the civilization. The highlight of this change was the “Scopes Monkey Trial” of 1925, which was less about the facts of the case and more about traditional ideas being forcibly dethroned.

In addition, the new science of propaganda was being used to destroy satisfaction. This began almost entirely as an American phenomenon, but it would ultimately spread to the rest of the world through the new media of film, radio, and television – fields that are still dominated by Americans, and which still have a world-wide impact.

To understand how this combination affected Western culture, it is useful to examine the work of Edward Bernays, the greatest apostle of propaganda.

Bernays was famous for using the discoveries of his uncle, Sigmund Freud, to manipulate the American populace and to make huge profits for his clients. Here are a few quotes from Bernays, from his books *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923) and *Propaganda* (1928):

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.

If we understand the mechanism and motives of the group mind, it is now possible to control and regiment the masses according to our will without them knowing it.

The average citizen is the world's most efficient censor. His own mind is the greatest barrier between him and the facts. His own 'logic proof compartments,' his own absolutism are the obstacles which prevent him from seeing in terms of experience and thought rather than in terms of group reaction.

Physical loneliness is a real terror to the gregarious animal, and that association with the herd causes a feeling of security. In man this fear of loneliness creates a desire for identification with the herd in matters of opinion.

What we see here is a concentrated effort to manipulate the minds of millions, to frighten them and to herd them, on behalf of a superior political and financial class. This was problem enough in the days when people received their news of the world from newspapers, but it became supercharged by television.

Bernays' reputation has risen and fallen over time, but his techniques of manipulating the masses have been retained and improved. And this is precisely what we still see (hundreds of times per day) from politicians and large corporations.

Those of us of the West – aside from the oldest and most isolated – have lived all our lives inside a web of manufactured discontent. We are told to elect political candidates because their opponent is horrible and because things are bad. We are told that we must buy new houses, or vacations, or a hundred other things, because other people have them and we'll look bad in comparison, or that the boy or girl we're interested in won't agree to marry us unless we look a certain way, or buy a certain ring, or drive a certain type of car, and so on, in hundreds of variations.

All of this is based on the assumption that we are in a deficit position – that the advertised product will somehow fill our deficit.

On top of this, our ancient prohibitions on gluttony and greed are absent, swept away by the inertia of modernism. The ancient virtues of temperance, fortitude, and delayed satisfaction are also gone, having been swept away by the same tide.

The ancients strove for honor, glory and prestige. Our modern world features an endless struggle for valueless acquisition.

A Bit of Proof

Before continuing, I'd like to add some proof to the idea that humans are naturally motivated; that people will produce for their own, internal reasons, without being prodded.

In 1973, a trio of psychologists named Lepper, Greene and Nisbett examined the connection between natural motivation and external motivation. They divided a number of children (who all loved to draw, as children generally do) into three groups:

One group were promised a fancy certificate if they would draw during their free time.

The second group was not promised anything, but the children were given certificates if they opted to draw on their own.

The third group were neither offered nor given anything.

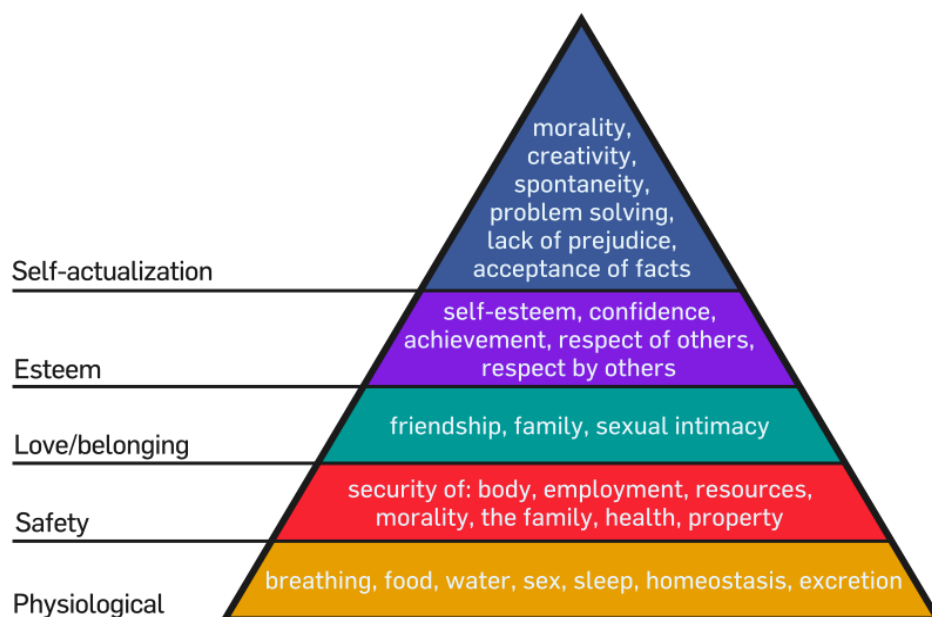
The results were that the children of the first group lost almost all interest in drawing, whereas the other two groups continued to draw with enthusiasm. Additional experiments gave the same results.

