

Individualization

Losing the Traditional

Individualization and 'Precarious Freedoms'

What does 'Individualization of Lifestyles' Mean?

'Only the day before yesterday, only four years ago, a grand experiment for humanity that had lasted forty years came to an end here.' These words were spoken in Luther's town of Wittenberg by Friedrich Schorlemmer at the end of 1993.

Seventeen million Germans lived in the walled province in enforced collectivization. A one-party state was seen as the highest form of freedom, individualization was damned as subjectivism. A risk-taking approach to the future was rejected in the name of 'scientific' optimism. The 'victors of history' were to set the norms and strive towards a unitary society (the socialist community). Human beings, understood as ceaselessly active communal creatures, were fed on the safe goal of communism, which was guaranteed by scientific laws. People were not allowed to decide anything because there was nothing left to decide, because history had already decided everything 'up there'. But they did not need to decide, either.

Now, in freedom, they may and must decide for themselves; all the existing institutions have collapsed, all the old certainties are gone. The joy of freedom is at the same time a falling into a void. Now let everyone look after himself. What are the rules? Who's in charge? Those who have, and who know how to increase what they have. Seventeen million people have reached this point, but the West's caravan moves on, calling out: 'Come with us. We know the way. We know the goal. We don't know any way. We don't know any goal. What is certain? That everything's uncertain, precarious. Enjoy our lack of ties as freedom.' (1993: 1)

The development in China is different, yet in many ways similar. There, too, the collective system that provided a guaranteed income, the 'iron rice-bowl', is breaking down. Earlier, people had hardly any scope for choice in private or professional life, but the minimal safety net of Communism offered them state-subsidized accommodation, training and health care. It is this state care from the cradle to the grave, tied to the work collective in the factory or on the land, that is now disintegrating. Its place is being taken by contracts linking income and job security to ability and performance. People are now expected to take their lives into their own hands and to pay a market price for services they receive. 'The constant refrain among urban Chinese is that they can no longer keep up with the quickened pace of life. They are confused by shifting values and outlooks on such fundamentals as careers, marriage and family relations' (Sun, 1993: 5).

Whatever we consider – God, nature, truth, science, technology, morality, love, marriage – modern life is turning them all into ‘precarious freedoms’. All metaphysics and transcendence, all necessity and certainty are being replaced by artistry. In the most public and the most private ways we are helplessly becoming high-wire dancers in the circus tent. And many of us fall. Not only in the West, but in the countries that have abruptly opened their doors to Western ways of life. People in the former GDR, in Poland, Russia or China, are caught up in a dramatic ‘plunge into modernity’.

Such examples, seemingly remote to citizens of the old Federal German Republic, point nevertheless to a dynamic that is familiar to us, too. Schorlemmer’s address contains the catch-word ‘individualization’. This concept implies a group of social developments and experiences characterized, above all, by two meanings. In intellectual debate as in reality these meanings constantly intersect and overlap (which, hardly surprisingly, has given rise to a whole series of misunderstandings and controversies). On the one hand, individualization means the disintegration of previously existing social forms – for example, the increasing fragility of such categories as class and social status, gender roles, family, neighbourhood etc. Or, as in the case of the GDR and other states of the Eastern bloc, it means the collapse of state-sanctioned normal biographies, frames of reference, role models. Wherever such tendencies towards disintegration show themselves the question also arises: which new modes of life are coming into being where the old ones, ordained by religion, tradition or the state, are breaking down?

The answer points to the second aspect of individualization. It is, simply, that in modern societies new demands, controls and constraints are being imposed on individuals. Through the job market, the welfare state and institutions, people are tied into a network of regulations, conditions, provisos. From pension rights to insurance protection, from educational grants to tax rates: all these are institutional reference points marking out the horizon within which modern thinking, planning and action must take place.

Individualization in this sense, therefore, certainly does not mean an ‘unfettered logic of action, juggling in a virtually empty space’; neither does it mean mere ‘subjectivity’, an attitude which refuses to see that ‘beneath the surface of life is a highly efficient, densely woven institutional society’.¹ On the contrary, the space in which modern subjects deploy their options is anything but a non-social sphere. The density of regulations informing modern society is well known, even notorious (from the MOT test and the tax return to the laws governing the sorting of refuse). In its overall effect it is a work of art of labyrinthine complexity, which accompanies us literally from the cradle to the grave.

The decisive feature of these modern regulations or guidelines is that, far more than earlier, individuals must, in part, supply them for themselves, import them into their biographies through their own actions. This has much to do with the fact that traditional guidelines often contained severe restrictions or even prohibitions on action (such as the ban on marriage, in pre-industrial societies, which prevented members of non-property-owning groups from marrying; or the travel restrictions and the recent obstructions to marriage in the Eastern bloc states, which forbade contact with the ‘class enemy’). By contrast, the institutional pressures in modern

Western society tend rather to be offers of services or incentives to action – take, for example, the welfare state, with its unemployment benefit, student grants or mortgage relief. To simplify: one was born into traditional society and its preconditions (such as social estate and religion). For modern social advantages one has to do something, to make an active effort. One has to win, know how to assert oneself in the competition for limited resources – and not only once, but day after day.

The normal biography thus becomes the ‘elective biography’, the ‘reflexive biography’, the ‘do-it-yourself biography’.² This does not necessarily happen by choice, neither does it necessarily succeed. The do-it-yourself biography is always a ‘risk biography’, indeed a ‘tightrope biography’, a state of permanent (partly overt, partly concealed) endangerment. The façade of prosperity, consumption, glitter can often mask the nearby precipice. The wrong choice of career or just the wrong field, compounded by the downward spiral of private misfortune, divorce, illness, the repossessed home – all this is merely called bad luck. Such cases bring into the open what was always secretly on the cards: the do-it-yourself biography can swiftly become the breakdown biography. The pre-ordained, unquestioned, often enforced ties of earlier times are replaced by the principle: ‘until further notice’. As Bauman (1993) puts it:

Nowadays everything seems to conspire against... lifelong projects, permanent bonds, eternal alliances, immutable identities. I cannot build for the long term on my job, my profession or even my abilities. I can bet on my job being cut, my profession changing out of all recognition, my skills being no longer in demand. Nor can a partnership or family provide a basis in the future. In the age of what Anthony Giddens has called ‘confluent love’, togetherness lasts no longer than the gratification of one of the partners, ties are from the outset only ‘until further notice’, today’s intense attachment makes tomorrow’s frustration only the more violent.

