

# The rise of collectivist conservatives

Today's Republican Party is a comedy of incompetence and strife. Yet beneath the hijinks lurks a struggle to define the proper relationship of the individual to society and to the state. If we don't dig too deep, the fight for the soul of the conservative movement looks something like this: In the rugged individualist corner is Fox News performance artist Glenn Beck—today's most spirited and surreal public defender of the American tradition of flinty self-reliance. In the collectivist corner is heavyweight conservative columnist David Brooks, who has used his *New York Times* platform to wage a relentless “scientific” campaign against what he sees as the pernicious individualism of Goldwater conservatives like Beck and Rush Limbaugh.

“Your rights as an American are individual rights,” [Beck reminds us](#). “I feel like I need to keep saying that word so it stays in the front of your and everybody's mind—individual, individual, individual!” To add heft to his indignant free-associative musings, [Beck turns regularly](#) to semi-pro philosophers such as Ayn Rand Institute president Yaron Brook to decry the “ideology of altruism and collectivism” before his considerable television audience.

“The problem is, this individualist description of human nature seems to be wrong,” David Brooks contended [in a column from last fall](#) that was aimed directly at the heart of the Goldwaterite right. “Over the past 30 years, there has been a tide of research in many fields, all underlining one old truth—that we are intensely social creatures, deeply interconnected with one another and the idea of the lone individual rationally and willfully steering his own life course is often an illusion.” Brooks has even [gone so far as to suggest](#) that Western civilization may founder on the individualist “illusion” and that science confirms that “the Chinese are right to put first emphasis on social contexts.” The GOP is at risk, Brooks says, because its emphasis on individual freedom “is the main impediment to Republican modernization.”

Brooks is right that we humans are, as the biologists say, “hypersocial” animals. And it is true that many proponents of tough-minded individualism fail to grasp the profound importance of human sociality while falling for romantic myths of isolated genius. But Brooks goes wrong when he leaps from the biological facts of life to the “illusion” of individual agency and the desirability of a more communitarian culture. Beck and his friends from the Ayn Rand Institute do not defy science when they contend that real freedom is individual freedom. They do not flout Darwin when they argue that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are best ensured by an ethos of individualism and a government limited by its deference to individual rights.

Humans are unique among animals in our capacity to transmit cultural beliefs and customs from one generation to the next. The human mind is not a blank slate but a “fill-in-the-blanks slate,” outlined by nature and filled in by socialization. Yet the fact that we are thoroughly social creatures built to learn and inhabit culture does not tell us what the content of our culture should be. Our hands did not evolve to play the piano and our cultural capacity did not evolve to transmit ideals of individual liberty, but it is plainly fallacious to conclude that something is therefore “wrong” with Mozart or Madison.

Our cultural capacity is precisely what allows us to transform and transcend our mammalian limits. So, yes, an individualist ethos is unnatural. But so are other travesties of nature—such as equality under the law, monotheism, vaccination, and the wheel. Like these, the American tradition of individualism is a civilizing manifestation of human sociality, not a denial of it.

And individualism works. As Brooks himself notes, individualistic societies tend to be wealthier than collectivist ones. And studies show that individualistic societies, which emphasize choice and personal fulfillment, tend to produce happier people than do collectivist societies, which are anchored by conformity, honor, and inherited obligations. By almost any measure, individualism is a success.

So does Glenn Beck win this round by a knockout? That would be funny—but also a misreading of the Right's

populist persuaders.

Why? Because the “individualism” of latter-day disciples of Goldwater and Reagan has a strange way of disappearing as soon as they stop arguing about marginal tax rates. Glenn Beck is no different. Scratch him and you’ll find a vehement nationalist whose fiery cable gospel breathes populist life into David Brooks’ abstract collectivist theology.

Beck’s “[9/12 Project](#),” meant to revive the fleeting American spirit of grieving, truculent solidarity that followed the 9/11 attacks, lays out nine principles and 11 values of “the greatest nation ever created.” The first principle is “America is good.” What is that if not a recklessly unconditional commitment to the national collective? With his fourth principle—“The family is sacred”—Beck simply ignores the fact that no force in human history has been more corrosive to family cohesion than the individualist ideal of self-realization that he champions.

Similarly, when it comes to the “War on Terror,” Beck’s embrace of the rights of individuals against the state just peters out. Beck’s nonchalance about warrantless wiretaps and waterboarding betrays a peculiar notion of individual liberty. And if you’re an individual from another country exercising your individual right to associate freely with a willing American employer, God forbid the state should belatedly recognize your individual rights by granting you “amnesty”! For too many conservatives, “individual rights” is code for their right to remain unburdened by whatever exercise of state power they happen to dislike.

So while Brooks and Beck may come out swinging from their respective corners, their “fight” ends in a loving embrace. Here is the conservative dilemma writ small. Egghead conservatives like Brooks offer a coherent communitarian philosophy of government, but would suppress (in the name of science!) the cultural innovations that have helped produce the creativity and wealth of the West. Meanwhile, talkers like Beck offer a politics of strong American families and an even stronger American security state no less collectivist than Brooks’. The language of limited government and individual liberty is mandatory in the theater of populist American nationalism, but the populist Republicans’ zany pastiche of jingoist tropes merely pretends to value those ideals. In reality, it offers no real alternative to the sober collectivist vision that explicitly marginalizes them.

As the flags wave and the eagles soar, the American Right’s commitment to individual liberty continues to crumble. Conservatism must stand for something. But here’s the big question: Can a politics of individual freedom be revived? Can it win elections? David Brooks—who knows all about “science” and the success of the hive-minded Chinese—says it can’t. Beck’s populist Republicans fume that Brooks is wrong, wrong, wrong. But why, then, does the substance of their politics have so much in common with his?

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