

Individualization

Institutionalized Individualism
and its Social and Political
Consequences

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A Life of One's Own in a Runaway World

Individualization, Globalization and Politics

There is hardly a desire more widespread in the West today than to lead 'a life of your own'. If a traveller in France, Finland, Poland, Switzerland, Britain, Germany, Hungary, the USA or Canada asks what really moves people there, what they strive and struggle to achieve, the answer may be money, work, power, love, God or whatever, but it would also be, more and more, the promise of 'a life of one's own'. Money means your own money, space means your own space, even in the elementary sense of a precondition for a life you can call your own. Love, marriage and parenthood are required to bind and hold together the individual's own, centrifugal life story. It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that the daily struggle for a life of one's own has become the collective experience of the Western world. It expresses the remnant of our communal feeling.

What drives people to reach for the stars in their lives? Why is this new direction emerging which, although seemingly meaningful only at the level of the individual, is really unfolding in accordance with a schematic pattern? What explains the zeal, the fear and enthusiasm, the cunning and determination, with which large numbers of people fret and fight for their 'own lives'? For many, the answer obviously lies within the people themselves – in their individual wills, their inflated expectations, their insatiable hunger for new experience, their decreasing preparedness to obey commands, to get into lane, to make sacrifices. Such hasty explanations, however, throw up a new series of questions. How are we to explain the fact that people in many countries suddenly and simultaneously want to take control of their lives? Everything is acted out in the personalized costumes of the individual – independently, in the world's most varied cultures, languages and cities. Is this a kind of epidemic of egoism, an ego fever, to be overcome through daily doses of ethics and references to the public good? Or are individuals, despite all the glitter of the campaign for their own lives, perhaps also in the vanguard of a deeper change? Do they point to new shores, towards a struggle for a new relationship between the individual and society, which still has to be invented? This is what the present chapter will argue.

We live in an age in which the social order of the national state, class, ethnicity and the traditional family is in decline. The ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society. The choosing,

deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time. It is the fundamental cause behind changes in the family and the global gender revolution in relation to work and politics. Any attempt to create a new sense of social cohesion has to start from the recognition that individualism, diversity and scepticism are written into Western culture. The importance of a life of one's own in a runaway world may be outlined in the following 15 points.

1: The compulsion to lead a life of one's own and the possibility of doing it, emerge when a society is highly differentiated. To the extent that society breaks down into separate functional spheres that are neither interchangeable nor graftable onto one another, people are integrated into society only in their partial aspects as taxpayers, car drivers, students, consumers, voters, patients, producers, fathers, mothers, sisters, pedestrians and so on. Constantly changing between different, partly incompatible logics of action, they are forced to take into their hands that which is in danger of breaking into pieces: their own lives. Modern society does not integrate them as whole persons into its functional systems; rather, it relies on the fact that individuals are not integrated but only partly and temporarily involved as they wander between different functional worlds. The social form of your own life is initially an empty space which an ever more differentiated society has opened up. It becomes filled with incompatibilities, the ruins of traditions, the junk of side-effects. The space left behind as once dominant certainties lose their power becomes a junkyard for the wreckage of people's own lives. Many Westerners could say: 'My life is not a continuum. It is not merely broken by day and night into black and white pieces. It is different versions of me which go to the station, sit in the office and make bookings, stalk through groves, write; I am the thinker-of-all-trades, of broken-up trades, who runs, smokes, kills, listens to the radio, says "Yes, sir" to the chief officer.' Such a person has been called 'a tray full of sparkling snapshots' (Arno Schmidt, *Aus dem Leben eines Fauns*).