A kind of ‘vagrant’s morality’ thus becomes a characteristic of the present. The vagrant:

does not know how long he will remain where he is, and it is not usually he who decides the length of his stay. He chooses his goals as he goes along, as they turn up and as he reads them off the signposts. But even then he does not know for sure whether he is going to take a rest at the next stopping-point, or for how long. He only knows that his stay is unlikely to be a long one. What drives him on is disappointment with the last place he stopped at, and the never-dying hope that the next, as yet unvisited place, or perhaps the one after that, will be free of the defects which have spoiled the ones up to now. (Bauman, 1993: 17)

Are such portrayals, as some suspect, signs of egoism and hedonism, of an ego fever rampant in the West? Looking more closely, we find that another feature of the guidelines of modernity is that they act against, rather than for, family cohesion. Most of the rights and entitlements to support by the welfare state are designed for individuals rather than for families. In many cases they presuppose employment (or, in the case of the unemployed, willingness to work). Employment in turn implies education and both of these presuppose mobility or willingness to move. By all these requirements individuals are not so much compelled as peremptorily invited to constitute themselves as individuals: to plan, understand, design themselves and act as individuals – or, should they ‘fail’, to lie as individuals

on the bed they have made for themselves. The welfare state is in this sense an experimental apparatus for conditioning ego-related lifestyles. The common good may well be injected into people's hearts as a compulsory inoculation, but the litany of the lost sense of community that is just now being publicly intoned once more, continues to talk with a forked tongue, with a double moral standard, as long as the mechanism of individualization remains intact and no one either wishes or is able to call it seriously into question.

Here, again, we find the same picture: decisions, possibly undecidable ones, within guidelines that lead into dilemmas – but decisions which place the individual, as an individual, at the centre and correspondingly penalize traditional lifestyles and behaviour.

Seen in this way, individualization is a social condition which is not arrived at by a free decision of individuals. To adapt Jean-Paul Sartre's phrase: people are condemned to individualization. Individualization is a compulsion, albeit a paradoxical one, to create, to stage manage, not only one's own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding it and to do this amid changing preferences and at successive stages of life, while constantly adapting to the conditions of the labour market, the education system, the welfare state and so on.

One of the decisive features of individualization processes, then, is that they not only permit but they also demand an active contribution by individuals. As the range of options widens and the necessity of deciding between them grows, so too does the need for individually performed actions, for adjustment, co-ordination, integration. If they are not to fail, individuals must be able to plan for the long term and adapt to change; they must organize and improvise, set goals, recognize obstacles, accept defeats and attempt new starts. They need initiative, tenacity, flexibility and tolerance of frustration.

Opportunities, dangers, biographical uncertainties that were earlier predefined within the family association, the village community, or by recourse to the rules of social estates or classes, must now be perceived, interpreted, decided and processed by individuals themselves. The consequences – opportunities and burdens alike – are shifted onto individuals who, naturally, in face of the complexity of social interconnections, are often unable to take the necessary decisions in a properly founded way, by considering interests, morality and consequences.

It is perhaps only by comparing generations that we can perceive how steeply the demands imposed on individuals have been rising. In a novel by Michael Cunningham (1991), a daughter asks her mother why she married her father:

'You knew that, of all the people in the world, he was the one you wanted to marry?' I asked. 'You never worried that you might be making some sort of extended mistake, like losing track of your real life and going off on, I don't know, a tangent you could never return from.'

But her mother 'waved the question away as if it were a sluggish but persistent fly. "We didn't ask such big questions then," she said. "Isn't it hard on you, to think and wonder and plan so much?"' (1991: 189f).

In a novel by Scott Turow (1991), a meeting between father and daughter is described in similar terms:

Listening to Sonny, who was twisted about by impulse and emotion – beseeching, beleaguered, ironic, angry – it struck Stern that Clara [his wife] and he had had the benefit of a certain good fortune. In his time, the definitions were clearer. Men and women of middle-class upbringing anywhere in the Western world desired to marry, to bear and rear children. Et cetera. Everyone travelled along the same ruts in the road. But for Sonny, marrying late in life, in the New Era, everything was a matter of choice. She got up in the morning and started from scratch, wondering about relationships, marriage, men, the erratic fellow she'd chosen – who, from her description, still seemed to be half a boy. He was reminded of Marta, who often said she would find a male companion just as soon as she figured out what she needed one for. (p. 349)

To some, such examples sound familiar. To others they seem alien – tales from a distant world. It is clear that there is no such thing as ‘the’ individualized society. Unquestionably, the situation in cities like Munich or Berlin is different from that in Pomerania or East Friesland. Between urban and rural regions there are clear differences, which are empirically demonstrable with regard, for example, to lifestyle and family structure.³ What has long been taken for granted in one as a part of normal life, seems odd, irritating, threatening in the other. Of course, lifestyles and attitudes from the town are spreading to the country – but refractedly, with a different gloss. Individualization means, implies, urbanization. But urbanization carries the role models of the world out there into the village living room – through the expansion of education, through tourism, and not least through advertising, the mass media and consumerism. Even where seemingly unaltered lifestyles and traditional certainties are chosen and put on show, they quite often represent decisions against new longings and aroused desires.

It is necessary, therefore, to check each group, milieu and region to determine how far individualization processes – overt or covert – have advanced within it. We do not maintain that this development has achieved blanket coverage of the whole population without differentiation. Rather, the catch-word ‘individualization’ should be seen as designating a trend. What is decisive is the systematic nature of the development linked to the advance of modernity. Martin Baethge (1991) writes: ‘Something which points towards tomorrow can hardly be representative of today’ (p. 271). Individualization has elements of both – it is an exemplary diagnosis of the present and the wave of the future.

