

The Hyper-Individualism of Economic and Political Conservatism In Light of Human Social Development

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Every human group has to find the proper balance between accommodating individual values [individual freedom, individual rights – individualism] and requiring commitment to social values [social obligation and responsibility – communalism]. Societies that smother individuals with excessive social commitment suffer from a lack of both creativity and the flexibility to adapt to changing conditions and situations. On the other hand, societies that allow individuals too much freedom and require too little commitment to the common good risk losing control, which is essential to maintaining the integrity of the group and the security that it provides for raising offspring and assuring species survival. The key question is what constitutes the appropriate balance?

While different societies answer this question somewhat differently, it is interesting to note that all successful societies throughout all of human social development have placed the greater weight on the social commitment side of the scale [social values – communalism]. Put simply, while in all societies individuals are recognized as having individual talents and abilities [strength, intelligence, knowledge, ingenuity, and interpersonal skills], they are expected to exercise these abilities not just in their own self-interest but also in a manner that benefits the common good of the group. In the traditional human societies [bands and tribes] that characterized the simpler social condition for humans for 99.9% of their history [prior to the emergence of complex societies and civilizations], individuals were not tolerated who pursued activities that were excessively self-serving and that resulted in their accumulating ever greater control of resources for their personal benefit. In fact, individuals who showed such proclivities were first ostracized, and if the behavior persisted, they were expelled from the band or tribe, a fate that often meant death. The simple fact was that individuals could not survive for long on their own in what was a high risk natural environment filled with competing predators. They needed the protective umbrella of the group to survive, and the bargain they made to belong to that group required them to hold their individual aspirations in check and to use their talents to contribute as much or more to the needs of the group as to their own needs, wants and desires.

In most traditional societies, individuals are socialized to respect this implicit social contract and in many cases to view the group as so important that individuals will sacrifice their own lives in behalf of the survival of their offspring and the group. To the present day, we still identify as our culture heroes those

who have risked or given their lives to assure the survival of other group members or the group as a whole. In this regard, virtually all of our fantasy super heroes act to sustain the community [support communal values] in the face of villains who plot to gain power and control over the community for their own ends [anti-social, hyper-individualists]. Our major political heroes – Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Kennedy – are seen as giving of themselves so our nation could be established, achieve a proper balance, remain whole, and pursue its collective ideals. Even our supreme Christian religious hero, Jesus, is portrayed as giving his life that others might live. Ted Turner, Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Dale Carnegie, and John D. Rockefeller are examples of individuals who have been extremely successful financially and who have accumulated great personal wealth and power, and while as individuals they have been lauded for their innovation and industry and envied for their wealth, only when they have offered up substantial portions of their wealth to support the social needs of the human community have they been celebrated as truly admirable. In this regard, note the many equally successful billionaires through time who are not in this celebrated group, and for good reason. Even our frontier and outlaw heroes undergo transformations in the retelling of their life stories to be seen as social heroes – Robin Hood, Jesse James, Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Wild Bill Hickok, Wyatt Earp. Most of our heroes are social heroes; they are not individualistic heroes who serve only their own interests.

Commitment to social values as trumping individual values is the foundation bargain humans make in order to belong as members of human groups, and it is nothing new. Since before some primates came down from the trees, our human ancestors have depended on their social groups for protection from predators, location and distribution of resources, defense in relation to other groups in their species, communicating essential knowledge and skills, and responding to existing conditions and anticipating future needs. As one group of primates, humanoids were able to become successful ground level predators and explorers in large part because they gave up social organization based on the dominant individual male and his harem of confined females and adopted social organization based on several male and female adult pairings together with their offspring cooperating together in one unified group – the human troupe or band.

Once the DNA evidence linking all living creatures on earth to the same fundamental life code was added to the geological evidence for the development of the earth and the anthropological evidence for the development of the different species on earth, evolution as a theory was confirmed beyond question, except in particular details. And within the picture of human evolution there is virtually universal agreement among human social evolution experts

that the human capacity for social and communication skills allowed for the development of cooperatively based societies with large numbers of members. In turn, these larger cooperative communities led to advances in technology and planning for the future that proved instrumental in the ascension of the human species to its current prominence among all species on earth. It is fair to say that at the root of the human success story is the commitment the species makes to the common good of the group – to social values, to the communal perspective.

