

Individualization

Authors' Preface: Institutionalized Individualism

An international dispute about fundamental principles is raging beneath the surface in the social sciences. One side starts from the idea that the social and political landscape has fundamentally changed, at the latest since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet empire in 1989, but that this has not been reflected in sociology and political science. The other side, the majority, sees no sign of an 'epochal shift' and argues that modernity has always been another word for crisis; feeling outraged and insulted, it continues as before, only with still more figures and still better methods. There is no doubt that, when this dispute breaks into the open and rouses the national and international sociological congresses from their Sleeping Beauty world, it will revitalize the discipline and help it to regain public attention.

The essays collected in this volume document the position of two authors who *do* think there has been a categorical break. In our view, the suppression of the new is one of the great traumas of modern capitalism; it has brought forth a huge structure of postponement and denial, which claims that everything remains as it was. As the result of a more radical process of 'reflexive modernization',¹ however, a fundamental change is occurring in the nature of the social and political – an erosion of anthropological certitudes which compels the social sciences to modify their theoretical tools and even to reinvent the social sciences themselves, in a collaborative division of labour with history, geography, anthropology, economics and natural science.² This is a far-reaching supposition, of course. But the crucial question is how, beyond the mere assertion of an epochal break, sociology can strengthen its theoretical, methodological and organizational foundations by making them more concrete or focused, and in this way ultimately renew its claim to another enlightenment.

The keyword in this international controversy is *globalization*. The consequences of this for society (and sociology) have been spelt out most clearly in the English-speaking countries, but above all in Britain, where it has been forcefully argued that conventional social and political science remains caught up in a national-territorial concept of society. Critics of 'methodological nationalism' have attacked its explicit or implicit premise that the national state is the 'container' of social processes and that the national framework is still the one best suited to measure and analyse major social, economic and political changes.³ The social sciences are thus found guilty of 'embedded statism',⁴ and thought is given to a reorganization of the interdisciplinary field.

Within a different perspective, a comparable critique of the conceptual bases of social science has been conducted since the mid-1980s in the German-language area under the keyword *individualization*, although its empirical and

theoretical scope has not yet been registered in the English-speaking countries. The discussion of *Risk Society*,⁵ for example, has centred mainly on the risk argument (Part 1) and little or not at all on the individualization argument (Part 2).⁶ The present volume is an attempt to remedy this gap. If the globalization debate took up the territorial bias, the individualization debate has probed and criticized the *collective* bias of the social sciences.

One can hardly think of a word heavier with misunderstandings than ‘individualization’ has proved to have in the English-speaking countries. To prevent the discussion of this book from running aground on these misunderstandings, it is necessary to establish and keep in view the distinction between the *neoliberal idea of the free-market individual* (inseparable from the concept of ‘individualization’ as used in the English-speaking countries) and the concept of *Individualisierung* in the sense of *institutionalized individualism*, as it will be developed in this book.

Neoliberal economics rests upon an image of the autarkic human self. It assumes that individuals alone can master the whole of their lives, that they derive and renew their capacity for action from within themselves. Talk of the ‘self-entrepreneur’ makes this clear. Yet this ideology blatantly conflicts with everyday experience in (and sociological studies of) the worlds of work, family and local community, which show that the individual is not a monad but is self-*insufficient* and increasingly tied to others, including at the level of worldwide networks and institutions. The ideological notion of the self-sufficient individual ultimately implies the disappearance of any sense of mutual obligation – which is why neoliberalism inevitably threatens the welfare state. A sociological understanding of *Individualisierung* is thus intimately bound up with the question of how individuals can demystify this false image of autarky. It is not freedom of choice, but insight into the fundamental incompleteness of the self, which is at the core of individual and political freedom in the second modernity.

The *social-scientific* sense of ‘individualization’ should thus be distinguished from the neoliberal sense. A history of sociology could be written in terms of how its principal theorists – from Marx through Weber, Durkheim and Simmel to Parsons, Foucault, Elias, Luhmann, Habermas and Giddens – have varied the basic idea that individualization is a product of complex, contingent and thus high-level socialization.⁷ For although they tell quite different – some optimistically, many pessimistically tinged – narratives of individualization, and although some see it as a danger to society and/or individuality itself, the red thread running through them all is that individualization (a) is a structural characteristic of highly differentiated societies and (b) does not endanger their integration but actually makes it possible. The individual creativity which it releases is seen as creating space for the renewal of society under conditions of radical change. In developed modernity – to be quite blunt about it – human mutuality and community rest no longer on solidly established traditions, but, rather, on a paradoxical collectivity of reciprocal individualization.

In this book, the concept of ‘individualization’ will be deployed in this sociological sense of institutionalized individualism. Central institutions of modern society – basic civil, political and social rights, but also paid employment and the

training and mobility necessary for it – are geared to the individual and not to the group. Insofar as basic rights are internalized and everyone wants to or must be economically active to earn their livelihood, the spiral of individualization destroys the given foundations of social coexistence. So – to give a simple definition – ‘individualization’ means disembedding without reembedding.

