

Warding off the Birth of Cold Monsters

Land in Common
internal process & learning notes (2023)

Nietzsche called the state “the coldest of all cold monsters.” Which implies a class of beings that extend below that pinnacle: the cold monsters. They are also called “institutions,” though the question remains open as to whether all institutions are also cold monsters. We know, at the very least, that many of them are.

What are cold monster institutions? They are a kind of organism, a form of life. They are not people in the human sense, and not even more generally in the animal sense. They are not of any of the five conventional kingdoms of life. They are of a 6th kingdom. Just to be fancy and a little bit cheesy, let’s call it Kingdom Frigimonstrum (from *frigis monstrum*, “cold monster” in Latin). Maybe there’s a whole taxonomy of them within this broad category.

Groups of humans, assembled together with various laws, funding structures, and cultural patterns of governance and relationship can generate an emergent “2nd order” form of life called an “institution.” Institutions are alive, and humans are a key component of them, but they are not themselves human. They don’t have human intentions, feelings, or a human kind of agency. They do have their own equivalents of these, though: in place of feelings, they have institutional affects that circulate through them and through the bodies of their humans (i.e., fear, threat, enthusiasm, pride, etc.), and they have their own forms of inhuman agency. Once born and standing on “their own two legs,” their primary motivation is self-preservation in the name of whatever mission they’ve adopted as their self-justification. They will move continually to gather and mobilize the energy, matter, and meaning they need to nourish themselves. They will alter their habitat as best they can in ways that benefit their nourishment and sustenance. Humans who are some of their parts will serve internally not as humans *per se* (though their humanity is a necessary condition) but as *roles*. The institution will mobilize its own humans to recruit other humans into these roles, and it will shift and change roles as needed.

At the same time, there will be an endless internal mess of struggles since the humans will never be wholly engulfed by their roles as parts or cogs. They will struggle for their own agency, for their own sustenance, for forms of community and connection that exceed the Institution, and to shape the actions and directions of the institution itself. These struggles matter immensely, because sometimes they determine whether the

cold monster of the Institution will roll over a community and crush its living bodies, or whether it will plant trees in a self-congratulatory ceremony of ecological restoration (and fundraising, of course). It's a matter of harm reduction, really.

A big question is: how do we assemble humans, engaging in collective action, perhaps even building durable institutions, in ways that ward off the birth of a new cold monster? How do we struggle to hold the space open when so many forces are trying to coax a new cold monster to be born?

What forces and elements, assembled in what ways, lead to the birth of a cold monster? How can we prevent this while still organizing ourselves in meaningful ways? Once born, can a cold monster be undone without undoing the institution that is its embodiment?

Or maybe the question is not how to prevent them from being born. Maybe they will be born. Maybe we need to keep their population low? Or do we learn to live with them? Raise them differently? Refuse to set up a world where they rule? Open questions.

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Five “birth control” tests

1. Are we OK with dying? Can our organization die in the service of movement? Are we asking, together, how we would know when the right time is to die? This is, in some ways, about thinking like a movement rather than an organization.
2. Can what we're building survive the death of our organization? Is our organization serving as an incubator for forms of life that can grow to thrive on their own, or is it building dependencies? How resilient are our projects? (This is related to the importance of us being able to die).
3. Are we in service to collective liberation at every level? This includes internal ways of organizing and relating as well as the “external” work we're doing in the world.
4. Are we honest? Can we share, in public, our vulnerabilities, struggles, and limits? Can we talk honestly about the ways our work (for example, where our money comes from) causes harm? Can we actively refuse the trap of telling glossy, fake stories (fairly glamor) that cover over the places where we need to do serious learning and self-transformation?

5. Are people more important for our organization than roles? In other words, are we built around actual relationships of deepening trust, mutual care, and accountability, or are we built around generic functions where the people that fill them are interchangeable? Are our structures functioning as walls (maybe with gates and doors, but still walls, and still gatekeepers) between relationships, or are our structures enabling our connection, communication, deepening accountability, trust, and love?

Or, said differently: is a “nonprofit organization” the goal, or is it seen as a problematic and maybe temporary strategy to build, deepen & transform relationships? (related to question #1 about “can we die,” with “we” here being the structure/legal container...