

Restoring the Language of Obligation

James T. Kloppenberg

In her campaign for the U.S. Senate seat long held by Ted Kennedy, Elizabeth Warren last year earned the admiration of the left and the ire of the right for proclaiming that “there is nobody in this country who got rich on his own.” In the widely viewed YouTube video of her remarks, she says with conviction that everyone who enjoys economic success owes a debt to society: “Part of the underlying social contract is that you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.” Progressives hailed her rare courage in acknowledging the legitimacy of paying taxes; conservatives shrieked that she is just another one of the socialists from whom they need to “take back” their country.

Both sides are mistaken. Warren’s courage was not rare, and her politics are hardly socialist. In fact, the sensibility that undergirds her observation about social responsibility is as old as the first English settlements in North America. Until recently, duty was taken for granted by all but a few people on the fringes of American political life as one of the essential features of self-government. One of the saddest facts of contemporary political discourse is the ignorance of most Americans about the centrality of the concept of obligation in American history. Of all the damage Ronald Reagan did to the United States, perhaps the most severe was his stupefyingly successful campaign to persuade Americans that the “free market” has always ruled America and that government has always been distrusted and held in check by liberty-loving individualists. Although that idea now reigns on most right-wing talk radio and television shows and even infects the assumptions of so-called centrists, it is a fantasy.

But it’s not just the right that has stopped talking about citizens’ obligations. Ever since the 1970s, most American liberals have traded the language of duties for the language of rights. Unless we start talking about our responsibilities to one another though, the richest Americans will continue to exercise their right to increase the distance between them and everybody else. For several decades now we have been witnessing the consequences of the so-called free market for those without the resources or the training to exploit the new economy of the twenty-first century. If we want to address that problem, we have to restore to American liberalism the language of obligation.

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Beginning with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England and continuing through the ratification of the U.S. Constitution a century later, freedom was never invoked without reference to the responsibilities it entailed. During the War for Independence, the former colonies had to produce state constitutions, and the Massachusetts Constitution—drafted in 1779 by John Adams—provided the template many other states followed. Since Adams has become American conservatives’ favorite founder, they might find his ideas about government and obligation surprising. Adams did proclaim the rights to life, liberty, property, free expression, and trial by jury, yet he insisted that those rights must be balanced against citizens’ obligations. Not only must citizens obey the law, worship God, and contribute to maintaining an educational system that extended from elementary schools to the university in Cambridge where George Washington’s soldiers had bivouacked during the war; in a government of the people, Adams insisted, duties matter as much as rights because “good morals are necessary to the preservation of civil society.” Without “the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality,” some individuals would be tempted to look to their own “private interest” instead of the proper end of government, “the common good.”

Adams was hardly alone. James Madison envisioned a federated structure for the nation because he considered it “the only defense against the inconveniences of democracy consistent with the democratic form of government.” Defending citizens’ rights was crucial, but attaining “justice and the general good” and “the common good of society” he judged equally important. Both the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans, and then the Whigs and the Jacksonians who succeeded them, accused each other of threatening the delicate balance between freedom and obligation. Against the rights of free white men championed by Jeffersonians and Jacksonians, first Federalists and then Whigs countered by emphasizing the responsibilities those white men owed toward slaves, Indians, women, and children. True, different Americans understood the commitments toward freedom, toleration, benevolence, and popular government in strikingly different ways. At no time did a unitary tradition of shared values ever exist in America. Most white Southerners came to define their obligations in relation to the defense of slavery. Other Americans, however, ranging from the Whig Davy Crockett, the homespun frontiersman who opposed Democrat Andrew Jackson’s policy of Indian removal, to the Republican Abraham Lincoln, the Kentucky native who denied that the wolf’s freedom extends to the sheep’s life, insisted that liberties are always circumscribed by moral obligations.

The post-Civil War period brought a change. Briefly, for a few years after the failure of Reconstruction, some American writers and politicians enthusiastically

and self-consciously embraced the idea that freedom trumps responsibility. They bolstered the idea of *laissez-faire* by arguing that “survival of the fittest” is the principle governing not only natural selection but also social and economic life. The post-Civil War campaign to restrict government authority did not liberate the energies of throttled entrepreneurs from the stranglehold of monarchies and landed aristocracies. Instead it merely empowered a generation of robber barons, in a frenzy of unregulated economic activity, to amass fortunes unprecedented in American history.