But what then is specific about individualization and second modernity? In second modern society the separation between subjective and objective analysis, consciousness and class, *Überbau* and *Unterbau* is losing its significance. Individualization can no longer be understood as a mere subjective reality which has to be relativated by and confronted with objective class analysis. Because individualization not only effects the *Überbau* – ideology, false consciousness – but also the economic *Unterbau* of ‘real classes’; the individual is becoming the basic unit of social reproduction for the first time in history.

To put it in a nutshell – individualization is becoming *the social structure of second modern society itself*. Institutionalized individualism is no longer Talcott Parsons’ idea of linear self-reproducing systems; it means the paradox of an ‘individualizing structure’ as a non-linear, open-ended, highly ambivalent, ongoing process. It relates to a decline of narratives of given sociability. Thus the theoretical collectivisms of sociology ends. A ‘microfoundation of macrosociology’ (Collins) may not be possible. But sociology as an institutionalized rejection of individualism is no longer possible either.

So what does individualization *beyond* the collective bias of the social science mean? An institutionalized imbalance between the disembedded individual and global problems in a global risk society. The Western type of individualized society tells us *to seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions*. For example, the tension in family life today is the fact that equality of men and women cannot be created in an institutional family structure which presupposes and enforces their inequality.

But does this not mean that everyone just revolves around themselves, forgetting how much they rely on others for the assertion of their own push-and-shove freedom? Certainly the stereotype in people’s heads is that individualization breeds a me-first society, but, as we will try to show, this is a false, one-sided picture of what actually happens in the family, gender relationships, love and sex, youth and old age. There are also signs that point towards an ethic of ‘altruistic individualism’. Anyone who wants to live a life of their own must also be socially sensitive to a very high degree.

To adapt Habermas’s concept of an ‘ideal speech situation’, we might speak here of an ‘ideal intimacy situation’. If the former refers to general norms, the latter establishes specific rules for the intimate interactions involved in relationships, marriage, parenthood, friendship and the family – a normative horizon of expectations of reciprocal individuation which, having emerged under conditions of cultural democratization, must be counterfactually assumed and sustained.⁸ The result is that ‘natural’ living conditions and inequalities become political. For example, the division of labour in the family or workplace can no longer claim to be a ‘natural’ matter of course; like much else besides, it must be negotiated and justified. But part of the same phenomenon is the right to a life of one’s own

(space, time and money of one's own) within relationships and the family. The issues of fairness and recognition of the other's identity thus become highly charged or 'jinxed' as they get caught up in the partners' distribution of daily tasks and career chances, and as the 'family' more and more becomes the rubbish bin for all the social problems around the world that cannot be solved in any other way.

The French sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann once asked what actually constitutes a couple now that it is no longer a marriage certificate. His answer was that a couple arises when two people buy one washing-machine together, instead of two separate ones. It is then that the long-term breakdown over the 'dirty washing' begins.⁹ What counts as dirty? Who washes when and for whom? Does it have to be ironed? What if he says yes and she says no? Everything can be negotiated – but then again not. By the same token, any kind of discussion presupposes shared meanings that cannot simply be placed in doubt; limits must therefore be set to argument and confrontation if you want to live with somebody on a daily basis. The 'dirty washing' issue, however, makes people feel bad. The partner who shuts up and washes is swallowing the fact that the pain of injustice will ultimately suffocate the love.

The separation which then becomes necessary (and is always there as a danger) often does not take place in a 'socially sensitive' manner. But it involves an awakening of, or a fight for, co-operative individualism, which presupposes that each has a right to a life of his or her own and that the terms of living together have to be renegotiated in each case. The twofold search for individuation, which is often unsuccessful, might be termed the *freedom culture*. This daily culture of freedom also has political implications, for it stands in blatant contradiction with the global victory of neoliberalism. The smouldering conflict is called 'capitalism or freedom' (in an inverted allusion to the old conservative election motto: 'Freedom or Socialism!'). The freedom culture is in danger of being destroyed by capitalism.

Many will notice that the dimension of power, of the relationship between power and subjectivity, is missing from this book. The idea comes from Hegel that people at the top of society also develop a richer subjectivity. In modern management, this takes the sharper form that anyone climbing the career ladder not only knows better what he wants, but forgets that he depends on those he has left behind; he lives in the illusion that he can do the job of anyone else working for him. At the same time, the new capitalism intensifies social inequalities throughout the world and changes their historical characteristics. Marx spoke of the proletariat and had in mind the need of capital for cheap labour power. But today this seems to be less and less the case: global capital, in bidding farewell to unskilled labour, dismisses more and more people into a state beyond society in which their services are no longer needed (by the labour market).

