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Organized Self-Realization
Some Paradoxes of Individualization

Axel Honneth

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the sociological notion 'individualization' contains the most heterogeneous phenomena, the article develops an interpretation of the fate of individualization in Western capitalism today. After having differentiated three different meanings of that notion with the help of Georg Simmel, the position is defended that the claims to individual self-realization, which have rapidly multiplied in the Western societies of thirty or forty years ago, have become so much a feature of the institutionalized expectations inherent in social reproduction that the particular goals of such claims are lost and they are transmuted into a support of the system's legitimacy. The result of this paradoxical reversal, where the processes which once promised an increase of qualitative freedom are henceforth altered into an ideology of de-institutionalization, is the emergence in individuals of a number of symptoms of inner emptiness, of feeling oneself to be superfluous, and of absence of purpose.

Key words
■ freedom ■ meaning ■ self-realization ■ Simmel ■ Weber

From its beginnings at the end of the nineteenth century, sociology, to the extent that it takes the form of a theory of society, has thought of itself as being involved in confronting the symptomatic processes of change in modern societies. In this connection, it is above all two concepts stemming from the inheritance of classical social philosophy which stand at its disposal: first, through the concept of rationalization Max Weber designated the step-by-step extension of the standards of purposive rationality to social spheres that were supposed to have served traditional modes of social integration by means of affectivity and the ties of shared values; second, through the concept of individualization, for instance of Emile Durkheim, one understood the process of a growing and irreversible freeing of the members of society from traditional ties and stereotypical compulsions, which helped them to attain greater autonomy and freedom of choice. The development of modern societies, with these two concepts granted a theoretical primacy, was therefore frequently conceived of as reflecting an advance in the

institutional intertwinement of growing individualism and rationalization. As great admittedly as was the sharpening of knowledge that came with this pair of concepts, nonetheless from the very beginning the problems arising from each of the categories taken separately were just as variegated: with respect to the concept of rationalization it soon becomes unclear whether in fact it is the single standard of the efficacy of technical rules that permit us to speak of institutional rationaliz-ation in realms as diverse as those of the organization of the economy, of political administration, of individuals' conduct of their lives, or of family life; however, the institutional processes of transformation in these spheres are analysed in particular, what remains in doubt, at the very least, is whether they all may be comprehended in terms of the criterion of an increase in purposive rationality. No less subject to dispute from the start, however, was the use Durkheim made of the category of an individualization induced by society, when, agreeing in a certain manner with Hegel, he concluded from the fact of functional differenti-ation that a growth in the possibilities available to individuals for shaping their own lives was occurring. Weber himself, at one point, had already said that with the expression 'individualism' the most heterogeneous things conceivable are meant (Weber [1904–5] 1976: 222, fn. 22). From the very beginning the main problem here has been the degree to which one may also see an indication of the heightening of personal autonomy in the descriptions offered of a pluralization of individual roles, ties, and commitments. Probably for this second aspect, too, namely for the increase in individuals' power to act and ability to reflect, criteria can be provided that are accessible to a certain kind of observation from without; yet, however such questions of research may be resolved, there seems to be no disputing that the idea of the individualization of a life-history does describe an easily observed and hence objectively occurring process, whereas the claim of an increase in the autonomy of the individual subject ultimately remains tied back to the viewpoint of the participants in social interaction. To this extent, from the start a precarious ambivalence has pervaded the concept of individualization, this second building-block of a sociological diagnosis of modernity, because it has referred simultaneously to the external fact of an increase in the number of personal qualities and to the 'inner' fact of an increase in the individual's own accomplishments. The structural peculiarities characteristic at present of a process of individualization defined by these two poles are what I should like to concentrate on in this article; in doing so, however, some further preliminary conceptual clarification is required, for the topic comprises rather more layers than may at first glance appear to be the case.