In the last ten thousand years, complex societies and civilizations have developed, which have been made possible by the ever-expanding umbrella of social cooperation across larger and larger groups. Clans have become bands, which have become tribes, which have become tribal federations, which have become feudal baronies and then states, which have become nations. And in the historical period these nations have formed international federations first defined militarily and more recently connected both economically and politically. Humans do not get to a state of complex society and civilization without being guided by the clear preeminence of the principle of social cooperation and obligation over the principle of individual freedom and personal rights. From the very beginning to the present, this is just the “way things have always been” and the way they are extremely likely to be so long as the species exists. And as cooperative structures have consistently grown across larger and larger social groupings in the course of human social history, the social principle has increased in importance and influence, not diminished. So, looking at the big picture, the trend is clear: social values remain preeminent and are growing in importance. Put simply, our entire species’ history reveals that humans are most fundamentally social beings, not separate individuals, and correspondingly individual values have by necessity always been subservient to communal values.

The need to properly understand, prioritize and balance individualistic and social perspectives occurs at all levels of human existence from the individual to the nation state. Anywhere the competitive self-interested perspective of individualism arises it is in tension with the cooperative perspective of communalism. Just as individuals can adopt an excessively egotistical viewpoint, overlook all social obligations, and seek to corral wealth and power to exclusively serve their own ends [the Scrooge syndrome], so tribes, states, and nations can do the same. Most fights, skirmishes, raids, battles and wars begin as a result of individuals or groups pursuing their exclusive self-interests while asserting their superiority in relation to others – the competitive individualistic perspective. Corporations in America are legally defined as hyper-individualistic – required to pursue their exclusive self-interests and maximize returns to their

private investors. By legal mandate, corporations have no larger social responsibilities; controls have to come from the greater society in the form of regulations implemented politically. As corporations have become more powerful and influential in the economic and political affairs of the country in recent years, the singular corporate emphasis on the individualistic perspective is putting pressure on the overall balance between the individual and communal orientations in the nation.

Most of the time humans negotiate the tension between the individualistic and communal perspectives fairly well at all levels, and the cooperative communal perspective contains and restrains the aggressive, self-serving impulse of the competitive individualistic point of view. But when individuals or human groups of any size are put under pressure for access to resources or adopt worldviews that espouse their fundamental superiority – for whatever reason [often religious, ethnic, or racial], aggressive behavior guided by self-interest can arise and dominate. So, the impetus to competitive, aggressive, and violent behavior is always potentially present in individuals and groups and among groups at all levels. Managing this tension between the two fundamental forces of competition [individualism] and cooperation [communalism] so as to retain the vigor and creative benefits of competitive inclinations while insisting that these predispositions be expressed within an overall cooperative orientation and framework is one of the major challenges for humans and their societies.

So, given this pervasive human social history in which the norm is for social values to contain and frame individualistic values, how do we presently get to the hyper-individualism and its associated anti-government, pro-corporate stance of far right economic and political conservatives in America – exemplified by many in the Libertarian Party and Tea Party Movement? I suggest that mostly we get there by first forgetting the larger social basis for who we are, where we come from, and where the present trends clearly point that we are going. And once we allow ourselves to forget this past and present overall direction, I suggest that secondly we get there by taking for granted the social cocoon upon which we depend for our very survival and by allowing ourselves to dwell in the illusion that this cocoon is not really all that important. In this fantasy of denial, some of us [hyper-individualists] turn upon our most fundamental social selves and declare ourselves super individuals who deserve to be free of the social obligations and responsibilities upon which human society is founded. If in fact this fantasy of extreme individualism were fully implemented, it would most likely mean the end of civilization and might even be suicidal for the species as a whole.

Apart from losing sight of our fundamental social selves, how is it that this hyper-individualist illusion has been invited into our modern midst? First, we have to realize that the illusion of the super individual is always potentially there in the inherent tension in all societies between individual needs and wants and the needs and wants of the group. The long history of the preeminence of the social perspective in human societies, though a constant factor for very good reasons, does not guarantee that this precedent will necessarily persist. Second, the hyper-individualist illusion seems to achieve credence as a result of an important individualist sub-trend, which was established in the first long period of social development as complex society and civilization emerged and became established. We need to examine more specifically this sub-trend and the eventual emergence of the middle class and of individual social mobility, which have also promoted individualism in the modern era.

