

Some Psychological Consequences of English Individualism, 1400-1700

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It is self-evident that our view of psychological phenomena is heavily influenced by our assumptions about the political, social, economic and religious structure of a society. The general outline of the changes in the nature of English society between 1400-1700 appear to be well established. Based on the work of Marx, Weber and others in the nineteenth century, historians such as Tawney, Hill, Power and

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others have documented a massive transition. There was the invention of private, absolute, property and the destruction of 'group' ownership; the destruction of the household as the basic unit of production and consumption; the growth of a money economy out of a largely subsistence one; the rise of permanent wage - labourers; the growth of a profit motive and the unending accumulative drive; the rise of modern industries and large towns; the elimination of 'magical' and 'irrational' forces which prevented economic accumulation; the withering away of wider kinship groups and the emergence of the nuclear family system; the destruction of small, closely-meshed, communities with the growth of geographical and social mobility. England changed from a society where the individual was subordinated to the group (to the household, family, village, religious congregation, estate) to the situation depicted by Hobbes in the seventeenth -century where society was composed of autonomous individuals.

Such a rapid and massive change from one social, economic and political system could reasonably be expected to have repercussions in mentality and emotions. A number of writers, such as Ariès, Hunt, de Mause, Stone, and Shorter, have documented this change. We may take Professor Stone's very recently published account as an example since it is not only massive, but the author, Dodge Professor at Princeton, is an acknowledged expert on social and economic predictions. The central theme of his book is the growth of 'affective individualism'. This means that from the eighteenth-century people began to love and care for each other in a way impossible before. This growth of emotion and the recognition of the individual personality was 'perhaps the most important change in *mentalité* to have occurred in the Early Modern Period, indeed possibly in the last thousand years of Western history' (p. 4). Medieval society was constituted of groups and not individuals and hence interpersonal relations were cold and formal and this continued into the later period: 'the violence of everyday life seems to have been accompanied by much mutual suspicion and a low general level of emotional interaction and commitment. Alienation and distrust of one's fellow men are the predominant features of the Elizabethan and early Stuart view of human character and conduct'. (p. 95) Since children and wives died so often, people did not dare to become emotionally involved with them; the consequent neglect led to further high mortality. Parents were brutal as was society: 'the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were for England the great flogging age: every town and every village had its whipping-post, which was in constant use as a means of preserving order' (pp. 170-1). Gradually, with temporary reversions, things improved until by the end of the eighteenth century marriages began to be based on the newly learnt emotion, romantic love, and people cared for, and felt grief for, their children. Thus there is a picture of the growth of privacy, emotion, cleanliness, sensibility, which paralleled economic growth and political sophistication. Society had

progressed from something very brutal and almost 'tribal' in the later middle ages to the small, closely-tied, system of nuclear

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families based on affection which characterized modern Anglo-Saxon cultures. It is, superficially, a very plausible story, fitting exactly with what we would have expected. Unfortunately, anyone who looks carefully at the diaries, autobiographies, personal papers, ecclesiastical and other court records, and village sources for the period from 1400-1700 will find that Stone's general picture does not seem to fit the evidence at all well.

We may briefly summarize a few criticisms which have been documented elsewhere. Stone is forced to dismiss almost all the massive creative literature from Chaucer to the end of the seventeenth century as a 'fantasy' unrelated to popular emotion, since it does not fit his case. He makes no use of the detailed local and other records which would have shown that his picture of Elizabethan life is a travesty. His use of autobiographical material is very selective: for instance his theories concerning the lack of grief at children's deaths does not fit the evidence from many diaries. He gives practically no evidence, either primary or secondary, to support his view of the period up to 1500. Much of his argument is based on work done in France, but he himself frequently notes that France and England are very different in certain respects. His use of anthropological analogies undocumented. One could continue, but all that we need to establish is that there is a *prima facie* case for having very serious reservations about the work. What appears to have happened is that Stone, soundly basing his book on the current general view of the nature of social and economic change in England, has found what ought to have been the consequences in the psychological sphere. The fact that the book is such a disaster and that he has only managed to prove his case by a massive manipulation of sources suggests that we ought to re-look at the underlying model of change.

We may attempt to think the unthinkable. Suppose that, in relation to England, Marx and Weber were wrong, and consequently most of the edifice which has been built up, with a few modifications, on top of their work is also defective. Suppose that those self-evident and obvious shifts in basic economic and social structure between 1400-1700 did not occur at all, that they are an optical illusion created largely by the survival of documents and the use of misleading analogies with other societies. Suppose that England in 1400 could be described as follows. Private, absolute, property was fully developed; the household was not the basic unit of society but rather the individual; the money economy was fully developed; wage-labour was already widely established; the drive towards accumulation and profit was already predominant; the 'irrational' barriers towards isolating the economic sphere were already dismantled; there were no wider kinship groups so that the individual was not subordinated to larger family groupings; natural 'communities', if they had ever existed, were gone; people were geographically and socially mobile; individuals were not subordinated by law or custom to entities (the family, village, neighbourhood, congregation etc.) larger than themselves. If this were the case, and it is broadly the

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view I take in a forthcoming book on the subject, what would the consequences be for speculations concerning the massive emotional and psychological transition that was believed to have occurred between 1400-1700? It would clearly disappear. We would expect to find loving parents and cruel parents, rigid upbringing and relaxed upbringing, deep attachments between husbands and wives and frail attachments, running side by side from the very start. Of course there

would be variations over time in the social and legal relationships, in customs and fashions. But the idea of a massive transition from a group-based, brutal, unfeeling society, to the highly individualized modern one would not need to be documented. My reading of the evidence suggests that such a general framework fits the evidence far better and leads to far less distortions than the current consensus. It is centred on the fact that, for as yet unexplained reasons, England from the fifteenth-century was filled with individuals with highly , developed legal, economic, political and religious rights and duties. Thus England was 'individualist' in the double sense that it was apparently different from many other agrarian nations both at the time and in the modern world and that this 'individualism' of England was based on its extreme stress on the autonomy of the individual.

References and further reading

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