



The second element of the story is demoralization. A study by Pelin Kesebir and Selin Kesebir found that general moral terms like “virtue,” “decency” and “conscience” were used less frequently over the course of the 20th century. Words associated with moral excellence, like “honesty,” “patience” and “compassion” were used much less frequently.

The Kesebirs identified 50 words associated with moral virtue and found that 74 percent were used less frequently as the century progressed. Certain types of virtues were especially hard hit. Usage of courage words like “bravery” and “fortitude” fell by 66 percent. Usage of gratitude words like “thankfulness” and “appreciation” dropped by 49 percent.

Usage of humility words like “modesty” and “humbleness” dropped by 52 percent. Usage of compassion words like “kindness” and “helpfulness” dropped by 56 percent. Meanwhile, usage of words associated with the ability to deliver, like “discipline” and “dependability” rose over the century, as did the usage of words associated with fairness. The Kesebirs point out that these sorts of virtues are most relevant to economic production and exchange.

Daniel Klein of George Mason University has conducted one of the broadest studies with the Google search engine. He found further evidence of the two elements I’ve mentioned. On the subject of individualization, he found that the word “preferences” was barely used until about 1930, but usage has surged since. On the general subject of demoralization, he finds a long decline of usage in terms like “faith,” “wisdom,” “ought,” “evil” and “prudence,” and a sharp rise in what you might call social science terms like “subjectivity,” “normative,” “psychology” and “information.”

Klein adds the third element to our story, which he calls “governmentalization.” Words having to do with experts have shown a steady rise. So have phrases like “run the country,” “economic justice,” “nationalism,” “priorities,” “right-wing” and “left-wing.” The implication is that politics and government have become more prevalent.

So the story I’d like to tell is this: Over the past half-century, society has become more individualistic. As it has become more individualistic, it has also become less morally aware, because social and moral fabrics are inextricably linked. The atomization and demoralization of society have led to certain forms of social breakdown, which government has tried to address, sometimes successfully and often impotently.

This story, if true, should cause discomfort on right and left. Conservatives sometimes argue that if we could just reduce government to the size it was back in, say, the 1950s, then America would be vibrant and free again. But the underlying sociology and moral culture is just not there anymore. Government could be smaller when the social fabric was more tightly knit, but small government will have different and more cataclysmic effects today when it is not.

Liberals sometimes argue that our main problems come from the top: a self-dealing elite, the oligarchic bankers. But the evidence suggests that individualism and demoralization are pervasive up and down society, and may be even more pervasive at the bottom. Liberals also sometimes talk as if our problems are fundamentally economic, and can be addressed politically, through redistribution. But maybe the root of the problem is also cultural. The social and moral trends swamp the proposed redistributive remedies.

Evidence from crude data sets like these are prone to confirmation bias. People see patterns they already believe in. Maybe I've done that here. But these gradual shifts in language reflect tectonic shifts in culture. We write less about community bonds and obligations because they're less central to our lives.