This suggests the following objection. The farewell to class conceptualized by individualization theory may have been applicable yesterday, but it is no longer applicable today and will be invalid tomorrow. The concept of class, so often pronounced dead, has been undergoing a renaissance in the new global context. For the new inequalities growing worldwide are also a collective experience.

That is precisely the question. For paradoxically, it is the individualization and fragmentation of growing inequalities into separate biographies which is a

collective experience.¹⁰ The concept of class actually *plays down* the situation of growing inequalities *without* collective ties. Class, social layer, gender presuppose a collective moulding of individual behaviour – the old idea that, by knowing that someone was a Siemens apprentice, you also knew the things he said, the way he dressed and enjoyed himself, what he read and how he voted. This chain syllogism has now become questionable. Under conditions of individualization, the point is rather to work out if and when new collective forms of action take shape, and which forms they are. The key question, therefore – to which this book also knows no answer – is how the bubbling, contradictory process of individualization and denationalization can be cast into new democratic forms of organization.

It would be a big mistake, however, to equate the crisis of the concept of class with a denial of increasing inequalities. In fact basing ourselves on individualization theory, we investigate and think out the opposite notion: that social inequality is on the rise precisely because of the spread of individualization. Instead of suppressing the question of how collectivity can be generated in global modernity, or shifting it into the premises of a sociology based upon uncertain class collectives, the non-class character of individualized inequalities poses it in a more radical way. There are further questions that stand out in individualization theory, even if it often has no answer to them.

No doubt the question of the *frontiers* of individualization is becoming ever more pressing. Many think that objective limits of collectivity are set in advance, rather as there are natural limits to growth, and this suggests that the limits of individualization should be sought in the individualization process itself – that, to put it mechanically, the more people are individualized, the more they produce de-individualizing consequences for others. Take the case of a woman who files for divorce and whose husband finds himself facing a void. In the tussle over the children, each one tries to impose on the other the dictates of his or her life. Not only is there a positive sum game of co-individualization; probably more often there is also a negative sum game of contra-individualization. It would seem reasonable to suppose that the irritation caused by the other's resistance strengthens the urge for a new, and perhaps seemingly 'democratic', authoritarianism.

If we now circle back to our starting-point – the coming sociological dispute over continuity or discontinuity – the point at issue can be identified more clearly. To the extent that modern society and modern sociology are experiencing a change in their foundations, the suspicion arises – in relation to *all* social science and all special areas of sociology – that they are largely operating with *zombie* or living-dead categories which blind them to the realities and contradictions of globalizing and individualizing modernities. This idea is developed here in a concluding interview, which could just as well be read as an introduction.

A few of the essays contained in this book were written in the 1980s, but most of them date from the 1990s and have been taken up in the still heated debate on individualization. Chapter 1, 'Losing the traditional: Individualization and "precarious freedoms"' and Chapter 2, 'A life of one's own in a runaway world', introduce the theme of the book. Chapters 3 and 4 – 'Beyond status and class?' and 'The ambivalent social structure' – then develop and discuss the connection

between individualization and growing social inequalities. Chapters 5 to 7 – ‘From “living for others” to “a life of one’s own”’, ‘On the way to a post-familial family’ and ‘Division of labour, self-image and life projects’ – turn the individualization argument in a feminist direction and apply it to such issues as the family, love and the male-female division of labour. Chapters 8 and 9 – ‘Declining birthrates and the wish to have children’ and ‘Apparatuses do not care for people’ – discuss some of the implications for birthrates, the wish to have children and associated dilemmas in the planning of everyday life. Chapters 10 and 11 – ‘Health and responsibility in the age of genetic technology’ and ‘Death of one’s own, life of one’s own’ – illustrate the individualization thesis from the points of view of human genetics and death. Chapters 12 and 13 – ‘Freedom’s children’ and ‘Freedom’s fathers’ – discuss and reinterpret the individualization argument as it has a bearing on young people and investigate its intellectual roots in the past.

Notes

1 See U. Beck, A. Giddens and S. Lash, *Reflexive Modernization*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994; U. Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997, Chapter 1; U. Beck (in conversation with J. Willms) *Freiheit oder Kapitalismus – Gesellschaft neu denken*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2000; and U. Beck and W. Bonß, *Die Modernisierung der Moderne*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2001.

2 P. J. Taylor, ‘Embedded statism and the social sciences: opening up to new spaces’. *Environment and Planning*, 28, 1996, pp. 1917–1995; and *British Journal of Sociology*, 1, 2000.

3 See U. Beck, *What Is Globalization?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

4 Taylor, 1996; N. Brenner, ‘Global cities and glocal states’. *Review of International Political Economy*, 5, 1, 1998.

5 U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage, 1992.

6. See also Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics*. Chapters 2 and 4.

7 M. Schroer, *Die Individuen der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001.

8 U. Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995; A. Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.

9 J. -C. Kaufmann, *Schmutzige Wäsche*. Konstanz: Universitätsverlag, 1992.

10 L. Leisering and S. Leibfried, *Time and Poverty in Western Welfare States*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.

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