

Common Good and Columbia University's Center on Capitalism and Society present

The Future of the Individual

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Humans vs. Bureaucracy

a statement by Philip K. Howard and Edmund Phelps

Nothing gets done sensibly, or fairly, unless a real person makes it happen. This is true for a teacher in a classroom, a CEO in a company, a nurse in a hospital, a worker on a shop floor, an inspector of a restaurant, or a high official in Washington.

Making these choices requires an open zone in which the responsible individual feels free to draw on experience and instinct to make a judgment. Sometimes the decision will be a good one, sometimes it won't. This process of trial and error is how people learn. It is part of economic advancement and the rewards of work. Similarly, achieving innovation requires a real person to imagine the product or method, to judge whether it has a chance of success, and to create the thing.

Today, Western nations are organized to avoid individual choice. Rules and systems tell us how to do things "correctly." Mindless compliance supplants personal responsibility to achieve a result. The idea is that systems, not humans, will lead us to the promised land.

The harm is not just ideological—that individuals are less free. The harm is practical—things don't work. Schools are lousy, healthcare unaffordable, government paralyzed, and people feel powerless to do anything about it. Economic growth is slower and the labor force has shrunk—observations suggest that innovation is constricted and job satisfaction has narrowed.

America needs a new public philosophy. Humans must be reinstated as the activating force. Systems and regulations must be rebuilt as a corral with an open area for human responsibility, not as an instruction manual that dictates daily choices. Corporate attitudes that block innovators from building in communities and handicap outsiders from competing with insiders must be exposed as costly to human fulfillment. Law should be a framework for free choice, not a replacement.

Put humans in charge. A revolution will be required. But that is proof only of how far we've slipped. This is not just a plea for better public policy. This is a new belief structure. *Let us take responsibility. Judge how we do, don't tell us how to do it.*