Individualism and Classical Sociology

The figure in classical sociology who early on had developed a sense for the conceptual distinctions of which his discipline stood in need, were it to succeed in dissolving the ambiguities within the concept of individualization, was Georg Simmel. Like no other author of the generation of sociology's founding fathers,

he was aware of the difference in principle between the mere fact of an increase in the number of personal qualities, in other words, the fact of a pluralization of life-styles made possible by the modern money economy, on the one hand, and the strengthening of individual autonomy, on the other; if the growing anonymity of social relationships in the metropolis may also lead to a dissolution of group affiliations and thus to a diversification of individuals' possibilities of choice, this was still far from indicating in his eyes that individual freedom was developing apace, for the latter required the safety-sustaining support of other individuals (Simmel, 1900). But Simmel was not only alert early on to the necessity of differentiating between social individualization and the growth of individual freedom, were sociology to measure up to the task of providing a diagnosis of modern capitalism; rather, he actually bestowed upon sociology still further complications in the concept of individualization, for in providing sociological diagnoses of his age he exposed two further layers of meaning. On the one hand, for Simmel the processes whereby a pluralization of individuals' possibilities of choice was brought about, processes which sociology first had to describe, were always also bound up with the danger of an impoverishment of social contact and of the deepening of people's mutual indifference, as the analyses of *The Philosophy of Money* make clear; hence one always has to distinguish a third dimension of meaning in the concept of individualization, one related to the tendency of individuals to become ever more lonely as the network of anonymous social contacts expands. This particular development, too, Simmel at first thought could be described only from the viewpoint of an observer; he did not have in mind a process of increasing loneliness, of isolation felt or suffered, but rather the objective fact of a stronger and stronger concentration on one's own interests alone, independently of other people.

Above all, however, in the very notion that a heightening of individual freedom was taking place Simmel perceived two distinct dimensions of meaning, which led him to make a further differentiation in the concept of individualization (Simmel, 1983). As his point of departure he put forward a distinction among the possible goals of individualization in its second aspect, namely, an increasing autonomy: at some earlier point in history, in his view of the regions of Latin civilization, the telos of the formation of inner freedom had been understood to be the autonomous articulation of beliefs and aims that all human beings in principle could share; what was at issue was an individualism of equality, for at stake was how to enable individuals to exercise their powers of reflection, which, it was assumed, constitutes a quality of the human species as such. To this notion of autonomy, as we would perhaps say today, there is opposed a second kind of individualism that has its roots, in terms of intellectual history, in German Romanticism: here the goal of the strengthening of individual freedom is understood to be precisely the elaboration in the course of a life-history of those singular and irreplaceable qualities by which individuals are distinguished; in this respect one has to speak of a 'qualitative' individualism which, following Herder, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, aims wholly at articulating the authentic personality of the individual. Hence the heightening of individual

freedom, for Simmel, runs in two directions, the increase of autonomy and the creation of authenticity, and between them there exist a number of tensions that cannot easily be rectified in modernity. If we summarize his sociological investigations, it does seem that Simmel distinguishes just four phenomena that may be designated by the single concept of individualization: alongside the individualization of people's biographies, which appears to be an empirically observable fact, it may refer to the growing isolation of individual actors, as well as to either an increase in individuals' powers of reflection or to their developing autonomy. The difficulty consists in separating these four phenomena in the sociological diagnosis of the present consistently, so that the relations among them may be brought to light to begin with.