2: The life of one's own is not a life peculiar to oneself. In fact the opposite is true; a standardized life is produced that combines both achievement and justice and in which the interest of the individual and rationalized society are merged. The expansion of the nation-state produced and affirmed individualization, with doctrines of socialization and institutions of education to match. This is what I call the paradox of 'institutional individualism'. The legal norms of the welfare state make individuals (not groups) the recipients of benefits, thereby enforcing the rule that people should organize more and more of their own lives. People used to be born into traditional societies, as they were into social classes or religions. Today even God himself has to be chosen. And the ubiquitous rule is that, in order to survive the rat race, one has to become active, inventive and resourceful, to develop ideas of one's own, to be faster, nimbler and more creative – not just on one occasion, but constantly, day after day. Individuals become actors, builders, jugglers, stage managers of their own biographies and identities and also of their social links and networks.

3: The life of one's own is thus completely dependent on institutions. In the place of binding traditions, institutional guidelines appear on the scene to organize your

own life. The qualitative difference between traditional and modern life stories is not, as many assume, that in older corporate and agrarian societies various suffocating controls and guidelines restricted the individual's say in his or her own life to a minimum, whereas today hardly any such restrictions are left. It is, in fact, in the bureaucratic and institutional jungle of modernity that life is most securely bound into networks of guidelines and regulations. The crucial difference is that modern guidelines actually compel the self-organization and self-thematization of people's biographies. In earlier times in Europe very precise rules governed wedding ceremonies, for example, so that in some regions and periods nearly half the population of marriageable age remained single. Today, by contrast, many sets of guidelines – in the educational system, the labour market or the welfare state – involve demands that individuals should run their own lives, on pain of economic sanction.

4: Living a life of one's own therefore means that standard biographies become elective biographies, 'do-it-yourself biographies', risk biographies, broken or broken-down biographies. Even behind façades of security and prosperity, the possibilities of biographical slippage and collapse are ever present. Hence the clinging and the fear, even in the externally wealthy middle layers of society. So there is a big difference to be made between individualization where there are institutional resources like human rights, education and the welfare state to cope with the contradiction of modern biographies and 'atomization' where there are not. The neoliberal market ideology enforces atomization with all its political will.

5: In spite or because of the institutional guidelines and the often incalculable insecurity, the life of one's own is condemned to activity. Even in failure, it is an active life in its structuring of demands. The other side of this obligation to be active is that failure becomes personal failure, no longer perceived as class experience in a 'culture of poverty'. It goes hand in hand with forms of self-responsibility. Whereas illness, addiction, unemployment and other deviations from the norm used to count as blows of fate, the emphasis today is on individual blame and responsibility. Living your own life therefore entails taking responsibility for personal misfortunes and unanticipated events. Typically, this is not only an individual perception, but a culturally binding mode of attribution. It corresponds to an image of society in which individuals are not passive reflections of circumstances but active shapers of their own lives, within varying degrees of limitation.

6: Your own life – your own failure. Consequently, social crisis phenomena such as structural unemployment can be shifted as a burden of risk onto the shoulders of individuals. Social problems can be directly turned into psychological dispositions: into guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts and neuroses. Paradoxically enough, a new immediacy develops in the relationship between the individual and society, an immediacy of disorder such that social crises appear as individual and are no longer – or only very indirectly – perceived in their social dimension. This is even true of the darker side of still integrated societies: the new collective positions of underclass and exclusion. These are collectively individualized. Here is certainly one of the sources, both present and future, for the outbreaks of violence for its own sake that are directed against shifting victims ('foreigners', the

disabled, homosexuals, Jews). Researchers distinguish between 'life story' as a chain of actual events and 'biography' as the narrative form of events – which by no means necessarily coincide with each other. Thus, if biographies spoke only of 'blows of fate', 'objective conditions' and 'outside forces' that 'overwhelmed', 'predetermined' or 'compelled', that would refute our formulated theory, for it has been argued that individuals have to perceive themselves as at least partly shaping themselves and the conditions of their lives, even or above all in the language of failure. A rough pragmatic indicator for the 'living one's own life' theory is thus the presence of elements of an individualistic and active narrative form in people's own biographies. Life's events are ascribed not mainly to 'alien' causes, but to aspects of the individual (decisions, non-decisions, omissions, capacities, incapacities, achievements, compromises, defeats). This does not, of course, rule out the possibility of false consciousness.