What is heralded, ultimately, by this development is the end of fixed, predefined images of man. The human being becomes (in a radicalization of Sartre’s meaning) a choice among possibilities, *homo optionis*. Life, death, gender, corporeality, identity, religion, marriage, parenthood, social ties – all are becoming decidable down to the small print; once fragmented into options, everything must be decided.⁴ At best, this constellation reminds us of Baron Münchhausen, who reputedly solved what has now become a universal problem: how to pull oneself out of the swamp of (im)possibilities by one’s own pigtail. This artistic state of civilization has been summed up perhaps most clearly (with a pessimistic twist) by the poet Gottfried Benn (1979): ‘In my view the history of man, of his endangerment, his tragedy, is only just beginning. Up to now the altars of saints and the wings of archangels have stood behind him; his weaknesses and wounds have

been bathed from chalices and fonts. Now is beginning the series of his great, insoluble, self-inflicted dooms' (pp. 150f).

On the Impossibility of Living Modern Life: the De-Routinization of the Mundane

It is easily said: certainties have fragmented into questions which are now spinning around in people's heads. But it is more than that. Social action needs routines in which to be enacted. One can even say that our thoughts and actions are shaped, at the deepest level, by something of which we are hardly or not at all aware. There is an extensive literature which stresses the relief afforded in this way by internalized, pre-conscious or semi-conscious routines – or more precisely, the indispensable role they play in enabling people to lead their lives and discover their identities within their social coordinates. As Hartmann Tyrell (1986) shows, everyday life is concerned primarily with:

the temporal order of doing... But it is not only the temporal order as such which matters, but the associated stratum of experiences repeated over and over again, the normal, the regular, the unsurprising. At the same time, daily life is a sphere of reduced attention, of routinized activity, of safe, easy availability, and thus of actions that can be repeated 'again and again'. It is about 'what is done here', sometimes in a decidedly particularist sense, in the family circle, the village, the region, etc. It is about the commonplace and familiar... what 'everyone does here'. (p. 255)

It is precisely this level of pre-conscious 'collective habitualizations', of matters taken for granted, that is breaking down into a cloud of possibilities to be thought about and negotiated. The deep layer of foreclosed decisions is being forced up into the level of decision making.

Hence the irritation, the endless chafing of the open wound – and the defensive-aggressive reaction. The questions and decisions rising up from the floor of existence can be neither escaped nor changed back into a silent ground on which life can be lived. At most, such pacification is achieved temporarily, provisionally; it is permeated with questions that can burst out again at any time. Think, calculate, plan, adjust, negotiate, define, revoke (with everything constantly starting again from the beginning): these are the imperatives of the 'precarious freedoms' that are taking hold of life as modernity advances. Even not deciding, the mercy of having to submit, is vanishing. Sometimes its place is taken by a hybrid, simulating what has been lost: the decision in favour of chance, of not deciding, an attempt to banish doubt which yet is pursued by doubt even in its interior dialogues:

I thought I'd be pregnant soon. I'd stopped taking precautions. But I couldn't seem to tell anyone, not Bobby or Jonathan. I suppose I was ashamed of my own motives. I didn't like the idea of myself as calculating or underhanded. All I wanted, really, was to get pregnant by accident. The unexpected disadvantage of modern life is our victory over our own fates. We're called on to decide so much, almost everything... In another era I'd have had babies in my twenties, when I was married to Denny. I'd have become a mother without quite deciding to. Without weighing the consequences. (Cunningham, 1991: 203)

Life loses its self-evident quality; the social ‘instinct substitute’ which supports and guides it is caught up in the grinding mills of what needs to be thought out and decided. If it is correct that routines and institutions have an unburdening function which renders individuality and decision making possible, it becomes clear what kind of encumbrance, exertion and stress is imposed by the destruction of routine. Ansgar Weymann (1989) points to the efforts the individual makes to escape this ‘tyranny of possibilities’ – such as flight into magic, myth, metaphysics. The overtaxed individual ‘seeks, finds and produces countless authorities intervening in social and psychic life, which, as his professional representatives, relieve him of the question: “Who am I and what do I want?” and thus reduce his fear of freedom’ (1989: 3). This creates the market for the answer factories, the psycho-boom, the advice literature – that mixture of the esoteric cult, the primal scream, mysticism, yoga and Freud which is supposed to drown out the tyranny of possibilities but in fact reinforces it with its changing fashions.

It is sometimes claimed that individualization means autonomy, emancipation, the freedom and self-liberation of humanity.⁵ This calls to mind the proud subject postulated by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, who will acknowledge nothing but reason and its laws. But sometimes anomie rather than autonomy seems to prevail – a state unregulated to the point of lawlessness. (Emile Durkheim, in his classic study of anomie, sees it as the ‘evil of missing boundaries’, a time of overflowing wishes and desires, no longer disciplined by social barriers (1993: 289, 311). Any generalization that seeks to understand individualized society only in terms of one extreme or the other – autonomy or anomie – abbreviates and distorts the questions that confront us here. This society is characterized by hybrid forms, contradictions, ambivalences (dependent on political, economic and family conditions). It is also characterized, as we have said, by the ‘do-it-yourself biography’ which – depending on the economic situation, educational qualifications, stage of life, family situation, colleagues – can easily turn into a ‘breakdown biography’ (Hitzler, 1988; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1993). Failure and inalienable freedom live in close proximity and perhaps intermingle (as in the ‘chosen’ lifestyle of ‘singles’).

At any rate, the topics that individuals wear themselves out on project into the most diverse spheres of life. They may be ‘small’ questions (such as the allocation of housework), but also include ‘large’ questions of life and death (from prenatal diagnosis to intensive medical care). The abolition of routine thus releases questions of very different social and moral weight. But they all bear on the core of existence. One can even say that decisions about lifestyles are ‘deified’. Questions that went out of use with God are re-emerging at the centre of life. Everyday life is being post-religiously ‘theologized’.

A secular line can be drawn: God, nature, social system. Each of these categories and horizons of meaning to an extent replaces the previous one; each stands for a particular group of self-evident assumptions and provides a source of legitimation for social action, which can be seen as a sequence of secularized necessities. As the dams become permeable and are breached, what was once reserved for God or was given in advance by nature, is now transformed into questions and decisions which have their locus in the conduct of private life.

(With the successes of reproductive medicine and human genetics the anthropology of the human species is even being drawn quite literally into the area of decision making.) To this extent, from the viewpoint of cultural history, it can be said that modernity, which dawned with the subject's claim to self-empowerment, is redeeming its promise. As modernity gains ground, God, nature and the social system are being progressively replaced, in greater and lesser steps, by the individual – confused, astray, helpless and at a loss. With the abolition of the old coordinates a question arises that has been decried and acclaimed, derided, pronounced sacred, guilty and dead: the question of the individual.