If we look broadly at human social development since the collective effects of agriculture and animal husbandry brought humans to the civilized condition, in all cases we see a long initial period during which people are progressively divided into more and more social classes arranged in a status hierarchy. The few individuals who lay claim to the most prestigious and powerful positions control access to most resources and thereby hold sway over the many. Whether referred to as royalty, divine priests, kings and queens, emperors, warlords, or feudal barons and dukes, civilization first depended for social control upon the privileged few dominating the many common people politically, economically, religiously, and militarily. Whereas tribal chiefs in the formative, pre-civilized period of human society were leaders selected for their proven capabilities from among a community mostly of equals, kings established themselves as leaders who claimed to be inherently superior and who demanded allegiance and tribute from all the “subjects” beneath them. The emergence of this supreme individual in the king, warlord, emperor, or dictator in what came to be a relatively stable social organization, constituted a major step in the ascension of the individualistic principle in the early period of complex society. From the point of view of the peons, it was “good to be the king.”

What those of lesser status overlooked was the fact that the reigns of these powerful Heads of State were often short and not infrequently ended in their literal heads dropping into a basket or being displayed on a pole as power shifted in response to altered alliances and allegiances. The social order could be quite fickle in deciding just which individuals would occupy the most elevated positions. Nevertheless, once kingship succeeded in claiming hereditary and often divine status for itself – and to a lesser degree for its surrounding royalty, it achieved considerable organizational stability. This stability was enforced by a

supporting legal and military corps that demanded allegiance across competing human tribes and fiefdoms. The overall result was that kingship created a framework within which specialized roles and further organizational complexity could develop. From Egypt to China to India to Rome to Mesoamerica, early civilizations were structured in terms of this organizational system, and the divine king was the epitome of society structured in a manner to celebrate the individual. Ironically, without equality of opportunity among the members of society, which was forbidden in the rigid class structure that accompanied kingship, there was no social mobility and so there could be no exercise of individualism among the masses to accompany the celebration of the supreme individual in the king.

In later times and as a result of a number of factors coming together in Europe during and following the Middle Ages, there evolved within kingship a relatively independent class of craftsmen, merchants, artisans, and professionals who populated ever larger urban centers and who constituted a transitional social layer between the common peasants and the aristocracy. This group later evolved into the middle class. Relative independence allowed for some of these members of the middle class to accumulate wealth in an economy where wealth was more and more defined by money, manufacture and labor and less by the control of land and raw materials. Money was liquid wealth, and it could much more readily lubricate the path of individuals to upper class status, if not buy royalty. Individual intelligence, industry, and financial acumen could result in social mobility so long as the individual was willing to leave behind his or her former class and community together with their many social associations. Mobility was for the successful individual, not for the group, and so emerged the tie between social mobility, the individualistic perspective, and individual aspirations for success.

Once the avenue opened for successful individuals among the masses to move from the peasantry to the middle class and from the middle class to the upper class – ultimately in pursuit of possibly “becoming the King,” the option for the rise of full-blown individualism was born within complex western civilization. Of course, these individualistic opportunities only existed within the larger social structure, which first tolerated and then accommodated them. But it was relatively easy for the industrious and manipulative individual to get “lost” in the maze of impersonal urban relations, hide from virtually all social obligations, attribute all success to his own efforts, and with a little luck in timing Scrooge his way to wealth and privilege in one or two generations.

The romance with this individualist fantasy of becoming one of the privileged super-rich continues to the present day and is housed as an element in the

American Dream. A rare few actually realize it through their own achievements. Lucky others win their way to wealth through playing mega lotteries. Unfortunately, many of these mega bucks winners demonstrate in their “after” lives that great wealth brings as much social turmoil and personal loss as it does happiness in material things. Still, this individualist romance of achieving great wealth persists in spite of the fact that the two major modern movements within the development of civilization have emphasized a return to the social commitment of equality – the most common condition in most pre-civilized, tribal human groups. Both democracy at the political level and socialism/communism at the economic level have as their goal to render all individuals equal, or more nearly equal, and to attack the idea that some individuals can gain positions of privilege and superiority and dominate others – the assumption inherent in competitive individualism. While communism has waned in recent times, democracy has become a dominant worldwide trend over the last 150 years. Even favored capitalism has had its wings clipped, emerging as regulated capitalism and trending toward socialism in many modern developed countries. Regulated capitalism and socialism are the compromises democracies have made to force individualistically and competitively oriented free enterprise to respect larger social goals and the common good.