It may well have been this extreme diversity of meaning which has brought it about, in the past hundred years, that the discovery of an 'individualization' taking place in modern societies has been interpreted in some very different ways. In his theoretical-historical overview of this hidden debate, Markus Schroer (2001) instructively distinguishes three currents, in each of which the phenomenon of an increase in individuality is assessed quite differently: at one end, the growing allotment of 'individuality' by means of education, administration, and the culture industry has been described as an advance in discipline, from which emerged a distinctive form of conformist individualism that actually paralyses the individual's conscious powers of resistance; at the other end, following Durkheim and Talcott Parsons, there is found the view that interprets the neutralization of tradition and the diversification of social functions as embodying the possibility that individuality may increase, so that individuals' capacities for planning their own lives in a conscious and responsible manner might be unleashed; and situated between these two extremes one encounters, finally, a third school of thought in which the process of individualization is seen as a two-sided event, bringing about at one and the same time an obvious emancipation of the individual from traditional ties yet also, in the background, a deepening of conformism. If we turn now to the present, the picture, already quite confusing, becomes still more complicated: the three ways of interpreting these phenomena distinguished by Schroer are joined by new points of view that illuminate either the sharpening of particular tendencies or an utterly transformed set of social structures. Thus, to list only some keywords, sociology, following the lead of communitarianism, has shown more attentiveness to the dimension of individualization that Simmel had earlier described as representing a growing indifference: in sociology's view, individuals, abandoning their old relationships at an ever faster rate on account of their increased mobility and greater readiness to change professions, do not seem particularly capable of forming new ties and therefore tend even more strongly to develop purely egocentric attitudes with respect to those with whom they interact (Putnam, 2000). Also pointing in this direction are inquiries that analyse the cultural consequences of the fact that social communication increasingly takes place in virtual reality (Dreyfus, 2001; Wittel, 2001), while another of Simmel's themes is touched upon by Charles Taylor's diagnostic observations of the past several years: in his eyes, the Romantic ideal

of authenticity has been trivialized in the present to such an extent that its dia-logical and communicative aspects are lost without anyone noticing, thereby vacating the field for the purely solipsistic aim of self-discovery (Taylor, 1992). Finally, there remain to be considered the empirical studies calling attention to the expectations raised by institutional arrangements, on account of which the creation of biographical originality has become something required of individuals themselves: more and more the presentation of an 'authentic self' is one of the demands placed upon individuals, above all in the sphere of skilled labour, so that it is frequently no longer possible at all to distinguish between a real and a fictitious self-discovery, even for the individuals concerned (Baethge, 1991; Kocyba, 2000).

The enumeration of new phenomena falling under the nebulous rubric of individualization could surely be expanded by several further observations; it is above all social psychology and the sociology of the media which have recently provided analyses that can offer additional points of view on the spectrum of processes involved in the increasing loneliness and autonomy of individuals to which Simmel drew our attention. But even this brief preliminary overview suffices to emphasize the full extent of the difficulties currently faced by any study of the process of individualization: there are simply too many social phenomena, too many radical changes occurring in the present, concerning this or that dimen-sion of individualization for us to be able to speak so readily of a pattern of developments, of which the tendency is already clearly apparent. If in what follows, in using the concept of paradox, I refer nonetheless to such a course of social development, I do so only with the methodological reservation that here one possible interpretation among many others of equal legitimacy is being presented. The position I should like to defend is that the claims to individual self-realization which have rapidly multiplied, beginning with the historically unique concatenation of entirely disparate processes of individualization in the Western societies of thirty or forty years ago, have so definitely become a feature of the institutionalized expectations inherent in social reproduction that the particular goals of such claims are lost and they are transmuted into a support of the system's legitimacy. The result of this paradoxical reversal, where the processes which once promised an increase of qualitative freedom are henceforth altered into an ideology of de-institutionalization, is the emergence in individuals of a number of symptoms of inner emptiness, of feeling oneself to be superfluous, and of absence of purpose. In justifying this thesis I should like to proceed in three steps. I shall, in the next section, attempt to portray the amalgamation of various processes of individualization during the 1960s and 1970s in the devel-oped countries of the West, processes lacking a common origin and unfolding in different ways and yet which were all drawn together by an elective affinity, with the result that one may speak in the singular of a new form of individualism. Then, in the third section of this article, I will recount the social processes by which these claims raised by individuals brought about changes in the functioning of institutions and organizations and were added to the list of the latter's expectations, over the following decades, so that individuals were

confronted with them as though they were demands issuing from without; in doing so, as in the previous section, I shall have to limit myself to only a few essential tendencies of this development. Finally, in the last section I shall enumerate the social-psychological and clinical indicators which currently suggest that the paradoxical reversal of the process of individualization threatens to lead to a number of new kinds of social suffering, both mental and material; and this summary view will permit me to close with a surprisingly relevant quotation from Simmel.