But if the first Gilded Age swamped agricultural and industrial workers alike, its excesses generated decades of reformist energy that created the rough outlines of the world Americans inhabited from the 1940s until the 1980s. Emerging in outbursts of rural discontent that assumed the name of populism, these insurgents gave way to a new coalition of reformers who gradually coalesced around the term “progressive.” These progressives were a motley coalition with multiple objectives, some of which included campaigns against prostitution and alcohol abuse and in favor of education, a nonpartisan civil service, direct election of senators, and, for some at least, women’s suffrage. At the center of the progressive agenda, however, was an updated idea of economic regulation premised on interdependence and social obligation. The first professional social scientists denied the purported timelessness of free-market economics and asserted that economic ideas, like all others, develop historically and must be scrutinized critically.

Other progressives likewise emphasized citizens’ duties. The rise of the social gospel shifted the emphasis of prominent Protestant clergymen from the afterlife toward the injustices endured by the poor in this life. Like the Baptist preacher Walter Rauschenbusch, an adviser to Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, they insisted that Christians had a responsibility to address those injustices and steer the state toward social reform. A new generation of women, often college educated, sought to exert pressure in various domains, some justifying their reformist activities as a form of “social housekeeping” for which women were uniquely well suited. In one of the most characteristic formulations of the progressive sensibility, pioneering reformer Jane Addams wrote “that the things which make men alike are finer and better than the things that keep them apart, and that these basic likenesses, if they are properly accentuated, easily transcend the less essential differences of race, language, creed, and tradition.”

In place of *laissez-faire*, progressives argued that the state and federal governments must fulfill their duty to restrain corporate power and restore the freedoms ostensibly secured by law but effectively limited by economic inequality. Progressives created a new apparatus, the regulatory agency, with procedures patterned on the model of scientific inquiry and that enforced a nonpartisan pub-

lic interest. Inspired (or shamed) by muckrakers, legislators experimented with new forms of government authority designed to address particular economic and social problems. The principle animating these reforms descended directly from the eighteenth-century conception of balancing rights and duties. As Theodore Roosevelt put it in 1910, “Every man holds his property subject to the general right of the community to regulate its use to whatever degree the public welfare may require it.” Or as Brandeis’s friend Edward Filene, the founder of Filene’s department store, liked to put it, “Why shouldn’t the American people take half my money from me” in taxes? “I took it all from them.”

In the 1920s, liberals’ interest in bringing scientific expertise to government continued unabated. First as secretary of commerce and then as President, the Republican Herbert Hoover oversaw a modified regulatory regime that purported to extend the progressives’ approach to government-business relations while surrendering decision-making to the private sector. When that experiment in corporatism failed dramatically and the nation sank into the Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt first stumbled into half-hearted versions of reform before he developed a more far-reaching program often designated the Second New Deal. Measures such as the Social Security Act, the Glass-Steagall Act, the Wagner Act, and other legislation concerned with employment, housing, banking, and a minimum wage helped weave a flimsy safety net and forge a durable coalition of voters self-consciously and persistently invoking the theme of citizens’ obligations to each other.

By the end of World War II, the United States faced a new world. Now the richest and most militarily powerful country anywhere, the nation had to decide how to use that unprecedented wealth and power. Roosevelt outlined a plan to meet that challenge in his 1944 State of the Union address. The Second Bill of Rights, as Roosevelt called it, was designed to ensure for every American a decent job at a living wage, adequate food, clothing, housing, medical care, education, and “protection from the economic fears of old age, sickness, accident, and unemployment.” It was a plan based on an explicit embrace of the duties citizens owed one another. Calling this visionary plan for a comprehensive social welfare state a “bill of rights” was a disingenuous sop to the conservative critics FDR knew it would antagonize. Like Britain’s Beveridge Plan, which FDR said should have been called the “Roosevelt Plan,” it depended on Americans’ recognition of what he called their “duty” to ensure the “security” of all citizens. Strikingly, the only part of Roosevelt’s Second Bill of Rights to survive his death was the GI Bill, which rewarded millions of veterans and fueled a wave of prosperity that lasted three decades.

