The Fear of Loneliness

Whether in urban or rural areas, people of the High Middle Ages spent much of their everyday lives in the company of others. What we in our times think of as privacy was not quite the same in medieval society. Not only were living spaces more communal, but people were expected to work, play, and travel in groups. In the following selection A History of Private Life, historian Georges Duby describes this crowded, communal society and the difficulties facing anyone seeking solitude.

“People crowded together cheek by jowl, living in promiscuity, sometimes in the midst of a mob. In feudal residences there was no room for individual solitude, except perhaps in the moment of death. When people ventured outside the domestic enclosure, they did so in groups. No journey could be made by fewer than two people, and if it happened that they were not related, they bound themselves by rites of brotherhood, creating an artificial family that lasted as long as the journey required.

By age seven, at which time young aristocratic males were considered persons of sex, they left the woman's world and embarked upon a life of adventure. Yet throughout their lives they remained surrounded, in the strong sense of the word—whether they were dedicated to the service of God and sent to study with a schoolmaster or joined a group of other young men in aping the gestures of a leader, their new father, whom they followed whenever he left his house to defend his rights by force of arms or force of words or to hunt in his forests. Their apprenticeship over, new knights received their arms as a group, a mob organized as a family. (Generally the lord's son was dubbed along with the sons of the vassals.) From that time forth the young knights were always together, linked in glory and in shame, vouching for and standing as hostage for one another. As a group, accompanied by servants and often by priests, they raced from tourney to tourney, court to court, skirmish to skirmish, displaying their loyalties by showing the colors or shouting the same rallying cry. The devotion of these young comrades enveloped their leader in an indispensable mantle of domestic familiarity, an itinerant household.

Thus, in feudal society, private space was divided, composed of two distinct areas: one fixed, enclosed, attached to the hearth; the other mobile, free to move through
public space, yet embodying the same hierarchies and held together by the same controls. Within this mobile cell peace and order were maintained by a power whose mission was to organize a defense against the intrusion of the public authorities, for which purpose an invisible wall, as solid as the enclosure that surrounded the house, was erected against the outside world. This power enveloped and restrained the individuals of the household, subjecting them to a common discipline. Power meant constraint. And if private life meant secrecy, it was a secrecy shared by all members of the household, hence fragile and easily violated. If private life meant independence, it was independence of a collective sort. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries collective privacy did exist. But can we detect any signs of personal privacy within the collective privacy?

Feudal society was so granular in structure, composed of such compact curds, that any individual who attempted to remove himself from the close and omnipresent conviviality, to be alone, to construct his own private enclosure, to cultivate his garden, immediately became an object of either suspicion or admiration, regarded as either a rebel or a hero and in either case considered "foreign"-the antithesis of "private." The person who stood apart, even if his intention was not deliberately to commit evil, was inevitably destined to do so, for his very isolation made him more vulnerable to the Enemy's attacks. No one would run such a risk who was not deviant or possessed or mad; it was commonly believed that solitary wandering was a symptom of insanity. Men and women who traveled the roads without escort were believed to offer themselves up as prey, so it was legitimate to take everything they had. In any case, it was a pious work to place them back in some community, regardless of what they might say, to restore them by force to that clearly ordered and well-managed world where God intended them to be, a world composed of private enclosures and of the public spaces between them, through which people moved only in cortege.”
Life in the Cities: Violence and Fear

The growth of cities after the eleventh century created what we now recognize as typical urban problems. One such problem was keeping the peace. Cities in Western Europe were often places of violence and fear. As part of a trend toward studying, social life, historians have increasingly studied crime and violence in medieval cities. In the following selection Jacques Rossioud analyzes violent acts in the cities of Western Europe, emphasizing how urban violence fostered anxiety.

“The history of the cities of Western Europe is shot through with episodes of violence, fear, and revolution, episodes in which family honor, participation in the municipal council, or working conditions were at stake. Such conflicts opposed "magnate" and "popular" factions. In Italy they opposed actual political parties dominated by clans, and in the bigger cities of Flanders they turned into true class wars punctuated by massacres, exiling, and destruction. Such conflicts were frequent between 1250 and 1330, and they resulted everywhere in a defeat of the old rich land and an enlargement of oligarchies.

A second wave of unrest of a more clearly social character (the dompi in Florence and Siena, the mailotins in Paris, and so forth) battered the urban world in the late fourteenth century. The defeat of the lower orders did not put an end to the tensions, which were transformed into an occasional brief terror, here and there, but were more usually expressed in continual but muted, "atomized" conflicts difficult to distinguish from common delinquency in the documentation. Stones thrown at night through a master's windows, a creditor brutalized, a brawl between two rival groups of workers were easily ascribed to ordinary violence by the judges.

In other words, many city-dwellers, even if they lived through long and difficult periods of tension, escaped the horrors of riots and repression, but they all had to face an atmosphere of violence on an almost daily basis. There is little need to accumulate examples: in Florence, Venice, Paris, Lille, Dijon, Avignon, Tours, or Foix, the judicial archives reveal an impressive series of cold-blooded vendettas, of Chaudes Njes between individuals or groups settled with knives or iron-tipped sticks, and of rapes, often collective, that marked for life poor girls beaten and dragged from their rooms at night.

These violent acts were for the most part committed by youths or adult men, often of modest social condition, but who were indistinguishable from law-abiding citizens. Wine-drunkenness was often an excuse does not explain everything, nor do the arms that everyone carried in spite of municipal ordinances. The example came from on
high: even in Reims at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the judges were incapable of keeping clans from resolving their quarrels by means of arms. However, civic violence (executions, torture, forcing a criminal to run through the city streets as the crowd jeered and struck him) was offered as a spectacle, and the domestic moral code allowed blows. Justice, what is more, did not inspire belief; it was more dreaded than appreciated, and it was inefficient and costly. When he was scoffed at, the individual turned to immediate vengeance. He did so to safeguard his honor: it was in the name of honor that young men punished girls who, to their minds, transgressed its canons. Like violence, honor was a value widespread in urban societies: prominent citizens were called "honorable." There was no reputation without honor and no honor without authority. The rich man's wealth and friends lent support to his honor; the working man without wealth held his reputation to be an essential capital.

Violence fostered anxiety. On occasion the notables denounced it, but they did not really seek to extirpate it (either in Venice or Dijon). For humble folk this fear added to other obsessions—of being abandoned amid general indifference, as with Dame Poverty, whom Jean de Meun described as covered with an old sack, a bit apart from the others ... crouched down and hunched over like a poor dog," sad, shamed, and unloved.”

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