

The Power of the Individual

Written by Doris Lessing, as published in The Voluntaryist, February 1992.

It is particularly hard for young people, faced with what seem like impervious walls of obstacles, to have belief in their ability to change things, to keep their personal and individual viewpoints intact. I remember very clearly how it seemed to me in my late teens and early 20s, seeing only what seemed to be impregnable systems of thought, of belief—governments that seemed unshakable. But what has happened to those governments—like the white government in Southern Rhodesia, for instance? To those powerful systems of faith like Nazism, Italian Fascism and Stalinism? To the British Empire—to all the European empires, in fact, so recently powerful? They have all gone, and in such a short time.

Looking back, I no longer see enormous blocs, nations, movements, systems, faiths, religions—only individuals, people who when I was young I might have valued, but not with much belief in the possibility of their changing anything. Looking back, I see what a great influence an individual may have, even an apparently obscure person, living a small, quiet life. It is individuals who change societies, give birth to ideas; who, standing out against tides of opinion, change them. This is as true in open societies as it is in oppressive societies, but of course the casualty rate in the closed societies is higher. Everything that has ever happened to me has taught me to value the individual, the person who cultivates and preserves her or his own ways of thinking, who stands out against group thinking, group pressures or who, conforming no more than is necessary to group pressures, quietly preserves individual thinking and development.

I am not at all talking about eccentrics, about whom such a fuss is made in Britain. Only a very rigid and conforming society could have produced the idea of an eccentric in the first place. Eccentrics tend to be in love with the image of eccentricity and, once embarked on this path, become more and more picturesque, developing eccentricity for its own sake. No, I am talking about people who think about what is going on in the world, who try to assimilate information about our history, about how we behave and function—people who advance humanity as a whole.

It is my belief that an intelligent and forward-looking society would do everything possible to produce such individuals instead of, as happens very often, suppressing them. But if governments, if cultures, don't encourage their production, then individuals and groups can and should.

Such people, such individuals, will be a most productive yeast and ferment, and lucky the society who has plenty of them.