The immediate postwar period never saw the resurrection of Roosevelt's more ambitious plans, such as programs to ensure full employment and national health care, programs that remain the unrealized goals of many of today's progressives. Harry Truman presented his Fair Deal as the culmination of Roosevelt's ambitions. But given the perceived threat from an expansionist Soviet Union, such proposals, which also threatened the doctrine of white supremacy, became vulnerable to the charge that they had become somehow un-American. After three centuries in which Americans had worked to balance their rights against their responsibilities, and the sin of selfishness against the divine command of benevolence, property rights metamorphosed under the shadow of communism into the essence of America. Conservatives began to read concern for the poor as a sign of disloyalty. Consumption soon replaced generosity in the national pantheon. Tough opponents like the Soviets, conservatives insisted, called for tough-mindedness. Whereas Roosevelt had summoned Americans to an expansive egalitarian mission at home and abroad, now even liberals such as Arthur Schlesinger Jr. instead urged them to cluster around "the vital center." For many liberals as well as most conservatives, meeting obligations at home took a back seat to hard-headed geopolitical maneuvering.

Beneath the tone of Cold War realism, though, a more subtle shift in focus was taking place as the legitimacy of federal government spending came to be accepted across the political spectrum. Despite a rhetoric of free-market triumphalism, many ostensibly conservative midcentury Republicans shared liberals' belief that some version of a government-business alliance was in the interest of all Americans. Just as informal gentlemen's agreements had enabled war production to go forward, so new deals were struck with labor unions, interest groups, and government regulatory agencies in the hope that a new American hybrid would emerge to dissolve tensions between labor and management. Government spending soared; money poured into new weapons systems, new highways, and new commitments to scientific research. Many liberals shared the confidence that a new, university-trained, non- or post-ideological managerial elite could staff the ramparts of the private and public sectors. Where most earlier progressives had seen inevitable conflict between selfishness and responsibility, new corporate liberals trumpeted a professionally engineered consensus forged by voluntary accommodation. But no sooner had Daniel Bell and other social scientists proclaimed "the end of ideology" than dramatic conflicts began breaking out over competing principles. FDR's invocations of "duty" and "security," premised as they were on an ideal of solidarity maturing from the Depression through World War II, began being overshadowed by rights talk.

The first battleground was the South. There, African Americans radicalized by the rhetoric of democracy, by the experience of military life, or by knowledge

of a world outside the segregated South, mobilized to challenge Jim Crow. Coming as it did at the same time that social scientists and literary scholars were constructing a new paradigm of “human” as opposed to “national” or “racial” or “ethnic” or “gendered” characteristics, the civil rights movement rode a wave of universalism that most American liberals took as the harbinger of a transformed set of social relations across the earlier chasms of race, class, and gender. From linguistics to sociology, from anthropology to the study of sexuality, from biology to philosophy, liberal scholarly investigators joined the quest for a common denominator that would link all humans into a single “family of man.”

Within little more than a decade, however, such hopes had evaporated. Struggles within each of the movements for black liberation, women’s liberation, trade union reform, and against the war in Vietnam began to seem almost as bitter as the struggles fought by the partisans in those conflicts against conservatives. By the time that the prolonged economic expansion of the postwar decades ended with the oil crisis of 1973-1974, the cultural confidence of liberal Democrats had been shattered, and the constituency of white working-class males that had celebrated the New Deal began to abandon the Democratic Party. As their own economic prospects began to dim with the early stages of deindustrialization, these Americans located the threat to their continuing prosperity not in a changing economy but in the demands of blacks and women. Less than a decade after that, Ronald Reagan was elected president—and the language of obligation that had undergirded the programs of Progressives, New Dealers, and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society had become a target for critics on the left as well as the right.

After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and the U.S. economy began to lose ground relative to both the industrialized and the developing world, navigating the new terrain of domestic and international politics became more treacherous. Increasingly, the terms of political and scholarly debate were set by free-market champions in newly ascendant right-wing think tanks such as the Cato Institute and their allies in academia such as William Riker, whose models proclaimed self-interested behavior as the consequence of “rational choice.” The particularistic agendas of identity politics challenged the integrationist programs of the civil rights movement and 1960s feminism. Now the desires of the sovereign self took precedence over the idea of obligation, which began to seem quaint in

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the face of a naturalized and thus unassailable free-market model premised on ostensibly neutral data drawn from the social sciences or evolutionary biology.

