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The Talent Society

By DAVID BROOKS

We're living in the middle of an amazing era of individualism. A few generations ago, it was considered shameful for people to have children unless they were married. But as Jason DeParle and Sabrina Tavernise reported in The Times on Saturday, these days, more than half of the births to women under 30 occur outside of marriage.

In 1957, 57 percent of those surveyed said that they believed that adults who preferred to be single were "immoral" or "neurotic." But today, as Eric Klinenberg reminds us in his book, "Going Solo," more than 50 percent of adults are single. Twenty-eight percent of households nationwide consist of just one person. There are more single-person households than there are married-with-children households. In cities like Denver, Washington and Atlanta, more than 40 percent of the households are one-person dwellings. In Manhattan, roughly half the households are solos.

A few generations ago, most people affiliated with one of the major parties. But now more people consider themselves independent than either Republican or Democrat. A few generations ago, many people worked for large corporations and were members of a labor union. But now lifetime employment is down and union membership has plummeted.

A few generations ago, teenagers went steady. But over the past decades, the dating relationship has been replaced by a more amorphous hook-up culture. A few generations ago, most people belonged to a major religious denomination. Today, the fastest-growing religious category is "unaffiliated."

The trend is pretty clear. Fifty years ago, America was groupy. People were more likely to be enmeshed in stable, dense and obligatory relationships. They were more defined by permanent social roles: mother, father, deacon. Today, individuals have more freedom. They move between more diverse, loosely structured and flexible networks of relationships.

People are less likely to be trapped in bad marriages and bad situations. They move from network to network, depending on their individual needs at the moment. At the same time, bonds are probably shallower and more tenuous.

We can all think of reasons for this transformation. Affluence: people have more money to live apart if they want to. Feminism: women have more power to define their own lives. The aging society: more widows and widowers live alone. The information revolution: the Internet and smartphones make it easier to construct far-flung, flexible networks. Skepticism: more people believe that marriage is not for them.

But if there is one theme that weaves through all the different causes, it is this: The maximization of talent. People want more space to develop their own individual talents. They want more flexibility to explore their own interests and develop their own identities, lifestyles and capacities. They are more impatient with situations that they find stifling.

Many people have argued that these changes have led to a culture of atomization, loneliness and self-absorption. That's overdrawn. In "Going Solo," Klinenberg nicely shows that people who live alone are more likely to visit friends and join social groups. They are more likely to congregate in and create active, dynamic cities.

It's more accurate to say that we have gone from a society that protected people from their frailties to a society that allows people to maximize their talents.

The old settled social structures were stifling to many creative and dynamic people (and in those days discrimination stifled people even more). But people who were depressed, disorganized and disadvantaged were able to lead lives enmeshed in supportive relationships.

Today, the fast flexible and diverse networks allow the ambitious and the gifted to surf through amazing possibilities. They are able to construct richer, more varied lives. They are able to enjoy interesting information-age workplaces and then go home and find serenity in a one-bedroom apartment.

On the other hand, people who lack social capital are more likely to fall through the cracks. It takes effort, organization and a certain set of skills to surf these new, protean social networks. People who are unable to make the effort or lack social capital are more likely to be alone. As Klinenberg and others have shown, this is especially likely to happen to solitary middle-aged men, who are more likely to lack the drive and the social facilities to go out and make their own friendship circles.

Over all, we've made life richer for the people who have the social capital to create their own worlds. We've also made it harder for the people who don't — especially poorer children.

These trends are not going to reverse themselves. So maybe it's time to acknowledge a core reality: People with skills can really thrive in this tenuous, networked society. People without those advantages would probably be better off if we could build new versions of the settled,

stable and thick arrangements we've left behind.

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