In recent years, the activities of the World Trade Organization [WTO] have led to the further integration of world economies at the same time that this organization has promoted the interests of international competitive capitalism as trumping national political and social policy. While ironically it is individualistically and competitively oriented capitalism through the WTO that is leading the movement to greater and greater international integration, its failure to consider the negative social consequences of its pursuits and mandates invites its having its wings clipped just as the robber barons of the nineteenth century were required to accept regulated capitalism. Given the clear long and short-term trends in human social development, it seems very likely that in the future successful international integration will not be merely a military and economic affair. We can expect that the importance of social and communal values will again reassert themselves – coming from the foundation social roots of what it has meant to exist in human groups from the beginning. The various divisions of the United Nations represent the nascent commitment among nations that probably portend this eventual social and political integration at world scale. In this regard, we can note the fear of this potential underlying trend in the One World Order attacks on the United Nations by hyper-individualistic groups who want to retain as much separation as possible in and among societies.

Extreme individualism holds that the individual is supreme and celebrates the values of independence, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, industry, self-determination, personal success, and personal property rights. It holds that anything that gets in the way of the exercise of these values is an impediment and deserves to be eliminated. The heroes of this point of view are rags to riches Horatio Alger types and singular mountain men, some extreme athletes [e.g. cage fighters] and outlaws, and many survivalists. Some of the asocial “shoot ‘em up” video games also support this extreme individualist perspective. The celebrities promoting this viewpoint are mostly media info-tainers whose actual lives are very far removed from the principles.

For the few who attempt to live the hyper-individualistic life and the wanna-bees who support the illusion, anything that gets in the way of exercising personal freedom is suspect and held in disrepute. And a favorite target is “The Government,” because the government is a social entity and expresses the will of the social group, and the rules and regulations that the group decides are good for the community often constrain the pure pursuit of individual freedom. So, extreme individualists love to “hate” the government. In America, these extremists focus on the Bill of Rights as if it is the core of the Constitution, and they conveniently forget that this Bill is an addendum to the primary document which is all about defining the government of the country whose goal is to serve the collective good of the people. They overlook the fact that the Constitution begins with the socially focused Preamble, “We the People [emphasis in the original document] of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, secure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” The Constitution does not begin, “I the Individual, in order to assure my individual rights and privileges, to guarantee I will not be disturbed by others or obliged to contribute to the needs of others, and to allow me to go where I please, do what I please, say what I please, and accumulate property and wealth at my discretion to use as I see fit, do establish this Constitution for My World.”

Hyper-individualists exist on a continuum from those who espouse the values of hyper-individualism and belong to political groups that promote these values but who live within the greater society and grudgingly tolerate the regulations of the larger society [many Libertarians and Tea Party members] to isolated hermits and paramilitary gangs. Whether actually living as individualist extremists or supporting their point of view, hyper-individualists are all about nothing getting in the way of their personal pursuit of freedom, and accordingly they contend that

the government must be curtailed in its powers and its ability to proscribe the limits of individual behavior. “Get government off my back” is the mantra of these super individualists.....until they get in trouble and need help!! Then they expect government to come to their rescue and to protect them from harm and to assure them of their right to continue on their individualistic quests unmolested and owing nothing to the greater group – except often allegiance to law enforcement and the military, the agencies which usually have saved them.

In behalf of this latter exception, there tends to be a lot of flag waving and pronouncements of hyper-patriotism by hyper-individualists. But there is little or no social commitment to or acceptance of any of the responsibilities that are associated with any of the layers of society that lie between themselves and these security agencies. Without the socially determined and invested layers of education, transportation, communication, energy/power, water and sewage, land use planning, and legal, financial, judicial and commercial regulations and public services, there is no basis for the members of modern society to support law enforcement or a national military. There is an implicit contract between the individual and the group that requires the individual to commit to these social layers because without them there is no social umbrella within which the individual can pursue his or her personal benefit with security. Hyper individualists want to pretend that commitment to and support for all this societal structure is mostly unnecessary. But, it just is not so!