Socio-Cultural Change and New Forms of Individualism

From a distance of nearly forty years, it is entirely possible today to describe the social and cultural changes in post-war Western societies as having been a process in which diverse and divergent individualizing tendencies became intertwined; and so it would not be entirely wrong to speak with Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens of a new, late-modern stage of conscious individualism (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1991: Ch. 3). Granted, in making or evaluating such a diagnosis one does need to be clearly aware of the fact that in viewing this currently prevalent form of individualism what is at issue is not the result of a single process that follows as it were an ascending line, but rather the consequence of the reciprocal reinforcement of entirely diverse dynamics of social development; what has been taking place here may be best described, with Max Weber, as the confluence of material, social, and intellectual processes of change which have so many traits in common, in the manner of an elective affinity, as to have been able collectively to create a new kind of individualism (Weber [1904–5] 1976: 97). The material foundations of this impetus to individualism derive from a set of socio-structural processes of development which, operating in conjunction, have diversified the ways of life open to individuals, and this new diversity may be outlined purely descriptively: the extreme growth of income and leisure time was able gradually to extend the space available for individual decision and, on the other hand, to reduce the formative influence of the social milieux particular to the different classes; with the expansion of the service sector in Western capitalist countries the chances of career advancement were multiplied for substantial portions of the population to such an extent that a far-reaching process of upward social mobility could commence, by which individuals' lives grew ever more diverse; and with the increased educational opportunities that were provided throughout the West around fifteen years after the end of the Second World War, finally, the possibilities of vocational choice were extended so rapidly that in this respect as well the lives of individuals began to diverge significantly; thus, already during the years of student unrest the population had a far more pluralistic and variegated profile, as concerned individual development and ways of life, than had been the case even ten years before.

To these objective tendencies of an increase in the range of options for individuals, one may add indicators that provide at least some grounds for thinking

that the capacity of individuals for autonomy, a capacity which ultimately can only be understood as being a performative one, also grew during the same period of time; after all, it would have been astonishing if the multiplication of educational options had not been paired with a considerable expansion of the options for individual self-discovery and self-reflection (Habermas [1981] 1987: 386–8). The dissolution of class-specific networks of career contacts, begun likewise by the educational reforms but also by the renovation of urban areas, may have played a part in bringing it about that for the individual the horizon of conceivable paths of life was widened and the space for experimentation radically enlarged; by pointing to the tendency that the crises of adolescence were becoming more pronounced, empirical inquiries undertaken at the beginning of the 1970s, too, indicated that the potential for an autonomous discovery of one's identity was increasing in general (Döbert and Nunner-Winkler, 1975). Whatever the actual structure of the social causes may have been, it seems indisputable that within the space of only two decades a marked individualization of ways of life took place: members of Western societies were compelled, urged, or encouraged, for the sake of their own future, to place their very selves at the centre of their own life-planning and practice.

But all these socio-structural processes of change would not have sufficed to lead to a truly new form of individualism, had they not been joined by yet other changes, of a more socio-cultural kind, and by transformations in individual attitudes as well. While it can be said that without the objective expansion of the options for action available to individuals, these new cultural ideals would have stood no chance of being accepted, the roots of the latter lay nonetheless in entirely distinct regions. Thus it was the higher income brought about by the economic growth of the post-war period that first made widespread consumption of luxury articles possible; yet the specific meaning given, to a lesser or greater degree, to such consumption by the individual first becomes explicable in relation to factors of a different kind, that is, cultural ones: the need to seek an intensification of one's own feeling of being alive in the consumption of cultural products that are not necessary for life but rather superfluous, namely, derives, according to Colin Campbell, from religious undercurrents, mainly Protestant in origin, in which, in contrast to the Calvinist work ethic, an uncommon state of emotional excitement was taken to be a sign of God's goodness and grace; once this pleasure's religious roots in an imaginary stimulation had been extinguished, after the sentimentality of the late eighteenth century and the Romanticism that then followed, it could become the normative incentive for a massive investment in intensity-enhancing consumer goods, an investment which lent the now quite ordinary consumerism of the post-war period its particular character of buttressing the identity of individuals (Campbell, 1987). What holds for consumerism in particular, however, also seems to apply to a number of other changes in behaviour during the same span of time: almost everywhere, the removal of rigid expectations concerning individual conduct did not simply lead to the creation of a new ideal of personality, but rather merely multiplied on a wide scale the probability that individuals would appropriate cultural traditions previously reserved

