

Reclaiming the Public Self

"Individualism and Its Discontents" by Wilfred M. McClay, in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (Summer 2001), One West Range, P.O. Box 400223, Charlottesville, Va. 22904-4223.

It may be hard for us to imagine how our ancestors could possibly have gotten along without them, but the terms *individualism* and *self* are relatively new to the lexicon of Western thought. Of course, as McClay reminds us, "a deeply rooted belief in the dignity and infinite worth of the individual person" has a long history in the West. But that traditional insistence on the importance of the individual is not what we mean today by individualism.

The contemporary notion actually began as a term of abuse, observes McClay, who holds the Sun Trust Bank Chair of Excellence in Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Joseph de Maistre employed it in the 19th century to describe the most reprehensible aspects of the French Revolution, including a doctrine of natural rights that allowed any individual to be his own moral arbiter. A few years later, Tocqueville described individualism as a new social philosophy that "disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and friends." It was, in other words, a deliberate withdrawal from the responsibilities of citizenship.

The meaning of individualism has evolved markedly over time in America, McClay notes, and to give the term as it is used today a precise meaning is not easy. It may describe how the dignity and freedom of the individual are to be protected against the control of the state, or it may be an assertion that the individual is a morally autonomous creature, accountable to virtually nothing and to no one and free to develop as the impulses of the self dictate. But the pejorative connotation the word had when it was new has not taken deep root in the United States, and Americans, by and large, regard individualism as "a wholly positive thing, the key ingredient in what it means to be American." "If anything," argues McClay, "the language of individual rights, and the tendency to regard individual men and women

as self-contained, contract-making, utility-maximizing and values-creating actors, who accept only those duties and obligations they elect to accept, grew steadily more powerful and pervasive in the latter part of the 20th century."

But rights-based liberalism was not always the norm in America. Indeed, in early America "a very constrained form of communitarian Reformed Protestantism . . . best represented the dominant social and political outlook." That public philosophy, which allowed the polity a large formative role, was undone in the 19th century by such prophets of the American self and heroic individuality as Emerson and Whitman. In the 20th century, progressive reformers such as Herbert Croly, Jane Addams, and John Dewey downplayed individualism and advanced a "new corporate ideal" that defended "the public interest." But despite a rise in social consciousness during the Great Depression, the new ideal never won wide acceptance, and it was battered by the emergence of the European totalitarian regimes, "whose terrifying success in suppressing the individual for the sake of the collectivity threw all corporate ideals into doubt and disrepute, from which they have yet to recover."

McClay believes that liberals and conservatives alike have been unwilling to "accept the need for an authority, a tradition, an institutional nexus that is capable of superseding individual liberty in the name of social cohesion and the public interest." The idea of individual dignity needs to be rescued from postmodernist subjectivity and the psychology of the self and returned to the public realm. There, the core meaning of individualism—an insistence on the transcendent value of the person—and the core insight of communitarianism—"the recognition that the self is made in culture, and the richest forms of individuality can only be achieved in the sustained company of others"—could both be newly affirmed.