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Published in the Social Science Encyclopedia (Routledge, 2nd edn., 1995)

INDIVIDUALISM

'Individualism' is a modern word. Its first recorded use is in 1840 when it was used in the English translation of de Tocqueville's **Democracy in America**. In a later work Tocqueville (1856) noted that 'Our ancestors had not got the word 'Individualism' - a word which we have coined for our own use, because in fact in their time there was no individual who did not belong to a group, no one who could look on himself as absolutely alone...' In modern societies, such as America, 'Men being no longer attached to one another by any tie of caste, of class, of corporation, of family, are only too much inclined to be preoccupied only with their private interests...to retire into a narrow individualism'.

The contrast between societies based on the group and the individual was part of the nineteenth century attempt to understand the massive changes brought about in the wake of the French and industrial revolutions. All the founding fathers of the modern social sciences, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Tonnies, Simmel and others reflected on the new relations between the individual and the group. For example, Maine (1861) noted that the '**unit** of an ancient society was the Family, of a modern society the individual'. It was generally agreed that the separation of the spheres of life, economics from society, religion from politics and so on had both given the individual more liberty, in Mill's sense, but also destroyed both meaning and warmth.

Thus individualism came to be seen as the essential feature of 'modernity'. Bell (1976) wrote that the 'fundamental assumption of modernity...is that the social unit of society is not the group, the guild, the tribe or the city, but the person.' The belief in the primacy of the individual was not only powerful, but peculiar. Dumont (1977) argued that 'among the great civilizations the world has known, the holistic type of society has been overwhelmingly predominant. Indeed it looks as if it had been the rule, the only exception being our modern civilization and its individualistic type of society.' The heart of the matter is summarized by Gellner (1988): 'a society emerged in which single individuals could apparently carry the entire culture within themselves, unaided...'

These views need to be qualified in various ways. Firstly, it is clear that all human societies have the concept of the separate 'person'. As Mauss wrote, '..it is plain...that there has never existed a human being who has not been aware, not only of his body, but also at the same time of his individuality, both spiritual and physical.' (quoted in Carrithers 1985) Furthermore, anthropologists have noted that many of the features of 'individualism' are to be found in societies ranging from the simplest hunting-gathering societies to the most complex civilizations, such as Japan over the last thousand years. An over-stark contrast between the 'West' and the 'Rest' is not justified.

It is also clear that the 'water-shed' theory of individualism is too simple. Although it is usually conceded that there was a long individualistic tradition in western civilization, somehow linked to

Christianity, it is often assumed that the eighteenth century, with the rise of market capitalism, saw a new order of things. Yet whether we look at the property system of Anglo-Saxon England where Maitland (1921) found a system compatible with 'the most absolute individualism' of ownership, or the medieval philosophy of Ockham and his successors, or, many centuries earlier, the extreme individualism of much Greek philosophy, it is clear that there is no clear 'progressive' story. Again, too simple a dichotomy between the 'Past' and the 'Present' is not warranted.

This makes the future much less easy to predict. Some believe that the trend is towards heightened individualism and egotism. The greater division of labour and the penetration of market values, the spread of political concepts of equality and innate human rights will lead to increased 'individualism' as de Tocqueville predicted. Others argue that we are now moving towards a 'global village' where, in Donne's words, 'no man is an island'. We will be electronically, if not organically, returned to a holistic society. Some recent writers, for instance Foucault, Derrida and Lacan have questioned the very notion of an independently constituted 'individual'. Recent developments in medical technology, in particular organ transplants and reproductive technology, have indeed made the boundaries between 'individuals' much less precise than they once were. The future of 'individualism' is as contested as its meaning and value.

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