7: People struggle to live their own lives in a world that increasingly and more evidently escapes their grasp, one that is irrevocably and globally networked. Even the most natural action of all – the inhaling of clean air – ultimately presupposes a revolution in the industrial world order. This brings us to the concept of the globalization of biography. In the global age, one's own life is no longer sedentary or tied to a particular place. It is a travelling life, both literally and metaphorically, a nomadic life, a life spent in cars, aeroplanes and trains, on the telephone or the internet, supported by the mass media, a transnational life stretching across frontiers. The multilocal transnationality of the life of one's own is a further reason for the hollowing out of national sovereignty and the obsolescence of nation-based sociology. The association of place and community or society is coming unstuck (Beck, 1999a). Whether voluntarily or compulsorily or both, people spread their lives out across separate worlds. Globalization of biography means place polygamy; people are wedded to several places at once. Place-polygamous ways of living are translated biographies: they have to be constantly translated both for oneself and for others, so that they can continue as in-between lives. The transition from the first to the second modernity is also a transition from place monogamy to place polygamy. To understand the social figure of globalization as it applies to the life of one's own, it is necessary to keep in view the different conflicting places across which that life is spread out. In this sense, not only global players but also Indian taxi drivers in Chicago or Russian Jews in Israel live transnational lives. Globalization of biographies means a very complex, contradictory process that generates novel conflicts and forms of separation. Thus, the upsurge of local nationalisms and the new emphasis on local identity should be seen as an unmistakable consequence of globalization, and not, as they may first appear, as a phenomenon that contradicts it. This seventh thesis therefore implies that the life of one's own is a global life. The framework of the national state has become too big and too small. What happens within your own life has a lot to do with worldwide influences, challenges and fashions or with protection against them.

8: The other side of globalization is detraditionalization. The life of one's own is also a detraditionalized life. This does not mean that tradition no longer plays any role – often the opposite is the case. But traditions must be chosen and often

invented, and they have force only through the decisions and experience of individuals. The sources of collective and group identity and of meaning which are characteristic of industrial society (ethnic identity, class consciousness, faith in progress), whose lifestyles and notions of security underpinned Western democracies and economies into the 1960s, here lose their mystique and break up, exhausted. Those who live in this post-national, global society are constantly engaged in discarding old classifications and formulating new ones. The hybrid identities and cultures that ensue are precisely the individuality which then determines social integration. In this way, identity emerges through intersection and combination and thus through conflict with other identities.

How does this differ from the historical and theoretical analyses of Georg Simmel, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber in the early part of the twentieth century? The main difference is that today people are not discharged from corporate religious-cosmological certainties into the world of industrial society, but are transplanted from the national industrial societies of the first modernity into the transnational turmoil of world-risk society (Beck, 1999b). People are expected to live their lives with the most diverse and contradictory transnational and personal identities and risks. Individualization in this sense means detraditionalization, but also the opposite: a life lived in conflict between different cultures, the invention of hybrid traditions. It is hardly surprising that various idylls – grandma’s apple cake, forget-me-nots and communitarianism – are experiencing a boom. Even traditional (for example, religious) systems of interpretation cannot shut themselves off from what is happening; they collide with one another and end up in public competition and conflict, at both a global and a local level. Fundamentalism too, in its European and non-European variants, is in this sense a reaction to both individualization and globalization. The crucial point here is that the public realm no longer has anything to do with collective decisions. It is a question not of solidarity or obligation but of conflictual coexistence.

9: If globalization, detraditionalization and individualization are analysed together, it becomes clear that the life of one’s own is an experimental life. Inherited recipes for living and role stereotypes fail to function. There are no historical models for the conduct of life. Individual and social life – in marriage and parenthood as well as in politics, public activity and paid work – have to be brought back into harmony with each other. The restlessness of the age, of the *Zeitgeist*, is also due to the fact that no one knows how or whether this can be achieved.