for the few, which then in consequence compelled their identities to undergo substantial alteration. The socio-structural processes of change which more and more were setting individuals at the centre of their own life-planning, enabled the broad acceptance of modes of interpretation, originating mainly in Romanticism and handed down by small sect-like groups, which permitted one to regard life as though it were an affair of experimental self-realization.

A good example of this elective affinity and linkage between social change and cultural transformation is provided by the alteration in behaviour we in retrospect often call the 'sexual revolution' (see the exemplary overview in Sigusch, 2001). It is certainly not as though the dissolution of conventional role-patterns, as became a possibility following the diversification of ways of life in the course of the 1960s, would of its own accord have suggested granting a greater importance to sexuality as forming a privileged field for trying out one's individuality; rather, the broad acceptance of a cultural ideal in which the human being had already, albeit on a minor scale, been defined as a 'desiring subject' (Michel Foucault), was required before there could be devised a style of conduct in which long-term promiscuous experimentation was experienced as expressing an individual's self-realization – in this dissemination of a traditional mode of interpretation, moreover, the popular reception both of certain novels, such as those of Hermann Hesse or Henry Miller, and of the rock music that was just then emerging may well have played a decisive intermediary role. The normative gaps opened up, as it were, through the newly developed freedoms socio-structural factors had made possible, were closed almost everywhere by individuals' acceptance in their daily lives of pieces of a quasi-Romantic tradition, which allowed one's own biography to be perceived as a tentative process of actualizing the core of one's unique personality. Thus there arose from the confluence of socio-structural individualization and Romanticism's ideal of authenticity something which may be described as the durable form taken by a new individualism: even more quickly on account of the diversification of social relationships, more and more individuals were no longer willing to understand their own lives as comprising a linear process of the development of an identity at the end of which would stand the demands of a profession and a division of labour by gender in the family; by virtue of the opening-up of new options for action, participation in various social milieux, more frequent contact with previously strange life-styles, and the acceptance of modes of interpretation derived from Romanticism, what took the place of this relatively fixed map of personal identity (which Parsons had still made the basis of his theory, as though the matter were self-evident) was the tendency to think of the various possibilities for personal identity as being the stuff of experimental self-discovery. In Simmel's terms, it was the appearance on a large-scale of individualization of a 'qualitative' kind: individuals were trying out various ways of life in order to be able, in light of these experiences, to actualize the core of their own personalities, which is what most clearly distinguished them from everyone else. Now, however, if this process of change, then only just begun, is to continue, it will require the key institutions of society to adapt themselves creatively to the new ideal of conduct, in order to transform the latter, as

an efficacy-enhancing outline of what life ought to be, into a reason for the legitimacy of carrying out far-reaching restructuring.