Flag waving hyper-individualists tend to be strong supporters of law enforcement and the military until any of these security agencies get in the way of their exercising any of the “liberties” that they claim. When this occurs, these extreme individualists redefine “true” patriotism much more narrowly. In the resulting revised patriotism, these hyper-individualists owe allegiance only to those who share their extreme ideology and the smaller paramilitary organizations that they erect to protect themselves from the impositions of “outside” government and its “corrupted” and “misguided” security forces. Extreme individualism is a slippery slope that can rapidly descend into isolation and social paranoia – irrational fear of the very community in which hyper-individualists are allowed to exist. It can end with social commitment limited to gangs and cults trying to carve out a separate survivalist space in the sparsely populated, rural areas of the country. These hyper-individualistic cults frequently end up stockpiling arms, preparing and practicing for armed conflict, and eventually precipitating violent confrontations with the representatives of law enforcement of the greater society, which ironically allows them to exist in the name of assuring them of their equal rights to assemble, protest and speak freely.

Summary

Modern hyper-individualists, who tend to be economic, political and often religious conservatives, are fighting a rear guard action in behalf of individualism in an effort to unseat communal values as leading in defining human society. They are doing this based on the presence in all societies of individual values and respect for individual human capabilities, even though these individualistic values are universally subservient to social values in all successful human societies through all time frames and in all types of human groups. They are encouraged in their efforts first by the appearance of complex societies structured around the supreme individual in kingship during the long initial development period of civilization and second in more modern times by the emergence of the opportunity for individual mobility for the masses within the largely anonymous and impersonal urban and suburban contexts. They choose to overlook the facts 1) that their individual freedoms are institutionalized within society and exist solely at the discretion of that society, 2) that they depend on that society to assure their exercise of their individual freedoms, and 3) that they owe commitment to and not protest of the fundamental social obligations and responsibilities of that society at all levels, since it is society that provides the security umbrella for their pursuit of their individual opportunities.

To be truly successful all individuals must achieve within themselves the same balance between individual and social values as their surrounding society, and in every case this means obligations and responsibilities to the group supercede individual needs, wants and desires. We lose sight of this fundamental fact at our personal and social peril.

Evidence of this peril is to be found most recently in the nearly catastrophic, worldwide financial crisis, which has become the Great Recession. This crisis, which could have easily led to full-blown world depression, was caused by super individualists – mostly in the form of self-interested corporations – successfully launching an attack on government regulations of the financial industry. The resulting deregulation “freed” financial institutions and the rating agencies and traders who served them to knowingly engage in highly risky behavior, which many knew to be both unsustainable and “wrong,” in order to maximize their individual benefit. The individualistic greed of select corporations and of the individuals that played key roles in running and “feeding” them nearly brought the world financial markets to their knees and made it necessary for government – drawing on the diminished resources of the great mass of the people – to come to the rescue of the financial system that these avaricious corporations and individuals had so flagrantly abused.

Whatever the legalities may be, these hyper individualistic corporations, their leaders, and all who created the deregulation conditions that facilitated this anti-social event [led by banking lobbyists and supported by economic and political conservatives with the unfortunate capitulation of many progressives] should be shunned and/or banished instead of being allowed to walk away with hundreds of billions of dollars and buy hiding privileges on their tax sheltered Caribbean islands. Unfortunately, instead of at least this public shunning occurring, the proponents of super individualism [Libertarians and Tea Party advocates] with their constant push to free all commercial enterprise from regulations that have been put in place to protect the common good are now claiming that the solution to the Great Recession is the combination of yet another round of deregulation and tax breaks for the very corporations and super rich who promoted, participated in, benefited most from, and are most responsible for the Great Recession itself. And in spite of the recent core lesson of the financial meltdown, the election of 2010 reveals that the expanding political center of the American voting public – the independents – still does not “get it” and remains susceptible in its understandable state of frustration to the disinformation and spin of the conservative Tea Party camp and its individualistic, anti-government ideology.

Conclusion

Individualism is an important aspect of all successful human societies, but it exists within society. It is an illusion to think individualism has been, is, can, or should be preeminent in defining or guiding society. Modern, conservative, hyper-individualistic movements in America dwell unrealistically in this illusion. And they attract many as advocates to their ranks who have not given careful consideration either to the major lessons of recent events, which reveal the negative consequences of following a heavily individualistic orientation, or to the social fundamentals of human societies, whether these societies are ancient and simple or modern and complex.