

Roommate not wanted

By Daniel Akst

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Review of *Going Solo*

By Eric Klinenberg

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There is an art to living alone. Neglecting to fill your social calendar under such circumstances can lead to some long, empty weekends, but even those whose datebooks are overflowing may find that loneliness lurks like a shadow when the party is over and they're once again by themselves.

Despite these risks, more and more people all over the world have decided that living alone is their best option. In the United States, 31 million people—one in seven adults—live alone, accounting for a remarkable 28% of households. That's up from just 9% in 1950. Americans may think of themselves as uniquely self-reliant, thanks perhaps to Emerson, but the trend is even more pronounced in other affluent countries.

Humanity's growing propensity for living alone is the subject of Eric Klinenberg's fascinating and admirably temperate "Going Solo," a book that does a good job of explaining the social forces behind the trend and exploring the psychology of those who participate in it. Solo living, Mr. Klinenberg believes, is not necessarily a worrisome development, yet many readers may find his account a sad one.

The author and his research team interviewed a variety of people who live alone, and most of them, despite a lot of talk about the ability to do whatever they want whenever they want, seem to lack an essential human connection. Some of these solitary dwellers rely on pets or television for companionship. The men seem particularly isolated, lacking the women's ability to forge networks of satisfying friendships.

Many of the author's subjects have fallen prey to what one sociologist calls the "tyranny of independence" and practice what another terms "defensive individualism." They are wary of commitment and fearful of having to make sacrifices to accommodate or care for others. One older woman complains that her daughter is aggravating because she talks only of her troubled marriage, as if loved ones ought to be quiet about the important things that bother them. Another woman who lives alone reveals a wariness verging on paranoia when she says, of an 11-year-old granddaughter, that she is "cute, sweet—but manipulative, incredibly manipulative. Not to be trusted an inch."

Yet as Mr. Klinenberg sensibly notes, even married people can feel lonely or isolated, and if it is fair to assume that people know what is best for themselves most of the time, we should not lightly second-guess the deliberate choice to go it alone.

Why are people making this choice? For the many women who outlive their husbands, healthy single older men are scarce. Young and old alike, meanwhile, recognize that family togetherness, when it is not wonderful, can be conflict-ridden and downright awful. Roommates, at any age, hold little appeal. Not least, people go solo because they can afford it. Living alone is a luxury good that, like the purchase of a car or the increased consumption of meat, flourishes in societies that have become affluent.

But people also seem motivated by a loss of faith in the very idea of family. Mr. Klinenberg quotes Joseph Schumpeter's observation that, as soon as people stop taking traditional arrangements for granted, "they cannot fail to become aware of the heavy personal sacrifices that family ties and especially parenthood entail." Or as the sociologist Andrew Cherlin puts it, today "one's primary obligation is to oneself rather than to one's partner and children."

Women in particular have come to see what a heavy burden they bear in families. The author cites their rising freedom as a powerful force behind the solo trend. Other forces include the communications revolution, which allows a kind of virtual connectedness; mass urbanization, which enables solo birds of a feather to flock together in neighborhoods full of cafés and laundromats; and increased longevity, which may well leave one partner in a couple alone in the last years of life.

Most important, perhaps, is the increased value we place on autonomy. Since Dr. Spock, mothers and infants have departed from the age-old practice of sleeping together, and middle-class babies are now often placed in their own rooms. Swelling home sizes made this possible; from 1960 to 1980, the ratio of bedrooms to children in the average U.S. family rose to 1.1 from 0.7, so that nowadays parents and kids are rarely together in the same room—even for eating. Students increasingly expect a private room at college. Assuming that they do share quarters for a while after graduation, the move to an apartment of one's own is now, writes Mr. Klinenberg, "the crucial turning point between second adolescence and becoming an adult."

The author believes that living alone is only going to become more prevalent as the developed world ages and the developing world grows more affluent. He thinks we might as well prepare for this inevitability by building more apartments and arranging better home care for the old and infirm. America's car-oriented suburbs, the prevailing venue for middle-class life, are ill-suited to single-person households, especially those of the elderly.

We do need more multi-unit housing and improved long-term care, as Mr. Klinenberg suggests, but a note of caution is in order. Western nations are burdened by heavy debts and low birth rates, which could lead to a decline in the affluence that makes living alone possible. Then again, it's easy to wonder how genuine all this insistence on the joys of solitary life really is. Affluence and modernity abet all kinds of choices, after all, including overeating. Living alone isn't quite in that category, but humans are social animals, and more of us may yet discover that living with kin or even close friends has advantages beyond mere affordability. For now, though, going solo is a choice more of us seem destined to make—willingly, if not always happily.

—*Mr. Akst is a member of Newsday's editorial board.*