

The Sociology of Leopard Man

by Logan Feys

He rejects society and all it has to offer in favor of a minimalist, reclusive existence. He calls himself Tom Leppard. But he is more widely known as “Leopard Man,” owing to the fact that he is tattooed from head to toe with leopard spots. He is, according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, the world’s most tattooed man. He is, according to society, a freak.

Normally, I find myself unimpressed with individuals who radically alter their appearance through extreme tattooing, piercings, hair mutilations, etc. Such people are desperate for society’s attention. Having failed to attract it in a positive form, they go for shock value. They may call themselves “non-conformists,” but most anti-social freaks, in their obsession with displaying their freakishness, are just as oriented toward and psychologically dependent on others’ opinions as approval-seeking socialites.

Leopard Man, however, is no ordinary freak. He doesn’t live for other people’s reactions. He lives in solitude. Tom Leppard, now in his 60s, spends most of his days in a small cabin in the Scottish wilderness. He ventures into civilization only when he needs food and supplies (he wears clothes to cover up his colorful body).

Society looks down upon freakish and extraordinary individuals alike and views them with suspicion. Ordinary people fear what they don’t understand. They especially fear loners, those mysterious creatures who pursue their own values without seeking others’ permission or permitting others to hamper them.

Pop psychologists reassure the masses that the abnormal suffer from psychological disorders. Indeed, plenty of weird people do have serious mental problems. But so do plenty of “normal” people. Who are the con-artists, the spouse-beaters, the child-molesters of the world? They are, overwhelmingly, the priests, the lawyers, the socially upstanding next-door neighbors of the world. Why do so many millions of “normal” people suffer from alcoholism, eating disorders, panic attacks, depression, and other debilitating conditions? Could it be that the pathological drive to “fit in” has spawned these mass self-inflicted diseases?

Conformity can be seen as the world’s most prevalent and most pernicious psychological disorder. The consequences of it are no less than the suppression and destruction of one’s self. To be human is to be an individual human, with individual tastes, talents, values, and aspirations that are distinct from those of others. Living in society, we are under constant pressure to surrender our individuality to the will of the majority, the school, the workplace, the family, etc.

Seceding from society, as Leopard Man has done, would certainly free us from social pressures. Leopard Man -- unlike so many millions of socially successful but intellectually enslaved status-seeking suburbanites -- is happy. In a rare BBC television interview, Leppard

remarked, "As far as I'm concerned, if there is a paradise on Earth, I'm in it. You're welcome to what you've got. I'll keep this."

How many people in society could sincerely utter such sentiments?

Leppard's solitary paradise notwithstanding, being around people and their creations can be worthwhile. I happen to enjoy dining out, touring museums, and meeting the occasional individual who piques my interest. One can enjoy the benefits modern society offers without succumbing to the stultifying habit of social dependence. But it takes a strong will. Perhaps Leopard Man lacks the psychological strength to stand on his own within society. Perhaps he simply doesn't find any value in society. I'm in no position to judge his particular choice.

I think one can be part of society and attain happiness or shun it completely and attain happiness. Or, like me, one can try to do both.

I find that being involved in societal activities on a daily basis with no respite tends to wear me down, as I must be in a constant reactive/ defensive state of mind in order to avoid absorbing society's standards. A day or two of solitude (or time spent in retreat from society with a close friend or loved one) every so often helps refresh and revitalize the mind. If you never get away from society, you risk the consequences of constantly orienting your mind toward others and constantly having to react to society's depravities. Anger and cynicism could build up inside you in place of life-affirming thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, in trying to maintain a cheerful attitude, you may let your guard down and passively internalize some of society's corrupt messages rather than fight them off -- and next thing you know, you're a conformist.

Get society out of your life and out of your mind -- not permanently (necessarily), but from time to time. Escape to non-social environs from time to time. Be like Leopard Man from time to time. He may not be a hero, but he is free. Be psychologically free enough and strong enough to live independently, leaving society and entering society on no one's terms but your own.