Self-Realization and Institutional Demands

From the socio-cultural process of change I have just been describing as being the result of a confluence of material and intellectual developments, Daniel Bell, around twenty-five years ago, drew sweeping conclusions regarding a growing contradiction within capitalism (Bell, 1976). He was basing himself essentially on the deep cultural changes occurring in the aftermath of the student movement when he claimed that a new and hedonistic everyday morality had arisen which would inevitably enter more and more into conflict with capitalism's functional requirements: the values of aesthetic creativity and sensuous impulsiveness, which he believed had spread in the meantime from the subcultures of the artistic avant-gardes and penetrated into the attitudes of a large part of the population, represented an ever greater hindrance to the creation of the virtues proper to a work-ethic, which continue to be necessary for the maintenance of economic efficiency. Now, from the vantage point of the present it is safe to say that this sociological prognosis has not been borne out; the new 'qualitative' individualism, which may easily be discerned in Bell's portrait of the hedonistic character-type, does not detract from the productivity of capitalist economic enterprise. It is true that increased demands for self-realization, as well as the experimental attitude with regard to one's own identity, inspired by self-discovery, have meanwhile left their mark on the social statistics documenting higher divorce rates, decline in the birth rate, and changes in family structure (cf. Lüscher et al., 1990; Tyrell, 1990); and primary bonds, in Anthony Giddens's view, are becoming increasingly fragile and of shorter duration, as they assume ever more strongly the character of 'pure' relationships in which the reciprocal tie is still sustained only by the fleeting material of one's own feelings and inclinations (Giddens, 1991: Ch. 3). Increasingly prevalent is also the tendency of expending a great deal of mental energy on so-called leisure activities, which, however, are no longer experienced as bringing recuperation or release from the working day's demands, but are instead seen to comprise the experimental attempt to define the dimensions of one's own self (cf., for instance, MacCannell, 1973). Finally, the consumption of luxury goods, which, as one knows, varies by social class, has considerably increased yet again during the past couple of decades, because many people seem to find in it the possibility of profiling their individual identities in an aesthetic fashion, at least for a short period of time (Illouz, 1997). But all these tendencies, which without doubt point in the direction of an 'individualism of irreplaceability' (Simmel), do not in any way conflict with the functional requirements of the capitalist economy; on the contrary, one cannot entirely avoid the impression that such tendencies have in the meantime become a productive force, albeit a peculiarly misused one, in capitalism's modernization.

The processes of change that come to mind at this juncture, too, cannot be understood as flowing from a single tendency of development; and the idea that here at issue are chains of actions linked together intentionally, in other words, patterns of deliberate actions and reactions, seems likewise to miss the point of the matter. Rather, the image of processes of change that relate to one another in the manner of an elective affinity may here be recommended once more, when what needs to be explained is why the claim to self-realization was increasingly made into an institutional demand in the course of the last third of the twentieth century: at first hesitantly and subsequently on a massive scale, individuals were confronted with the expectation that they present themselves as being 'flexible' (to cite the contemporary jargon) and willing to develop themselves if they wished to achieve success in their profession or in society (Sennett, 1998; Neckel, 2000). A preparatory role in this reversal was surely played by the electronic media, whose increasing significance in everyday life ensures, much more strongly than previously, that the ideal of a style of life, namely, an outline for one's own life that would be as creative and original as possible, is constantly upheld; thus, even if individuals may be permitted to continue to regard the particular life-styles propagated by the media with a suitable amount of a scepticism that itself has become routine, as Adorno already suspected (Adorno, 1969), it might still be the case that the ideal of self-realization is experienced along these lines, subliminally, as posing demands upon the manner in which one's own subjectivity is to be formed (Thompson, 1996: Ch. 7). The boundary between reality and fiction may well become blurred in particular instances, so that one tends, though without ever being aware of it, to seek out one's own self in the very spot that one suspects one's television or film idol would be encountered; hence, in sum we might perhaps speak of a certain tendency where individuals follow standardized patterns of searching for an identity precisely in order, however, to discover the core of their own personalities in a way that actually is experimental in nature.

A comparable effect has probably been exercised by the strategies developed in the past two decades by the advertising industry to ensure a faster turnover of consumer goods; here one may notice the tendency to advertise particular goods by means of the subliminal promise that by buying them consumers will acquire an aesthetic resource for both the presentation and the heightening of the originality of their own chosen life-styles (Shields, 1992). The instrumentalizing of individuals' demands for self-realization, which is what is at issue in this case, has led to the emergence of a self-propelling spiral of stylistic innovations and the responses to them, as every new self-image is quickly made into the coded content of the next advertising strategy; in the meantime one might even have the impression that this causal relation has been reversed, as the fashion and advertising industries appear to be able, for their part, to propagate images of an authentic life that are felt to be worthy of imitation and by which individuals retroactively orientate themselves in their self-discovery. The effort of self-realization throughout the course of one's own life begins, as it were under the surface, to be structured by the cultural goods offered up to individuals by

the advertising industry, with its calculated feeling for the variations of age, class, and gender.