Ever since the era of progressive reform, demands for regulating banking, the workplace, and the environment have been framed in terms of social responsibility. Just as those who benefited from the highest salaries owed the greatest debts to the society that made possible their prosperity, so those who created dangerous conditions had a duty to clean up after themselves. Today, more than half of Americans express preferences for progressive positions such as more steeply graduated taxation, more stringent regulation of the financial-services industry, a higher minimum wage, and stricter pollution controls. Yet a large majority resist calling themselves liberal and identify either as moderates or conservatives. Why? I believe the answer lies, in large part, in most liberals' abandonment of the older language of obligation. Earlier American reformers spoke of duties and responsibilities as well as rights, and they unapologetically invoked Judeo-Christian ideals of benevolence and justice. Since the 1960s the language of social solidarity has been muted on the left while the language of freedom, rights, and individual choice has risen to an increasingly shrill crescendo. As celebrations of obligations owed to God, family, community, and nation—language that progressives and New Dealers used unapologetically and with confidence—have become the language of the right, the left has found itself cut off from the richest resources in American history for fueling progressive political movements.

That is why when Elizabeth Warren speaks unequivocally about paying back one's debts to society, her implicit invocation of social responsibility sounds threatening to many American conservatives, just as it makes many on the left nervous. Both left and right hear in talk of responsibilities a code for constraining their freedoms. But there is nothing un-American or reactionary about the idea of obligation. It is the language of John Adams and Madison and Lincoln; of Wilson and both Roosevelts and Martin Luther King Jr. Historically, the language of American democracy has been the language of duties as well as rights.

The language of duties has also been the language used by Barack Obama. It ripples through *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, and it is the language he rediscovered in the speech he delivered on December 6, 2011, in Osawatomie, Kansas, where Theodore Roosevelt unveiled his own New Nationalism a century before. In that speech, perhaps the first speech of President Obama's campaign for re-election, he quoted Theodore Roosevelt's insistence that a "real democracy" requires economic regulation, wage-and-hour legislation, and a progressive income tax. Echoing the formula of Jane Addams, as he often does, Obama said that American democracy depends on our realization

that “we’re greater together than we are on our own.” The Republican Party’s economics of “you’re on your own,” Obama declared, has never worked. Instead he embraced the Progressives’ and New Dealers’ commitments to “fair play” and to giving every American a “fair shot” and a “fair share,” commitments that historically have yielded both more sustained economic growth and greater equality than simply trusting the market. Fairness, Obama concluded, requires all of us to “take some responsibility,” and he challenged all of us to face our “broader obligation” because “we still have a stake in each other’s success.”

That way of framing the issues should remind liberals that many of us have lost our way. The focus on securing equal rights for the disadvantaged and marginalized was important; protecting those achievements remains a priority. But we should not forget the other demands that have long accompanied the call for freedom. The increasing gap between rich and poor angers so many Americans because it undermines the solidarity that has undergirded the implicit social compact in place since the New Deal, a compact that remains intact despite repeated efforts to demolish it. Instead of continuing to stress perceived threats to the rights of minorities, a language that social conservatives can easily exploit for their own purposes, the left needs to pay more attention to the economy. Because the buying power of the minimum wage has been falling steadily since the 1970s, a robust increase would be the best way to address the problem of poverty among the majority of Americans who work long hours for little pay. Because jobs at Walmart, KFC, and UPS cannot be shipped offshore, predictable shrieks about the consequences of a higher minimum wage can be answered by emphasizing the value of enabling people with such jobs to buy cars and tools and furniture and restart the stagnating economy. Liberals need to stop cowering before the threat of outsourcing and insist again that American businesses have a responsibility to American workers and consumers, not just to the bottom line. They need to stop shrinking from invocations of the Judeo-Christian ideals of benevolence and equality and stop being squeamish about deploying the language of patriotism to fuel demands for social justice. As an antidote to our cynicism, we need a strong dose of Woody Guthrie.

When Obama reiterates his conviction that we all benefit when our wealth is spread around, he often invokes Warren Buffett or former Intel CEO Andy Grove, as if their assent could somehow inoculate him against conservatives’ barbs. But he needs to recover his own—and Elizabeth Warren’s—firmer tone. He needs to recover the confidence of American reformers from the seventeenth century onward, people who did not believe they had to apologize for seeking social justice. Even though that goal has always escaped our grasp, Americans on the left should remind ourselves that striving for it remains, as it has always been, as American as apple pie. One might say it’s our obligation. ■