10: The life of one’s own is a reflexive life. Social reflexion – the processing of contradictory information, dialogue, negotiation, compromise – is almost synonymous with living one’s own life. Active management (and that does seem the right word) is necessary for the conduct of life in a context of conflicting demands and a space of global uncertainty. Self-realization and self-determination are by no means merely individual goals; they are often also public stopgaps, the reverse side of the problems that all partial systems unload onto citizens by suddenly deeming them ‘mature and responsible’. This compulsion to self-realization, this departure for the foreign continent of the life of one’s own, goes hand in hand with integration into worldwide contexts. Something like individual

distinctiveness really appears for the first time through the combination of social crises in which individuals are forced to think, act and live. It becomes normal to test out a number of different mixes; several overlapping identities are discovered and a life is constructed out of their combination. The social structure of the global life of one's own thus appears together with continual differentiation and individualization – or, to be more precise, with the individualization of classes, ethnic groups, nuclear families and normal female biographies. In this way, the nationally fixed social categories of industrial society are culturally dissolved or transformed. They become 'zombie categories', which have died yet live on. Even traditional conditions of life become dependent on decisions; they have to be chosen, defended and justified against other options and lived out as a personal risk. Not only genetically modified food but also love and marriage, including the traditional housewife marriage, become a risk.

11: Living a life of one's own is, in this sense, a late-modern form which enjoys high esteem. This has not always been so. In traditional, nationally closed societies, the individual remains a species concept: the smallest unit of an imagined whole. Only detraditionalization, global opening and a new multiplicity of functional logics give social space and meaning to the emphasis on the individual. The positive evaluation of the individual is thus a truly modern phenomenon, which at the same time continues to be vigorously combated even today (as talk of the 'me-first' or 'push-and-shove' society shows). All through history, individualist behaviour has been equated with conduct that is deviant or even idiotic. When individuality features in the consciousness of a world picture, it is tainted with a flaw or defect. This was true in ancient Greece or during the early Middle Ages in Europe, when individuality was mainly interpreted as deviant or sinful behaviour to be avoided. This deprecatory sense of individuality persisted in the sciences and 'the bourgeois world, up to the epigraph of Sartre's *La Nausée*: "Ce type n'a aucune valeur pour la société, il n'est qu'un individu." A mere individual – that is the most concise formula expressing the opposition to the early Romantic rehabilitation (and redefinition) of the essence of individuality' (Frank, 1988: 611). Interestingly enough, this revaluation of individuality succeeded precisely because that which had for centuries been the reason for its low value now became the reason for its high value: namely, that the individual cannot be derived from the general. The point now was that the general could only be surmised and thus paled beside the verifiability and indeed immemoriality of the individual. The 'essence of individuality' may therefore be understood as 'radical non-identity'.

12: The life of one's own, seen in this way, is a radically non-identical life. While culture was previously defined by traditions, today it must be defined as an area of freedom which protects each group of individuals and has the capacity to produce and defend its own individualization. To be more specific, culture is the field in which we assert that we can live together, equal yet different.

13: Living your own life therefore can mean living under the conditions for radicalized democracy, for which many of the concepts and formulae of the first modernity have become inadequate. No one knows how the conflicting transnational identities can be politically integrated. No one knows how the ever growing

demands for family intimacy can be linked to the new demands for the freedom and self-realization of men, women and children. No one knows how the need of mass organizations (political parties, trade unions) to obligate individuals can be made compatible with claims for participation and self-organization. People are better adapted to the future than are social institutions and their representatives.