What is New in Individualization Processes? The Example of the Social History of Marriage

In his book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, published in 1860, Jakob Burckhardt writes that in the Middle Ages human consciousness lay:

dreaming or half awake, beneath a collective veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family, corporation – only through some general category. In Italy, this veil first melted into air, an objective treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The subjective side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual, and recognized himself as such. (1987: 161)

Paradoxically, Burckhardt's description of the Renaissance has features of post-modernism. Everything is taken over by fashions; the politically indifferent private person comes into being; biographies and autobiographies are written and invented; women are educated according to masculine ideals. 'The highest praise which could then be given to the great Italian women was that they had the mind and the courage of men.' From the standpoint of the nineteenth century, Burckhardt notes, something emerged which 'our age would call immodesty' (1987: 428).

Anyone reading this and similar accounts will ask: what is new and specific in the individualization processes of the second half of the twentieth century?⁶ To give a concise and direct answer, what is historically new is that something that was earlier expected of a few – to lead a life of their own – is now being demanded of more and more people and, in the limiting case, of all. The new element is, first, the democratization of individualization processes and, second (and closely connected), the fact that basic conditions in society favour or enforce individualization (the job market, the need for mobility and training, labour and social legislation, pension provisions etc.).

This history of the spread to pre-eminence of individualizations can be illustrated by various social phenomena and formations. Such will now be done by means of an exemplary sketch of the social history of marriage. To state our thesis at the outset: whereas marriage was earlier first and foremost an institution sui generis raised above the individual, today it is becoming more and more a product and construct of the individuals forming it. Let us now trace this historical curve in more detail.

As late as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, marriage was to be understood not from below to above but from above to below, as a direct component of the social order. It was a socially binding mode of living and working which was largely inaccessible to individual intervention. It prescribed to men and women what they had to do and not to do even in the details of daily life, work, economic behaviour and sexuality. (Of course, not everyone complied. But the social mesh of the family and village community was tight, and possibilities of control were omnipresent. Anyone who infringed the prevailing norms therefore had to reckon with rigorous sanctions.) To overstate slightly: marriage was a kind of internalized ‘natural law’ which – hallowed by God and the authority of the church, secured by the material interests of those bound together within it – was, so to speak, ‘executed’ in marriage. This emerges clearly through what seems to be an example of the contrary, a hard-won divorce reported by Gisela Bock and Barbara Duden (1977):

In the early 18th century, in the Seine/Maine region of France, two people appeared before the responsible church court: Jean Plicque, a vintner in Villenoy and Catherine Girardin, his wife. Seven months earlier she had with difficulty achieved a separation of bed and board on grounds of absolute incompatibility. Now they came back and declared that it would be not only better but ‘much more advantageous and useful for them to live together than to remain apart’. This couple’s realization is typical of all rural and urban households: husband and wife were dependent on each other because and as long as there was no possibility of earning a livelihood outside joint family work. (1977: 126)

This couple’s realization points up a situation that (despite all the diversity) seems to have been typical of pre-industrial society. Apart from church and monastery, there was no basis for material existence outside marriage. Marriage was not held together by the love, self-discovery or self-therapy of two wage-earners seeking each other and themselves, but was founded on religious obligation and materially anchored in the marital forms of work and life. Anyone who wishes to understand the meaning of this institution of marriage must leave aside the individuals and place at the centre the overarching whole of an order finally founded on God and the afterlife. Here marriage did not serve individual happiness, but was a means for achieving succession, hereditary family rule in the case of the nobility and so on. The stability of the social order and hierarchy depended on it in a very tangible way.

With the beginning of the modern age the higher meanings superimposed on forms of social existence were loosened. The trend towards individuality – first in the middle-class ‘market individual’ founded on private capital – called into question the gravity of collective identities and action units, at least latently. With the separation of the family from the economic sphere, the working, economic unit of husband and wife was ruptured. Characteristically, the response to this dissolution of the material basis of the marriage community was a heightening of the moral and legal underpinnings of marriage. Here, again, marriage is justified ‘deductively’, that is from above to below, but now with a moral exclamation mark, as a cornerstone of the bourgeois-Christian world order. A draft of the German Civil Code, published in 1888, states: ‘A German Civil Code, following

the general Christian view among the people, will have to start from the assumption that in marital law it is not the principle of the individual freedom of the spouses that prevails, but that marriage should be seen as a moral and legal order independent of the will of the spouses' (cited by Blasius, 1992: 130f).

'Not the principle of ... individual freedom', but an 'order independent of the will of the spouses': the threatening possibility resonates implicitly in the negation. However, the community is a one-sided one. The wife is expressly forbidden to use her own name. The surname thus becomes that of the husband. In exemplary fashion, the general element is equated with power – here, that of the husband. As late as 1956 we read in a judgement: 'Rather, Article 6 GG allows equal rights to come into play in family law only to the extent that our traditional concept of the family, as determined by Christianity, remains intact. All exaggerated individualistic tendencies are thereby denied an effect on marital law... This must also apply to marital law as it relates to names' (cited by Struck, 1991: 390). Here we already find the exorcising formulation about the 'exaggerated individualistic tendencies' that has lost nothing of its topicality. By it the Beelzebub of individualism was supposed to be sprinkled and driven out with the holy water of tradition.

Family registers are an unopened treasure trove of idealized family images proclaimed, as it were, *ex cathedra*. Two of them will be juxtaposed here: one from the time of National Socialism and one from the 1970s in the German Federal Republic. The contrast could hardly be more radical. The prefatory remarks make clear the individualistic conversion that has taken place in Germany – even officially – within three decades.

In the register from the early 1940s we read: 'Prefatory note: Marriage cannot be an end in itself, but must serve a greater goal, the increase and survival of the species and the race. Adolf Hitler.'⁷ This sounds like a command and is no doubt intended as one. The racial doctrine of National Socialism is an extreme example of the 'counter-modernization' which stages a masquerade of the past in order to push back the 'decadent' tendencies of modernity (Beck, 1993: Chapter 4). It aims – using every means – to establish the unquestioned world of a re-integrated blood community. Marriage thus becomes a branch office of the state, a miniature state, the 'germ-cell of the state'. It is the place where the 'German race' is reproduced.