The bottom line here is that humans *like* to create/produce, and that external rewards can ruin this internal motivation. In other words, the external stimulation of production has a negative effect.

People only need external motivation for things that they wouldn't choose to do otherwise.

Obtaining food, housing, tools, knowledge, mates, and friends are not things that we need external stimulation for. And throwing external rewards at these things tends to ruin our internal motivation.

Here is an illustration of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. This model is not ideal in my opinion, but it very well illustrates the things that humans are naturally motivated to achieve:



So, if people are naturally motivated to achieve these things, why must we fear satisfaction? The top levels of Maslow's pyramid are things that take decades to obtain, and require that the lower levels be maintained.

Maslow's lesson, and the lesson of the drawing experiment, is that contentment does *not* lead to laziness.

Self-Surpassing Man

Humans are, by nature, beings that self-surpass. We grow, we develop, we improve, and doing such things gives us pleasure. This is not something that has to be beaten into us – it is something we are born with. Children are naturally inquisitive, they like making things, and they like conquering obstacles. It is only when they are *forced* to do things that laziness and dissatisfaction really appear.

We productive humans are the only fountains of value in this world (beyond the low, base level provided by nature). If we can bring ourselves to really accept this truth, production and creation tend to make us feel good about ourselves. In other words, we feel no deficit, and we give ourselves credit for the good things that we do.

The man who accepts a status deficit, on the other hand, reverses the natural order of pleasures. The joy of creation is dethroned, and replaced by desperate grasping at rewards that dangle down from the top of a status structure. It is a degraded existence, and a far less healthy one.

The enthroning of grasping above creating alters the function of men's minds, and degrades the basic mechanism of production. This, not surprisingly, leads to decline.

But if we hold to our natural joy of production and growth – if we retain a belief that it is our nature to self-surpass – not only are we happier, but we produce *more*. So says Maslow, and so says the experiment.

Accidental wealth, by the way, does not provide enduring satisfaction. People find the initial surge exhilarating, but after a rather short period of time, their happiness reverts to its previous level, and often lower. This problem is very common, for example, among lottery winners.

The Other Side of Discontent

The problem with life separated from discontent is that we have so few images of it. Trying to imagine such a life, most of us draw a blank. A big part of this is that we've been taught to think about what we're *not*, rather than what we *are*. Our daily thoughts revolve mostly around deficits, noticing anyone who is taller, stronger, richer, etc., and feeling bad about the contrast. This is a direct result of our lineage being exposed to status hierarchies for some five to eight thousand years.

I noted in [FMP#21](#) that a friend of mine who conducted seminars would ask people what they wanted, and that they always responded by listing the things they *didn't* want. This complete focus on negatives is another version of the same deficit mentality.

Napoleon Hill, in his classic *Think and Grow Rich*, went on at great length that the one thing people most needed to do was to specify what they wanted – to state a *definite purpose*, in his words. Once we do that, we step outside of the status hierarchy and become like the second and third groups of children in the experiment mentioned above: creating because of our own drives and enjoying what we create.

Knowing what we want is how we create a world outside the permanent deficit mentality. This is where our images of the other side of discontent will come from.

If you'd like to do something very useful, please isolate yourself for half an hour and list the things that you want. Spend time and linger over each item; include as much detail as possible. I think you'll find it time well spent.

