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George Will: Is the individual obsolete?

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During the 2012 presidential election, there occurred one of those remarkably rare moments when campaign rhetoric actually clarified a large issue. It happened when Barack Obama, speaking without a written text, spoke from his heart and revealed his mind:

“Look, if you’ve been successful, you didn’t get there on your own. ... If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life. Somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive. Somebody invested in roads and bridges. *If you’ve got a business — you didn’t build that. Somebody else made that happen.* The internet didn’t get invented on its own. Government research created the internet so that all the companies could make money off the internet. The point is, is that when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together.”

The italicized words ignited a heated debate, and Obama aides insisted that their meaning was distorted by taking them “out of context.” But Obama was merely reprising something said less than a year earlier by Elizabeth Warren, a former member of his administration who was campaigning to become a U.S. senator from Massachusetts. She said: “There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody. You built a factory out there — good for you. But I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. ... You built a factory and it turned into something terrific or a great idea — God bless, keep a big hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.”

Warren, who was then a member of Harvard’s faculty, was being with her statement, as Obama was with his, a pyromaniac in a field of straw men (as William F. Buckley characterized his friend John Kenneth Galbraith, a Harvard economist). Warren, like Obama, was energetically refuting propositions no one asserts. Everyone knows that all striving occurs in a social context and all attainments are, to some extent, enabled and conditioned by contexts that are shaped by government.

What made Warren’s riff interesting, and Obama’s echo of it important, is that both spoke in order to advance the progressive project of diluting the concept of individualism. Dilution is a prerequisite for advancement of a collectivist political agenda. The more that individualism can be portrayed as a chimera, the more that any individual’s achievements can be considered as derivative from society, the less the achievements warrant respect. And the more society is entitled to conscript — that is, to socialize — whatever portion of the individual’s wealth that it considers its fair share. Society may, as an optional act of political grace, allow the individual to keep the remainder of what society thinks is misleadingly called the individual’s possession.

Note that “society” necessarily means society’s collective expression: the government. Note also that government will not be a disinterested judge of what is its proper share of others’ wealth. This collectivist agenda is antithetical to America’s premise, which is: Government — including such public goods as roads, schools and police — is instituted to facilitate individual striving, aka the pursuit of happiness.

Warren and Obama asserted something unremarkable — that the individual depends on cooperative behavior by others. But they obscured this point: It is conservatism, not progressivism, that takes society seriously. Conservatism understands society not as a manifestation of government but as the spontaneous order of cooperating individuals in consensual, contractual market relations. Progressivism preaches confident social engineering by the regulatory state. Conservatism urges government humility in the face of society’s extraordinary — and creative — complexity. American society, understood as hundreds of millions of people making billions of decisions daily, is a marvel of spontaneous cooperation. Sensible government facilitates this cooperative order by providing roads, schools, police, etc., and by getting out of the way of spontaneous creativity. This is a dynamic, prosperous society’s “underlying social contract.”

Many contemporary ethicists, however, believe that inequalities of wealth that are produced by exceptional individual productivity rising from exceptional natural aptitudes do not deserve society’s deference or protection. The more that science establishes genetic bases for differences of aptitudes and even of attitudes and desires, the more pressure there will be for government actions to remedy the unfairness of life’s lottery. Many of these pressures, however, will be opportunistic — old agendas seeking, through science, new momentum for respect. And it is not obvious why political power should be put in the service of ironing out differences that are, strictly speaking, natural. Nevertheless, the science of genetics is joining the social sciences in complicating our understanding of what equality of opportunity means.

For example, as the acquisition and manipulation of information become more important to individuals’ prosperity, life becomes more regressive. This is because the benefits of information accrue disproportionately to those who are already favored by natural aptitudes and aptitudes acquired through education and other socialization.

What is unfortunate is when the transmission of cognitive aptitudes and skills becomes so much a matter of the transmission of family advantages that a child’s prospects can be largely predicted by information about his or her parents.

Americans have long fancied that ours is a middle-class society without other significant, calcified class distinctions, a society open to upward mobility. Americans have been reluctant, and hence slow, to recognize what the sociologist Richard Sennett called the “hidden injuries of class.” This reluctance is, however, receding, for at least two reasons. One is apparent to the middle class as it looks down with alarm; the other is apparent to the middle class as it looks up with envy and resentment. After more than half a century of attempts at ameliorative social policies, it is undeniable that there exists an underclass trapped by the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Furthermore, the middle class believes, and is not mistaken, that as society becomes more technocratic and complex, and more given to rewarding cognitive elites, those elites become more adept at entrenching themselves by passing their advantages on to their children.

Government should tread lightly when it ventures into the fraught debate about how, if at all, the transmission of family advantages should be regulated or impeded. A sensible society is eager to have resources devoted to equipping young people with the attitudes and aptitudes that will enable them to take advantage of an open society's opportunities. Such a society will recognize that the most plentiful, important and efficient resources are those of parents — their time, attention and financial assets. Government should not impede or discourage parents in their conscientious accumulation, husbanding and investment of those assets for their children's education, broadly construed.