The commentary in the family register from the 1970s seems expressly to countermand the one just quoted. Here we read that 'the task of marriage under private law is not to see itself primarily as serving other aims beyond it, but to find its main purpose in marriage itself.'⁸ Today's marriage manual no longer talks about the 'Christian world order and its values' or of 'state goals', and still less of the 'survival of the race'. Instead, it makes explicit the switch that has taken place from a view directed at the whole to one focused on people. The state even seems to slap its own wrist in warning the spouses entrusted to it not to do what up until then had been state law and policy regarding marriage, namely to follow 'traditional models':

Caution is advised in face of the dangerous temptation to accept traditional models of marriage and of the family without question as 'natural', causing them to become fossilized in law. The rapid development of our modern industrial

society, the increasing number of working women, the expected further reduction of working hours, the changing character of professions, etc. compel the legal system to adopt an open-minded, unprejudiced attitude towards new embodiments of marriage and the family.⁹

The voice of sociology is audible here. This may even be a case of the (legendary) ‘trickling down’, the ‘disappearance’ of sociology – here, in the family register – which indicates its successful effect.

However, the newly weds also find the following ‘blessing’ quoted in their marriage manual in a chapter on ‘The Dissolution of Marriage’: ‘Once their disputes have reached a certain stage, they (the spouses) seem to each other like two surgeons operating on each other without anaesthetic, who “get better and better at knowing what hurts”.’¹⁰ This is witty and apt and could hardly contrast more dramatically with the ‘racial marriage’ or the ‘Christian marriage’ still legally binding in the 1950s. Furthermore it could not show more clearly the radical change from the interpretation of marriage as something beyond the individual to the exclusively individual interpretation. Here, not only does an official text mention the dissolution of marriage in the same breath as the contract; marriage is also institutionalized as an individualized programme. The why, what and how long of marriage are placed entirely in the hands and hearts of those joined in it. From now on there is just one maxim defining what marriage means: the script is the individualization of marriage. The individual code of marriage is, so to speak, legally ordained.

This makes two things clear. First, even the old forms of marriage, now that they have been bureaucratically disowned, must be chosen and lived at one’s personal risk. Even the marriage guidance manual contains, in effect, the warning that marriage – like excessive speed on a winding road – is a risky personal undertaking for which no insurances are valid. And second, no one now can say what goes on behind the oh-so-unchanging label ‘marriage’ – what is possible, permitted, required, taboo or indispensable. The world order of marriage is from now on an individual order which must be questioned and reconstructed by individuals as they go along.

To forestall any misunderstanding: even the new, individual order of marriage is not a mere product of individualization and its wishes. Rather, it is bound to institutional edicts – for example those of the legal system, which are central. It depends on the requirements of the educational system, the labour market, old-age pensions (the last today presupposing that both partners – and not just the husband, as earlier – have their own independent biographies, as earners and their own financial security). Even with regard to the twosome, therefore – that seemingly completely private, intimate sphere – individualization does not by any means imply that the increased freedom of choice is the same thing as a breakdown of order.¹¹ Rather, what we see here, as elsewhere, is what Talcott Parsons has called ‘institutionalized individualism’ (1978: 321). Freely translated, this means that in modern life the individual is confronted on many levels with the following challenge: You may and you must lead your own independent life, outside the old bonds of family, tribe, religion, origin and class; and you must do this within the new guidelines and rules which the state, the job market, the bureaucracy etc. lay down.

In this sense marriage, too, in its modern version, is not merely an individual order but an 'individual situation dependent on institutions' (Beck, 1986: 210).

Perspectives and Controversies of an Individual-Oriented Sociology

All sociology splits into two opposed views of the same thing. The social dimension can be regarded either from the standpoint of individuals or from that of the whole (society, state, the common good, class, group, organization etc.) (cf. Bolte, 1983). Both standpoints are founded on the structure of social action, which can be analysed either in terms of the agents or in terms of the social structure. However, that both standpoints are equally possible, equally necessary or equally original does not mean that they are equally valuable or have equal rights; still less does it mean that they are identical. Rather, each of these viewpoints relativizes, criticizes the other (subtly, but with abundant consequences): anyone who analyses society from the standpoint of the individual does not accept its form at a particular time as a preordained, unalterable datum, but calls it into question. Here, sociological thought is not far from the 'art of mistrust', to use a formulation of Berger (1977: 40), adapted from Nietzsche. Indeed, it tends to 'destabilize' existing power relationships, as Bauman (1991: 17), for example, puts it. By contrast, where the so-called 'operational requirements' of society (or subdivisions of it) provide the framework of reference, they are often presented to the outside world simply as the inner happiness of the ego. To apply this happiness there are funnels – known as 'duties' – and institutions for pouring it through these funnels, for purposes of intimidation: schools, courts, marriages, organizations etc.

The prevailing sociology has usually made things easy for itself by cutting off the questions that arise here with the strict injunction, backed up by thick volumes, that individuals can only be or become individuals within society. In this way they continually repress the idea: what would happen if these individuals wanted a different society, or even a different type of society?

The old sociology, still well endowed with university chairs, is armed against this idea: the general interest, congealed as structure, is condensed and glorified as Parsonian 'functional prerequisites'. From such prerequisites – as from a cornucopia of secularized ethical duties – pour forth 'role patterns', 'functions', 'demands', 'subsystems', equally remote from God and the earth, divorced from action and yet its precondition, which are to be applied as a standard to the confusion and refractoriness of individuals, to yield judgements such as 'normal', 'deviant', 'erroneous' and 'absurd'.

Accordingly, the 'individualistic' perspective on society has up to now been usually dismissed as presumptuous and self-contradictory. There is talk – using an up-to-date idiom – of 'demand inflation' and the 'ego society'. The decay of values is deplored, while it is forgotten that such decay is as old as Socrates. The GDR had exemplary experience of the inverse question and foundered on it: what happens to institutions without individuals? What does it mean when individuals withdraw their assent from the institutional elite? The same question was urgently

posed in Italy in 1993 (and in France, Sweden, Finland, Germany, the USA etc.) and the answer was the same: the political systems tremble. Where the functionalist viewpoint, based on system theory, is dominant, a 'subject-oriented' sociology often appears not only deviant but subversive. For it can sometimes reveal that the party and institutional elites are riders without horses.