Granted, more important than these effects of the media, of which the actual influence in society, moreover, remains debatable, is doubtless the restructuring to which the industrial and service sectors of the economy were subject during the 1980s. What took place during that period has been described economically as having been a phase in the elimination of Fordist processes of production; for our purposes, however, what is decisive is that with this development there came a completely new interpellation of individual workers, who no longer were addressed institutionally as employees but rather as creative entrepreneurs or as self-employed persons (Voß and Pongratz, 1998). If quite early on there was talk of a 'normative subjectification of labour' (Baethge, 1991), if a heightened value attached to individuals' achievements at work is currently being discussed (Kocyba, 2000), what is meant by this, first of all, is that, in the organization of industry and the service sector, the intellectual initiative of individual employees is called upon to an increasing degree; by means of new conceptions of management which embrace the autonomy of the team and its authorization to make its own decisions as well as the levelling out of hierarchies, businesses will meet the need for self-realization claimed by workers who seek the chance to utilize their skills autonomously in a variety of activities. But it very soon becomes clear that the new post-Taylorist strategies of business enterprise are having the quite different effect of comprehending labour more and more as a 'calling', so as to present employees with a set of entirely changed expectations: workers' motivations have to match whatever their job may require, they must be ready and willing to present every change of position at work as flowing from their own choice, and their involvement is to benefit the business as a whole. Thus, over the course of only two decades, there has arisen a new set of demands that allows employment to depend upon a convincing self-presentation on the part of the employees of their will to realize themselves in their work; and this reversal creates in turn the space for legitimizing economic deregulation, by pointing out how obsolescent the system of fixed job descriptions is in view of the greater readiness of individual employees to assume responsibility for themselves. The pressure with which employees and workers are thus burdened takes on an extremely paradoxical form: for the sake of their future employment prospects, they have to arrange their biographies in a fictive manner, in accord with the model of self-realization, although for the most part it is only the desire for social and economic security that is still permissible as a motivation (Behrens, 1984; Sennett, 1998).

It would probably not be entirely wrong to discern, in these sorts of processes, the tendency whereby the mounting claims to self-realization are transformed into a productive force in the capitalist economy. The inclination of individuals to think to an ever greater degree of their lives as comprising the experimental exploration of their own identities, does not merely provide legitimacy for a series of restructuring moves in the economy which aim collectively at deregulating industry and the service sector (Castel, 1995); rather, the new individualism is also being used today as a productive factor directly, in the sense that by calling

upon their apparently changed needs, more is now required of workers, in terms of involvement, flexibility, and individual initiative, than has been the case under the conditions of the regulated capitalism of the welfare state. However, to me it does seem misleading to take this trend of utilizing individual inclination and drive economically to represent a deliberate strategy with which a sensible management has slyly responded to the 'hedonistic' criticisms of capitalism advanced during the 1960s; the 'new spirit of capitalism' that Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have investigated in their fascinating study of the same name (1999) seems much more to be the unintended result of a chain of various processes, of which each possesses its own history and inner dynamic. If to the structural transformations in the electronic media, the advertising industry, and business enterprise which have already been mentioned we go on to add the fact that there has been an increase in the diffuse everyday expectations concerning individual self-realization, we shall arrive at the very inference with which Boltanski and Chiapello, too, conclude their inquiry: that the individualism of self-realization, gradually emergent over the course of the past fifty years, has since been transmuted – having become an instrument of economic development, spreading standardization and making lives into fiction – into an emotionally fossilized set of demands under whose consequences individuals today seem more likely to suffer than to prosper.