Although cognitive stratification and other causes of income inequality make America in some ways less egalitarian, do not ignore some hugely egalitarian aspects of modernity. Anyone can have as much access to the internet as Bill Gates has; Jeff Bezos and you have the same access to one of the 20th century's greatest blessings, antibiotics. The devices and medicines that have vast leveling effects on the distribution of well-being have been produced by cognitive elites whose capabilities are not resented by the multitudes who benefit from the results of those capabilities.

Two centuries ago, the great source of wealth in America was land. It was so plentiful that eventually, with the Homestead Act of 1862, it was essentially given away. A century ago, the distinctive source of wealth was heavy fixed capital: Think of Andrew Carnegie's steel mills, Cornelius Vanderbilt's New York Central Railroad, and then Henry Ford's River Rouge assembly plant. Today's distinctive source of wealth is what is called human capital — knowledge, information, cognitive skills. Although these are widely distributed by nature and augmented by universal free public education, there are limits to how much education — even if competently conducted, which it not always is — can do to equalize the ability of individuals to thrive in a competitive society.

In a society in which severe material deprivation has become rare, competition for cultural advantages has intensified. This is only partly because many of these advantages, such as education at elite institutions, have considerable cash value over a lifetime of earning. As societies, because of many of these advantages, such as education at elite institutions, become wealthier, and basic needs are supplied and insecurities are assuaged, monetary measurements become less useful as measures of individual welfare. Today, Christopher DeMuth notes, government's principal activity consists of transferring income from workers to nonworkers for the subsidization of two things that were virtually unknown just a few generations ago: nonwork (retirement, extended schooling, extended disability payments) and ambitious medical care (replaceable body parts, exotic diagnostic and pharmacological technologies). The Cato Institute's Brink Lindsey is correct that “the triumph over scarcity shifted the primary focus of liberal egalitarianism from lack of material resources to lack of cultural acceptance.”

In 1943, the behavioral scientist Abraham Maslow introduced the idea that human beings have a “hierarchy of needs.” At the base of “Maslow's pyramid” are physiological imperatives — needs for food, shelter, nourishment, sleep and sex. In advanced societies, people have advanced needs. These include what Maslow called “belonging needs,” such as acceptance and affiliations. Then come “esteem needs,” such as self-respect and social status. And at the pyramid's apex is the need for what Maslow called “self-actualization,” meaning a sense of fulfillment.

In developed societies where the satisfaction of physiological needs is taken for granted, the “higher” needs become political subjects, and the satisfaction of such needs becomes a political agenda. Politics follows society's ascent up the pyramid. As broad considerations of economic

class have lost political importance, considerations of ethnicity, sex, culture and religion have become more salient. This is why welfare-state answers to the basic questions about material distributive justice have not calmed our politics. Quite different concerns, even more passionately fought over, have broadened the range of political argument. Americans have always been torn between two desires: for absence of restraint and for a sense of community. As the nation's social pyramid becomes steeper, those closer to the base than the apex feel increasingly at the mercy of governing and media elites who do not seem to be elites of character as well as of achievement.

The more educated a nation becomes, the wealthier it is apt to become, and the wealthier it becomes, the more benefits its government can dispense to the citizenry. The wealthier the citizens become, the more they pay in taxes, and the more benefits they expect from government. So, although prosperity makes people confident and assertive, and gives them the means to be self-sufficient, it is not conducive to small government or to self-sufficiency. So perhaps democratic life undermines the prerequisites of democracy. It produces first a toleration of dependency, then a hunger for it, and finally an insistence that dependency is a fundamental right.

As dependency on government for various entitlements has grown, so has another kind of dependency. A perverse form of entrepreneurship is spawned as economic interests maneuver to become dependent on government-provided opportunities. As people become more deft at doing so, government becomes an engine of unearned inequality. This is especially a peril in successful societies. Economist Mancur Olson warned that the longer a successful society is stable, the more numerous are the successful factions — not the poor, or the unemployed or the new entrepreneurial risk-takers who are trying to gain a foothold against established competitors — who become deft at gaming the political system for advantages. These include domestic protectionism in the form of occupational licensure; or regulations that are more burdensome to newer and smaller entrants into a market than to large, wealthy corporations; or international protection in the form of tariffs and import quotas. More and more factions figure out how to prosper by achieving distributional advantages through politics. And society slowly succumbs to energy-sapping sclerosis.

Government needs to get back to basics. The political class, defined broadly to include persons actively engaged in electoral politics and policymaking along with those who report and comment on civic life, is more united by a class characteristic than it is divided by philosophic differences. The characteristic is a tendency to overestimate the importance of public policies, from which the political class derives its sense of importance. This is especially so regarding economic and social inequalities. These, the political class tends to believe, are largely the result of public policies and are therefore susceptible to decisive amelioration by better government actions. In the argument about which is primary, nature or nurture, the former receives an emphatic affirmation from the Founding Fathers' philosophy. Beneath the myriad patinas of culture, there is a fixed human nature that neither improves nor regresses. What does change for the better is the capacity of certain portions of humanity to improve the legal, institutional and social structures for coping with the constants of human nature. And to do so without diluting America's foundational commitment to take its bearings from the individual.