The Death of Status

Right now, status reigns in the West. The ancient restraints have been removed, and we are assaulted – daily – by a scientific system of removing our attention from what we are and toward a never-ending list of things we lack: money, power, toys, and so on.

But at the same time, technology is generally killing scarcity, and status along with it. It doesn't feel that way because of the system mentioned above, but it's true anyway.

It used to be that food was hard to obtain, that most things were hard to obtain. But technology has solved most of those issues, and things that were expensive (thus hard to obtain) are now cheap. For example, below are two graphs from Julian Simon's *The Ultimate Resource*. The top one shows the price of wheat as measured in average wages.

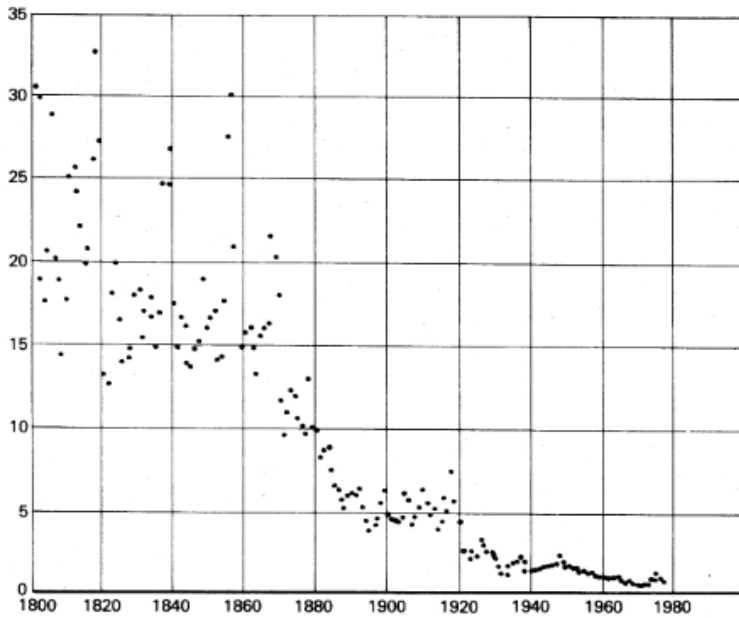


FIGURE 5-4. The Price of Wheat Relative to Wages in the U.S.

In the following graph, you can see that precisely the same thing has happened to the price of copper. And there are many other examples.

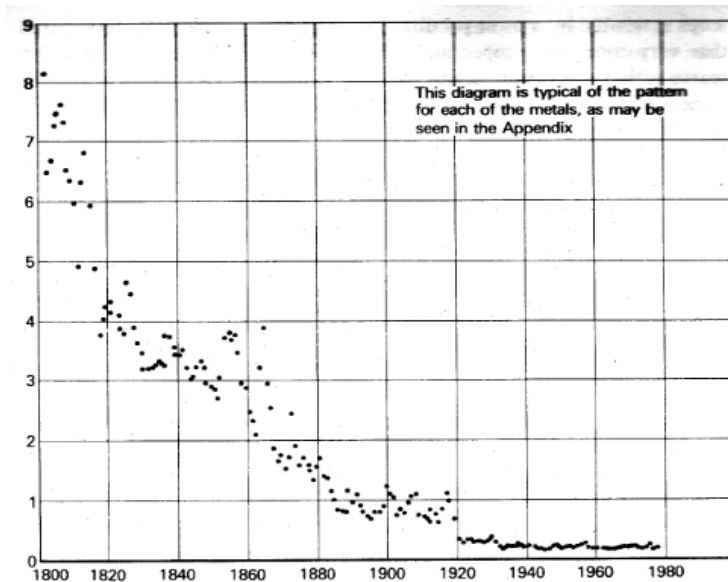


FIGURE 1-1a. The Scarcity of Copper as Measured by Its Price Relative to Wages

Scarcity, in large, important areas, is dying.

Now, consider my short list of things that were scarce not long ago. These are things that my relatives mentioned to me as problems when they were young. We've come a long way in two overlapping lifetimes.