14: The decline of values which cultural pessimists are so fond of decrying is in fact opening up the possibility of escape from the creed of ‘bigger, more, better’, in a period that is living beyond its means ecologically and economically. Whereas, in the old value system, the self always had to be subordinated to patterns of collectivity, these new ‘we’ orientations are creating something like a co-operative or altruistic individualism. Thinking of oneself and living for others, once considered a contradiction in terms, is revealed as an internal connection. In fact, living alone means living socially. The politics based on the defence of life as a personal project is the rejection of its adversaries: a powerful market system on the one hand and a communalism that imposes purity and homogeneity on the other.

15: The dominance of the life of one’s own thus leads to an opening and a sub-politicization of society, but also to a depoliticization of national politics. Two of the basic conditions for national representative democracy are being especially called into question. The first of these conditions is the general trust that enables parties (and other collective actors) to mobilize citizens and party members, to some extent blindly and independently of their personal preferences, around certain issues of the day. The second is the limited number of collective actors and their internal homogeneity. Both these premises are becoming questionable as a result of individualization processes. It cannot be assumed either that citizens are party members and party members are party troops or that parties and trade unions are intrinsically capable of achieving consensus – because large organizations are also pluralized in respect of their content. In the wake of the processes of individualization and globalization, collective actors are themselves being hollowed out and summoned to programmatic revolutions behind an unchanging façade (New Labour, for example). Unpredictable dilemmas arise, however, for the organization of politics at the level of the national state. Here we see the impetuous development of what Kant already noted in his critique of representative democracy: namely, the contradiction that democracy appeals to the individual as the subject of law making, yet filters out, glides over and holds down the expression of individual will in the forms of representativity. On the one hand, the ‘living your own life’ society validates at the heart of national politics the basic proposition that the individual – and only the individual – counts as the source of democratic legitimacy. On the other hand, the corporate and representative organization of the mediation of interests rests precisely upon the fact that it is not individuals but collective actors, constructed in accordance with the constitution, who take political decisions of major importance and scope. Conversely, it is not possible to admit more and more actors into the game of political power, because that would multiply the arenas of conflict without increasing the potential for consensus. The number of negotiating systems cannot grow indefinitely, and it is by no means the case that many individual negotiations add up to a single all-integrating power of decision. It thus becomes apparent that

the politicization of society in the wake of cultural democratization does not at all translate into an activation of politics. This takes the steam out of the frequent objection that the numerically larger involvement of modern individualists in a wide range of local initiatives or (to use the fashionable expression) networks – from sports clubs to campaigns against xenophobia – integrates or socializes modern society in a way that is functionally equivalent to that of the traditional political forms of large organizations or the national state. Even the widespread talk of a ‘networking of networks’ cannot obscure the fact that the increasingly fragmented political structure of society, which is expressed in the individualization of political behaviour and the waning capacity of the old large organizations for integration and aggregation, weakens the potential of political societies for purposive mobilization and direction. (Greven, 1997: 246ff.). The ideal of integration through conflict, which is the basis of national democracy, here breaks down. It becomes ever more difficult to guarantee the two sides of democracy: consensus among individuals and groups based upon free agreement and representation of conflictual interests. But this is where a real political dilemma of the second modernity becomes palpable. On the one hand, political imagination and political action are confronted with challenges of a quite unprecedented scale. We need only think of the sweeping reforms needed to give the social state a new foundation with regard to insecure forms of employment and the working poor; or of what is required to reorganize the nationally calibrated key institutions of parliamentary democracy so that they are more open to transnational identities, life situations and economic link-ups; not to speak of the once totally neglected question of ecologically reforming the autonomous and ever faster world industrial dynamic. On the other hand, processes of individualization are eroding the social-structural conditions for political consensus, which until now have made possible collective political action. The paradox is that this happens because political involvement is increasing at the microcosmic level and subpolitical society is governed from below in more and more issues and fields of action. The closed space of national politics no longer exists. Society and the public realm are constituted out of conflictual spaces that are at once individualized, transnationally open and defined in opposition to one another. It is in these spaces that each cultural group tests and lives out its hybrid.

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