Pathologies of Individualism Today

With the institutional transformations Western capitalism has undergone in the past twenty years, the ideal of a self-realization pursued throughout the course of a life has developed into an ideology and productive force of an economic system that is being deregulated: the expectations individuals had formed before they began to interpret their own lives as being an experimental process of self-discovery now recoil on them as demands issuing from without, so that they are explicitly or implicitly urged to keep their options regarding their own decisions and goals open at all times. This process of ideals being inverted into compulsions and expectations into demands has engendered forms of social discontent and suffering which Western societies throughout their history have not previously known on a massive scale. To be sure, this does not hold for the manifestations of everyday unhappiness that Pierre Bourdieu and his collaborators have attempted to comprehend in the book *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu et al., 1997): wherever deregulation and unemployment create a growing class of permanently superfluous people, wherever multinational corporations, unburdened by any political constraint, are on the lookout for newer ways of subcontracting production, wherever economic refugees from the poor parts of the world pour into the big cities of the West in search of occasional work, there one witnesses a resurgence of the same forms of unprotected labour – indentured labour, piece-work, working at home – that were common in the very infancy of capitalist industrialization (Castel, 1995). The increasing emphasis on flexibility

in the labour market and indeed the creeping metamorphosis of the whole society into a market, which has been justified, albeit tenuously, by appealing to the new individualism, confront us once again with the 'social question' that had been assumed, during the second half of the twentieth century, to belong among the safely neutralized remnants of the nineteenth.

But beneath this threshold of visibility, within the last few decades other forms of social suffering have become prevalent that are in a certain way without precedent in the history of capitalist societies: they are a great deal less accessible to empirical observation as they transpire in the realm of mental illness and to recognize them there exist only clinical indications. The French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg, in an impressive study bearing the title *La Fatigue d'être soi* (Ehrenberg, 1998), arrived at the conclusion, after having sorted through the clinical evidence, that we are currently faced with a rapid rise in the frequency of depression; not merely a growing number of therapeutic findings but also the unprecedented sales of pharmaceutical anti-depressants show that, to a horrifying degree, full-blown depression is displacing the symptoms of neurosis. As a key to explain how this kind of illness has become a mass phenomenon Ehrenberg makes use of the idea that individuals have as it were been psychically overburdened by the diffuse but widespread demand that they must be themselves; the permanent compulsion to draw the material for an authentic self-realization from their own inner lives requires of individuals an ongoing form of introspection which must sooner or later leave them feeling empty; and the point at which inner experience no longer marks out the path for one's own life, even given a strong resolution that it do so, signals in Ehrenberg's view the moment when a depression begins (for conditions in Germany, see Frommer et al., 1999). It may well be the case that with the ideal of self-realization's inversion into an external compulsion we have reached the historical threshold where the awareness of this inner emptiness has become the experience of a growing portion of the population: urged from all sides to show that they are open to authentic self-discovery and its impulses, there remains for individuals only the alternative of simulating authenticity or of fleeing into a full-blown depression, of staging personal originality for strategic reasons or of pathologically shutting down.[1] Considering the perspicuity with which Georg Simmel observed the social and cultural transformations of his times, it comes as no surprise that in his *Philosophy of Money* one already finds a presentiment of this situation. Of the ideal of self-realization he there remarks:

> It is true he [namely, the peasant at the end of the Middle Ages] gained freedom, but only freedom *from* something, not liberty *to do* something. Apparently, he gained freedom to do anything – because it was purely negative – but in fact he was without any directive, without any definite and determining content. Such freedom favours that emptiness and instability that allows one to give full rein to every accidental, whimsical and tempting impulse. Such freedom may be compared with the fate of the insecure person who has forsworn his Gods and whose newly acquired 'freedom' only provides the opportunity for making an idol out of any fleeting value. (Simmel, 1900: 402)

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Note

1 Andreas Kuhlmann has pointed out to me that here a stronger distinction ought to be made between depression in the narrow clinical sense and in the broader metaphorical sense of suffering from one's own inner emptiness: whereas a person who is actually depressed seems to lose all interest in his or her own life and surroundings and acts as though he or she were paralysed, a person suffering from inner emptiness, in contrast, may well frequently still remain attached to hectic and enervating activities, by way of compensation. For a further treatment of the subject, which has only been outlined here, this distinction would be of the greatest importance.

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