- Ice
- Refrigeration
- Fresh fruits
- Fresh vegetables
- Meats
- Good mattresses
- Clothes washers and dryers
- Cooking appliances
- Consistent, easy heat in winter
- Cool air in summer
- Local transportation (horses, cars)
- Long-distance transportation
- Medicines
- Medical information
- Technical information
- Building materials
- Long-distance communication
- Affordable travel

All of the things above were status items at one time, and are commodity items now – common things that give their holders no special status. One by one, status items are vanishing. Certainly advertisers will continue to promote one item after another as necessary to status, but it remains clear that a new, faddish trinket means a *lot* less than a car did in 1915 or air conditioning did in 1960.

As status fails, cultures can either become trivial, vain, and ridiculous; they can self-destruct as the elite find ways to drive the masses back into need; or they can re-form. Right now, all three of these adaptations are occurring in different segments of Western civilization:

1. **Becoming trivial, vain, and ridiculous.** This is the route being taken by commercial advertisers. How many kinds of beer are there, just from the big brewers? Why is there a new fashion trend every year? How many kinds of shoes does one person need? Are three hundred dollar sneakers really necessary? How many iGadgets must people buy every year? How many memorials to your local sports team will fit on your wall?
2. **The elite driving the masses back into need.** This is precisely what is happening on the governmental and central banking levels. Perhaps half of the Western world is already dependent on their governments for survival, and their rations will be cut as required. The productive half of Western civilization is being carefully bled dry. Taxes, fees, and inflation account for well over half of their production, and things only stand to get worse. In addition, a number of permanent wars are being waged by the Western governments, and this eats up production far faster than any other method.
3. **Reformation** is occurring at the grass roots level in a dozen different areas. Readers of this newsletter and similar material comprise one of these areas, homeschoolers are another, Bitcoiners and 3D printers are still others, and there are several more. These people are taking their lives back into their own hands and living as they think best, rather seeking positions in a status hierarchy.

So long as reformation continues, the days of the commercial advertisers' artificial scarcity are limited. At some point it will be regarded as ridiculous and repellent to live one's life only to obtain the trendy item of the week. Already people use the word “hipster” as an insult and make jokes about the desperate need for things like napkin rings.

The large risks, of course, are the destructive actions of governments and central banks. It appears that these people are facing large problems of their own making, and that they won't be able to keep their masses in full compliance forever. But we'll have to leave that discussion for a future issue.

If the manufactured scarcity model fails, it will ruin great swaths of businesses and investments, since they have based their values on the idea that oversized profits were permanently obtainable.

Just to be clear, this is not to say that whole industries will vanish. Shoes, for example, will still be made, but several dozen high-fashion lines may be bankrupted.

But financial considerations are among the least issues concerning the loss of scarcity. If status hierarchies fail – to any appreciable extent – the resultant increase of human happiness will be profound. For example:

- Once status is removed, the man or woman who is better than you in some way ceases being a treat and a torment, and becomes, rather, an inspiration, and quite possibly a friend or mentor.
- The thousands of dollars per year (sometimes per month!) spent on status items can be used instead to build long-term wealth, or be put to other productive uses.
- When feeling good about one's self no longer depends on comparison with others, people will tend to interact more benevolently. There will be less malicious gossip, less meddling, more kind words, more compliments, and so on.
- People will be less reliant on outside groups and causes for their self-esteem.
- People will feel less vulnerable and will therefore be less afraid to take risks.
- People will begin living with intent, rather than following a 'success script' provided to them by advertisements and authorities. That is, they will decide what it is they really want, make plans for obtaining it, and then act on their plans. (Please refer to [FMP #16](#) on this point.)
- Instead of forever chasing the brief rush of “happiness,” people will become more conscious of the long-term experience of “satisfaction.”

The loss of status hierarchies is something to be welcomed, but the institutions that stand to lose from the process will attempt to stop it. In fact, they are doing so already. What happens next is largely to be determined by the choices of millions of individuals, and that choice lies between using one's will or sacrificing it to authority.