Neither is it true, of course, that both conceptions of the social order are incomplete in themselves and need to supplement each other. But before such a need for harmony smoothes over a conflict which has not yet been fought out openly, it should be pointed out here that for some centuries the view of the totality has suppressed that of individuals. In view of this it is time to turn the tables and ask what kind of society comes into being after the demise of the great political camps and the party political consensus.

In other words: the two points of view remain until further notice incompatible; they are even becoming, through a modernization which is setting individuals and their demands and dilemmas free, more and more irreconcilable, and are giving rise to antithetical explanations, methods, theories and intellectual traditions.

It will be objected that this is not a meaningful antithesis. Entities which presuppose each other analytically, individuals and society, cannot be described as a social conflict. Moreover, both viewpoints lay claim to both viewpoints. He who embraces the 'whole' (of society) – the functionality of social formations – in his field of vision, self-evidently claims to include the standpoint of individuals as well. If necessary, this is presented as the morally correct standpoint, that which must be asserted against the false self-consciousness of individuals in their own well-understood interests. Whereas, conversely, every variant of subject- or individual-oriented sociology naturally also offers statements and explanations about the intrinsic reality of social formations and systems, their structure, stage management etc.

What was shown in the preceding section through the example of marriage applies generally: the antithesis between the individual- and system-based viewpoints should be understood as a historical development. If, in traditional, pre-industrial societies, we can still, perhaps, assume a fairly balanced relationship between the two frames of reference, this pre-established harmony breaks down with the unfolding of modernity. This is the central theme of sociology in Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. But both still assume that it is possible to integrate individualized society, as it were transcendently, through values. Such a possibility, however, became more unrealistic the more individuals were released from classical forms of integration in groups, including family and class. What is emerging today can be called, with Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'the average exoticism of everyday life':

It is most obvious in the provinces. Market towns in Lower Bavaria, villages in the Eifel Hills, small towns in Holstein are populated by figures no one could have dreamed of only thirty years ago. For example, golf-playing butchers, wives imported from Thailand, counter-intelligence agents with allotments, Turkish Mullahs, women chemists in Nicaragua committees, vagrants driving Mercedes, autonomists with organic gardens, weapons-collecting tax officials,

peacock-breeding smallholders, militant lesbians, Tamil ice-cream sellers, classics scholars in commodity futures trading, mercenaries on home leave, extremist animal-rights activists, cocaine dealers with solariums, dominas with clients in top management, computer freaks commuting between Californian data banks and nature reserves in Hesse, carpenters who supply golden doors to Saudi Arabia, art forgers, Karl May researchers, bodyguards, jazz experts, euthanasists and porno producers. Into the shoes of the village idiots and the oddballs, of the eccentrics and the queer fish, has stepped the average deviationist, who no longer stands out at all from millions like him. (1992: 179)

Under such conditions, institutions are founded on antiquated images of individuals and their social situations. To avoid endangering their own power, the administrators of these institutions maintain the status quo at all costs (supported by a sociology operating with the old conceptual stereotypes). An amusing consequence of this is that the political class regards the individuals 'out there' as no less stupid and brazen than the society of individuals considers the political class. The question as to which of them is right can, in principle, be easily decided. The idea that only the party elite and the bureaucratic apparatus knows what is what and that everyone else is imbecilic is one that characterized the Soviet Union – until it collapsed.

'This society', Enzensberger writes of the German Federal Republic:

is no longer capable of being disappointed. It registered very early, very quickly what's going on in Bonn. The way the parties present themselves also contributes to this cynical view. The politicians try to compensate for the loss of their authority, the erosion of power and trust, by a huge expenditure on advertising. But these wasteful battles are counter-productive. The message is tautologous and empty. They always say only one thing, which is, 'I am I' or 'We are we'. The zero statement is the preferred form of self-presentation. That naturally confirms people's belief that no ideas can be expected from this caste... When the posters say: 'It's Germany's future', then everyone knows that these are empty words, at most it's about the future of the milk subsidy to farmers, of the health insurance contributions or benefits. The Federal Republic is relatively stable and relatively successful not because of, but despite being ruled by the people who grin down from the election posters. (1992: 233, 228)

The theory of individualization takes sides in political debate in two ways: first, it elaborates a frame of reference which allows the subject area – the conflicts between individuals and society – to be analysed from the standpoint of individuals. Second, the theory shows how, as modern society develops further, it is becoming questionable to assume that collective units of meaning and action exist. System theories, which assume an existence and reproduction of the social independence of the actions and thoughts of individuals, are thereby losing reality content. To exaggerate slightly: system theory is turning into a system *metaphysics* which obstructs the view of the virulent social and political process whereby, in all spheres of activity, the content, goals, foundations and structures of the 'social' are having to be renegotiated, reinvented and reconstructed.¹²

A sociology which confronts the viewpoint serving the survival of institutions with the viewpoint of individuals is a largely undeveloped area of the discipline. Almost all sociology, through a 'congenital bias', is based on a negation of individuality and the individual. The social has almost always been conceived in

terms of tribes, religions, classes, associations, and above all, recently, of social systems. The individuals were the interchangeable element, the product of circumstances, the character masks, the subjective factor, the environment of the systems, in short: the indefinable. Sociology's credo, to which it owes its professional identity, states over and over again that the individual is the illusion of individuals who are denied insight into the social conditions and conditionality of their lives.

The works of world literature, the great narratives and dramas that have held the epochs in thrall, are variations of this doctrine of the higher reality and dignity of the general, social dimension, the indivisible unit of which – as the term *individere* itself implies – is the individual. But is a science of *individere* actually possible? Is not a 'sociology of the individual' (unless it contents itself with the social history of that concept, in the context of discourse theory) a self-contradiction, a pig with wings, a disguised appeal for sociology to abolish itself?

