Near the start of his book, “The Conscience of a Conservative,” Barry Goldwater wrote: “Every man, for his individual good and for the good of his society, is responsible for his own development. The choices that govern his life are choices that he must make; they cannot be made by any other human being.” The political implications of this are clear, Goldwater continued: “Conservatism’s first concern will always be: Are we maximizing freedom?”

Goldwater’s vision was highly individualistic and celebrated a certain sort of person — the stout pioneer crossing the West, the risk-taking entrepreneur with a vision, the stalwart hero fighting the collectivist foe.

The problem is, this individualist description of human nature seems to be wrong. Over the past 30 years, there has been a tide of research in many fields, all underlining one old truth — that we are intensely social creatures, deeply interconnected with one another and the idea of the lone individual rationally and willfully steering his own life course is often an illusion.

Cognitive scientists have shown that our decision-making is powerfully influenced by social context — by the frames, biases and filters that are shared subconsciously by those around. Neuroscientists have shown that we have permeable minds. When we watch somebody do something, we recreate their mental processes in our own brains as if we were performing the action ourselves, and it is through this process of deep imitation that we learn, empathize and share culture.

Geneticists have shown that our behavior is influenced by our ancestors and the exigencies of the past. Behavioral economists have shown the limits of the classical economic model, which assumes that individuals are efficient, rational, utility-maximizing creatures.

Psychologists have shown that we are organized by our attachments. Sociologists have shown the power of social networks to affect individual behavior.

What emerges is not a picture of self-creating individuals gloriously free from one another, but of autonomous creatures deeply interconnected with one another. Recent Republican Party doctrine has emphasized the power of the individual, but underestimates the importance of connections, relationships, institutions and social filaments that organize personal choices and make individuals what they are.

This may seem like an airy-fairy thing. But it is the main impediment to Republican modernization. Over the past few weeks, Republicans have talked a lot about change, modernization and reform. Despite the talk, many of the old policy pillars are the same. We’re living in an age of fast-changing economic, information and social networks, but Republicans are still impeded by Goldwater’s mental guard-rails.
If there’s a thread running through the gravest current concerns, it is that people lack a secure environment in which they can lead their lives. Wild swings in global capital and energy markets buffet family budgets. Nobody is sure the health care system will be there when they need it. National productivity gains don’t seem to alleviate economic anxiety. Inequality strains national cohesion. In many communities, social norms do not encourage academic achievement, decent values or family stability. These problems straining the social fabric aren’t directly addressed by maximizing individual freedom.

And yet locked in the old framework, the Republican Party’s knee-jerk response to many problems is: “Throw a voucher at it.” Schools are bad. Throw a voucher. Health care system’s a mess. Replace it with federally funded individual choice. Economic anxiety? Lower some tax rate.

The latest example of the mismatch between ideology and reality is the housing crisis. The party’s individualist model cannot explain the social contagion that caused hundreds of thousands of individuals to make bad decisions in the same direction at the same time. A Republican administration intervened giganticly in the market to handle the Bear Stearns, Freddie and Fannie debacles. But it has no conservative rationale to explain its action, no language about the importance of social equilibrium it might use to justify itself.

The irony, of course, is that, in pre-Goldwater days, conservatives were incredibly sophisticated about the value of networks, institutions and invisible social bonds. You don’t have to go back to Edmund Burke and Adam Smith (though it helps) to find conservatives who understood that people are socially embedded creatures and that government has a role (though not a dominant one) in nurturing the institutions in which they are embedded.

That language of community, institutions and social fabric has been lost, and now we hear only distant echoes — when social conservatives talk about family bonds or when John McCain talks at a forum about national service.

If Republicans are going to fully modernize, they’re probably going to have to follow the route the British Conservatives have already trod and project a conservatism that emphasizes society as well as individuals, security as well as freedom, a social revival and not just an economic one and the community as opposed to the state.