Final Thoughts

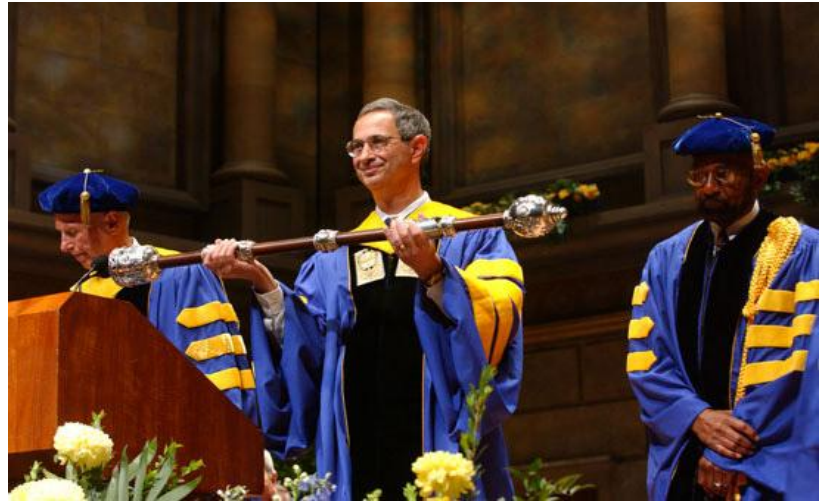
The status hierarchies we've been talking about have affected human civilization far more than people have realized. In particular, they have set the borders of creation and adaptation.

In Sumer, in Greece, and in Rome, and even in our time, people have overwhelmingly used their creative energies to fill slots in the cultural status hierarchy. What *they* wanted – the desires that might have formed organically within themselves – were so deeply overrun as to be barely distinguishable. Hence, my friend's experience of hundreds of basically good people who were unable to list things that they wanted in their lives.

Whenever we decide to be done with status hierarchies, we'll begin to create in far better ways, and will be considerably more efficient while doing so. Limiting human creativity to structures defined by people like Cugli and Lipit-Ectar was foolish in the extreme... yet that is precisely what human cultures have done.

Humans are creation machines, guided by their imaginations. For the past several thousand years, however, we have been imagining, dreaming, and creating within false boundaries.

In other words, we have been living with impoverished imaginations. Rather than dreaming our own dreams, we have been trained to dream in the vocabulary of rulers like Cugli and Lipit-Ectar. For example, images like the two below very often resonate within us, and they really shouldn't.



But however badly we have been affected by these status hierarchies, there is a very simple way out of the trap – and that way out is *contentment*.

Being content, by the way, does not mean that we have absolutely everything we want. Rather, it means that we are satisfied that we have done well and are capable of earning or creating the additional things that we want.

More than this, being content means that we give ourselves full credit for the good things we do. We will have no permanent deficit that swallows all the credit for our good deeds – we will receive all of that credit. (And yes, we'll get used to it and enjoy it.) This will be healthy in many ways, and is a magnificent selling point for the concept.

The truth is that humiliation by status was always a fraud. A “high position” does not make anyone better than another, and being a “worker” is not the same as being a “little person.” Workers are creators upon Earth, and they should never have let go of that opinion.

I will leave you now with some pertinent quotes on the subject:

It isn't what you have or who you are or where you are or what you are doing that makes you happy or unhappy. It is what you think about it.

– Dale Carnegie

Do not spoil what you have by desiring what you have not.

– Epicurus

Everyone chases after happiness, not knowing that it is right at their heels.

– Bertolt Brecht

If you say, “If I had a little more, I should be very satisfied,” you make a mistake. If you are not content with what you have, you would not be satisfied if it were doubled.

– Charles H. Spurgeon

I love everything that makes up a milieu, the rolling of the carriages and the noise of the workmen in Paris, the cries of a thousand birds in the country, the movement of the ships on the waters. I love also absolute, profound silence, and, in short, I love everything that is around me, no matter where I am.

– George Sand

I know that there is nothing better for men than to be happy and do good while they live. That everyone may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all his work -- this is the gift of God.

– Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

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I will be speaking at the British Inter-Planetary Society in London on June 14. They are holding a [conference on extra-terrestrial liberty](#), and I will be speaking on *Space: John Locke's Ultimate Triumph*. Please come if you can.

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SOMETHING EXTRA: In the next few weeks, we’ll be delivering a brief but important report on the topic of “civil forfeiture”, a legal concept that allows governments to seize your assets without notice and even without charging you with a crime.

While it might not make for the most exciting reading, this is a threat you should be aware of. After all, if we are to live as we wish, maintaining control over our property, possessions and wealth is critical.

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See you next month.

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