One does not need to go to the opposite extreme to see that many of the main concepts of sociology are on a war footing with the basic idea of individualization theory: that traditional contexts are being broken up, reconnected, recast; are becoming in all cases decidable, decision dependent, in need of justification. Where this historical development is asserting itself, the viewpoints from 'above' and 'below', from the social whole and from the individual, are diverging. At the same time, the questions stirred up by system theory's perspective are still in force and even take on increased importance as they become more unmanageable. Take, for example, the declining birthrate, which can only be deciphered if seen against the background of the changed wishes, hopes and life plans of men and women. On the level of society as a whole, it brings with it a whole string of secondary consequences and questions (education policy, labour market management, pensions, local planning, immigration policy etc.). Individuals, their preferences and aversions, are becoming the interference factor, that which is simply incalculable, a constant source of irritation, because they upset all calculations – education quotas, study plans, pension calculations etc. Among politicians and administrators, and the academic experts who prepare their texts, this heightens the suspicion of irrationality, since it keeps turning the current legal, administrative and computing formulae into waste paper. Where hitherto-accepted assumptions are found wanting, the clamour about 'mood democracy' and the 'elbow society' begins. Norms and moral standards are set. But the tidal wave of new life designs, of do-it-yourself and tightrope biographies, cannot be either held back or understood in this way. The scurrying of the individualized lifestyles, elaborated in the personal trial-and-error process (between training, retraining, unemployment and career, between hopes of love, divorce, new dreams of happiness), is unamenable to the need for standardization of bureaucratized political science and sociology.

No one denies that important matters are thought about and initiated by these disciplines, too. But what was previously regarded as background noise to be neglected, is now being seen, more and more undeniably, as the basic situation. The frame of reference of institutionalized state politics and administration, on one hand, and that of individuals trying to hold together their biography fragments, on the other, is breaking apart into antagonistic conceptions of 'public welfare',

‘quality of life’, ‘future viability’, ‘justice’ and ‘progress’. A rift is opening between the images of society prevalent in politics and institutions and those arising from the situations of individuals struggling for viable ways of living.

In this tension-laden field, sociology must rethink its concepts and its research routines. In the face of Enzensberger’s ‘average exoticism of everyday life’, together with what is now formulated with scholarly caution as the ‘pluralization of lifestyles’, old classifications and schemata are becoming as ideologically suspect as they are necessary to the institutional actors. Take, for example, the studies which ‘prove’ that the increasingly numerous non-marital partnerships are really pre-conjugal communities and that post-conjugal communities are actually only a preliminary form of the next marriage, so that marriage can be proclaimed the transcendental victor throughout all this turbulence. Such consolations have their market and their grateful customers: the turmoils of individualization, their message runs, are a storm in surviving marriage’s teacup.

This confirms the old adage that the echo coming back out of the wood is the same as the shout that went into it. Anyone who ‘maritalizes’ alternative ways of living should not be surprised if he sees marriages wherever he looks. But this is a prime example of blind empiricism. Even methodical brilliance, that is able to avoid calling its categorical framework into question, becomes a second-hand bookshop stocked with standard social groups, which only exist as an ideal: though as such they are very much alive.¹³

Prospect: How can Highly Individualized Societies be Integrated?

Individualization has a double face: ‘precarious freedoms’. Expressed in the old, wrong terms, emancipation and anomie form together, through their political chemistry, an explosive mixture. The consequences and questions erupting in all parts of society are correspondingly deep reaching and nerve deadening; they increasingly alarm the public and preoccupy social scientists. To mention only a few: how do children grow up when there are fewer and fewer clear guidelines and responsibilities in families? Can connections be made with the growing tendency towards violence among young people? Is the age of mass products and mass consumption coming to an end with the pluralization of lifestyles and must the economy and industry adapt themselves to products and product fashions that can be combined individually, with corresponding methods of production?

Is it at all possible for a society in the drifting sand of individualization to be registered statistically and analysed sociologically? Is there any remaining basic unit of the social, whether the household, family or commune? How could such units be defined and made operational? How should the various political spheres – for example, local politics, traffic policy, environmental policy, family or welfare policy – react to the diversification and transitoriness of needs and situations? How must social work (and its educational content) change when poverty is divided up and, as it were, distributed laterally among biographies? What architecture, what spatial planning, what educational planning does a society need under the pressure of individualization? Has the end come for the big parties and the big associations or are they just starting a new stage of their history?

Behind all these irritating questions, a basic question is making itself more and more clearly heard: is it still at all possible to integrate highly individualized societies? As is shown by the rebirth of nationalism, of ethnic differences and conflicts in Europe, there is a strong temptation to react to these challenges with the classical instruments of encapsulation against ‘aliens’: which means turning back the wheels of social modernization. No doubt the acceptance of violence against foreigners in the streets (for example) may indeed be explained in this way. In Germany as in other Western European states an uprising against the 1970s and 1980s is in progress, a *Kulturkampf* of the two modernities. Old certainties, just now grown fragile, are again proclaimed – from everyday life to politics, from the family to the economy and the concept of progress. The highly individualized, find-out-for-yourself society is to be replaced by an inwardly heterogeneous society outwardly consolidated into a fortress – and the demarcation against ‘foreigners’ fits in with this calculation.

To put the matter ironically: since men can no longer, ‘unfortunately’, deny the right of women to vote, since women’s desire for education can only with difficulty be held in check, since everything that might be useful in this regard proves awkward, a perhaps quite serviceable alternative route is being taken – not quite consciously but not quite unconsciously either. It involves achieving the same goals through the dramaturgy of violence and nationalism. Here the breaching of the taboo on violence by right-wing extremists has a basis of which little account has been taken: namely, the counter-revolt, pent up in the West too, against the individualization, feminization and ecologization of everyday life. Quite incidentally, violence reinstates the priorities of orthodox industrial society – economic growth, the faith in technology, the nuclear family, gender hierarchy – banishing the tiresome spirits of permanent questioning; or seeming to do so.

But nailing down the status quo or even doing a backward *salto mortale* could not, at the end of the twentieth century, provide a basis of legitimacy. The same is true of the three ways of integrating highly industrialized societies that are mentioned again and again in the debate. They, too, are becoming uncertain, fragile, unable to function in the longer term.

The first is the possibility of what might be called a transcendental consensus, an integration through values, which was the driving force of classical sociology from Durkheim to Parsons. Opposing this today is the realization that the diversification of cultural perceptions and the connections people have to make for themselves eat away the very foundations on which value communities can feed and constantly renew themselves.

Others, second, contrast to this integration through values an integration founded on joint material interests. If an avowal of common values (which, of course, always has a narrowing, repressive side) is no longer possible, it is replaced in highly developed society by the share in prosperity that is felt by broad sections of the population, binding them into that society. According to this theory, the cohesion of the old federal republic rested primarily on the growing ‘economic cake’, whereas the new, enlarged republic – where recession, shortage and poverty are starting to take control – faces severe tests. But even disregarding this topical development, the basic assumption is itself questionable. To hope

that only material interests and institutional dependence (consumption, job market, welfare state, pensions) create cohesion, is to confuse the problem with the solution, making a virtue (desired by theory) out of the necessity of disintegrating groups and group allegiances.

Third, national consciousness, too, is no longer able to provide a basis for stable integration. This is not only shown by the polarizations generated by the 'national project'. It is also, as René König wrote as early as 1979, 'much too abstract in relation to real and very tangible fissures' (p. 364); it is simply no longer able to reach and bind these splits. In other words, with the mobilization of ethnic identities, it is precisely national integration which breaks down:

This can be called a 'relapse into the middle ages', and the disintegration of the existing large societies into separate, opposed local powers can be seen as the decay of the old 'nations' – a process which has been a reality in some parts of the old and new worlds for some time now. Here, the old path from alliances to empires is reversed; the great empires sometimes split up into federative formations, or the individual parts split off along lines determined by political, ethnic or other factors. (ibid.: 364f)

So what is left? In conclusion, we would like to indicate at least the possibility of a different kind of integration and to put it forward for discussion. To summarize our basic idea: if highly individualized societies can be bound together at all, it is only, first, through a clear understanding of precisely this situation and second, if people can be successfully mobilized and motivated for the challenges present at the centre of their lives (unemployment, destruction of nature etc.). Where the old sociality is 'evaporating', society must be reinvented. Integration therefore becomes possible if no attempt is made to arrest and push back the breakout of individuals. It can happen if we make conscious use of this situation and try to forge new, politically open, creative forms of bond and alliance. The question of whether we still have the strength, the imagination – and the time – for this 'invention of the political' (Beck, 1993) is, to be sure, a matter of life and death.

In one of his last major essays, König sketched a positively utopian role for sociology in this connection. He believed it could contribute to integration through enabling the highly complex society to reflect and observe itself creatively and methodically. He criticized the 'ruling class of today' in the strongest terms because it had 'lived entirely on a legitimacy borrowed from old elites and had added nothing of its own'. In this situation, König goes on, 'sociology could make this highly complex thematic context transparent... Admittedly, integration could not then be achieved on the institutional level' – either ethnically, socially, economically or through state nationalism. 'To an extent, it can only be implemented "in thought".' Therefore, it could be achieved 'only within the framework of a new philosophy, which no longer revolved around "being" and "becoming", but around the chances for human beings under the conditions that have been described' (pp. 367ff; cf. Peters, 1993).

What König proposes is in fact very topical – an integration to be attained 'in thought', in the struggle for new existential foundations for industrial civilization. Post-traditional societies threatening the cohesion of this civilization can only become integrable, if at all, through the experiment of their self-interpretation,

self-observation, self-opening, self-discovery, indeed, their self-invention. Their future, their ability to have and shape a future, is the measure of their integration. Whether they can succeed in this is, of course, questionable. Perhaps it will turn out that individualization and integration are in fact mutually exclusive. And what of sociology? Is it really able to make an intellectual contribution to pluralist societies? Or will it remain stuck in its routines, obliterating the big outlines of change and challenge with its minute calculations of developmental trends?

In his novel *The Man without Qualities* (1961), Musil distinguishes between a sense for reality and a sense for possibility. He defines the latter as ‘the capacity to think how everything could “just as easily” be, and to attach no more importance to what is than to what is not’. Someone who sees possible truths, Musil goes on, has, ‘at least in the opinion of their devotees... something positively divine, a fiery, soaring quality, a constructive will... that does not shrink from reality but treats it, on the contrary, as a mission and an invention... Since his ideas... are nothing else than as yet unborn realities, he too of course has a sense of reality; but it is a sense of possible reality’ (pp. 12f). Undoubtedly, sociology, too, ought to develop such a sense of possible reality – but that is another matter.

Notes

1 Respectively, this is how Ostner and Roy (1991, p. 18) and Karl Ulrich Mayer (1991, pp. 88f) understand individualization; for a summary of the debate on individualization, see Beck (1994).

2 Ronald Hitzler (1988) writes about ‘do-it-yourself biography’ (*Bastelbiographie*), Anthony Giddens (1991) about ‘reflexive biography’ and Katrin Ley (1984) about ‘elective biography’ (*Wahlbiographie*).

3 Hans Bertram and Clemens Dannenbeck (1990); Hans Bertram, Hiltrud Bayer and Renate Bauereiss (1993); Günter Burkart and Martin Kohli (1992).

4 Peter Gross refers to the multi-options society (1994). *Multioptionsgesellschaft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

5 E.g. Günter Burkart (1993).

6 Cf., for example, Dumont (1991); Macfarlane (1979); Morris (1972); Foucault (1984).

7 *Familienstammbuch mit Ahnenpass*, Paul Albrechts Verlage, Stulp and Berlin, no date (c. 1940), cf. p. 3; for the interrelations between individualization, family, sex roles and love, see Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1994).

8 *Stammbuch*, published by Bundesverband der Deutsches Standesbeamten, e.V., Verlag für Standesamtswesen, Berlin and Frankfurt, no date (c. 1970), no page references.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Zapf (1992) expressly opposes this widespread misunderstanding (cf. pp. 190f).

12 Cf. the theory of reflexive modernization in Beck (1993), esp. Chapter 3; and Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994).

13 The pragmatic a priori method of mass data sociology is worth noting: quantitative methods presuppose pre-formed categories and concepts (even if they are nominally deactivated). However, a society which is individualizing itself eludes these standardizations imposed by research method (which is already giving rise to unmanageable complications in the introduction of flexible working time and work contracts, for example). It is therefore difficult for a sociology proud of its technical virtuosity to jump over its own shadow and address questions of a self-individualizing society. But at the same time it becomes clear, here again, how woefully sociology has so far neglected the question of what kind of sociological empiricism, of scholarly and social self-observation, is appropriate to a society caught in the draught and sand drift of individualization. Cf. Beck and Allmendinger (1993).

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