

Ulrich Beck ■ Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim



Individualization

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Individualization

Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences

Ulrich Beck *and*
Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim



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Foreword by Scott Lash: Individualization in a Non-Linear Mode

Ulrich Beck's Risk Society, and indeed the theory of 'reflexive modernization' is characterized by two theses: an environmental thesis or the 'risk thesis', and an 'individualization thesis'. Beck's work has, from the mid 1980s, been understood in Germany in terms of a balance of these two theses. In Anglo-Saxon sociology the risk thesis has been enormously influential. The individualization thesis, for its part, has passed virtually ignored. That is the shortcoming that this book, *Individualization*, addresses. In the original German the individualization thesis is found across a range of articles and books. English readers have better fortune. In this single volume this thesis receives the exclusive attention of Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck. This book represents the other half of Beck's work. And this half today may be the most important half.

At stake in this book is a notion of the individual and a process of 'becoming-individual' that is clearly from another space than the possessive and ego-istic individualism of Thatcher, Reagan, George W. and contemporary global free-market liberalism. Perhaps more importantly it is also a notion of the individual that is vastly different from even the ethical and altruistic individualism of the Enlightenment. Indeed Enlightenment individualism is more about 'being-individual' than becoming-individual at all. And this is because Enlightenment individualism takes place in what Beck understands as 'the first' or 'simple modernity', while the individualism at stake in this book is a phenomenon of 'the second', 'reflexive' modernity. If the first modernity comprises predominantly a logic of structures, then the second modernity, if we are to follow Manuel Castells, involves a logic of flows. Beck's notions of unintended consequences, of ever-incomplete knowledge, of not irrationality but a rationality that is forever indeterminate is comfortable in the logic of flows. Beck's chronic indeterminacy of risk and risk-taking, of living with risk is of much more a piece with not the determinacy of structure but with the partial, the elusive determinacy of flow.

So we need to ask ourselves, along with Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, what can individualization and individualism mean in an age of flows. There are two issues at stake here. One is what Durkheim saw as an anomic individualism. In the shift from one set of social arrangements to another, there is a necessary period of movement, of unsettling that is understood as anomie. Thus in the move from the traditional *Gemeinschaft* and the *ancien regime* there is a transition phase of rootlessness until the first, industrial modernity develops its own normativities and classic Enlightenment individualism becomes routinized. Thus Hegel understood the shift from the anomic excesses of the French Revolution to the institutionalized individualism of property, contract, the bourgeois family and civil society of The Philosophy

of Right. The same sort of process is at stake in the transition from industrial to the second, informational modernity. First an anomic individualism. The point for Beck is that even after the transition to reflexive modernity, the new individualism does not become routinized. It is, even in its mature phase indeterminate, full of risk and precarious freedom.

In order to come to grips with Beck's notion of individualization and individualism I do not think it is helpful to make comparisons with either Habermas or Anthony Giddens. This is because German sociology has a markedly different genealogy than its Anglo-American counterpart. In many respects both Habermas and Giddens wrote from a dissatisfaction with the structural functionalism, the linear systems theory of Talcott Parsons, and the dominance of Parsonsian sociology in the post-war decades. Both Habermas and Giddens had affinities with Marxism. Both featured a stress on the importance of agency in contrast to structure. This was the position from the late 1970s when the two theorists came to hegemonic positions in German and Anglo-Saxon sociology. Beck comes effectively from another generation. He came to a position of predominance in the 1990s in Germany. This was a decade of intellectual history that defined itself against Habermas and corporatist and Marx-influenced social democracy. Indeed Beck came to prominence among a generation for whom no longer Habermas, but Niklas Luhmann was the guiding figure. It is significant that Giddens's two most influential younger colleagues and co-workers have been John Thompson and David Held, two Habermas-influenced sociologists who have produced indeed an impressive corpus of work. Beck in contrast came to prominence against the grain of Habermas and with Luhmann. Surely in the early years of the present millennium the outbreak of dogmatic Luhmannism in Germany is something Beck feels distinctly uncomfortable with. Beck is clearly not a Luhmannianer. Yet a generation of German students have come to maturity in an ambience that is given shape to by both Beck and Luhmann, and this ambience is not characterized less by conflict than by convergence of their respective conceptual frameworks.

At stake in this, and the defining thematic of this book, is a decidedly non-linear notion of the individual and individualization. In the first modernity, the modernity of structure, society is conceived as a linear system. Talcott Parsons's social system is such a linear system. Linear systems have single points of equilibria, and only external forces can disturb this equilibrium and lead to system change. The reflexive individualization of the second modernity presumes the existence of non-linear systems. Here system dis-equilibrium and change is produced internally to the system through feedback loops. These are open systems. The point is that the feedback loop, that is the defining property of non-linear systems, passes through the individual. Individualization now is at the same time system destabilization. Complex systems do not simply reproduce. They change. The individual is the point of passage for the unintended consequences that lead to system dis-equilibrium. Beck does not use this sort of language, but this sort of non-linearity is at the heart of individualization in the second modernity. It breaks with the linear individualism – both possessive and ethical-moral – of simple modernity. Indeed it might be fair to suggest that Parsonsian systems-linearity was in many respects the other side of Habermas's linearity of agency.

By the same token Luhmann's second-modernity non-linearity of system finds its parallel in Beck's non-linear individualism.

In this sense also the individual of the first modernity is reflective while that of the second modernity is reflexive. The idea of reflective belongs to the philosophy of consciousness of the first modernity. And, to be fair, Habermas was one of the first to note this. To reflect is to somehow subsume the object under the subject of knowledge. Reflection presumes apodictic knowledge and certainty. It presumes a dualism, a scientific attitude in which the subject is in one realm, the object of knowledge in another. Beck's work from the very start has presupposed a critique of such objectivist knowledge, a critique of such dualisms, be they Cartesian or Kantian. Beck's very first book, well before *Risk Society* (1992), stemming from his doctoral work, addressed issues of knowledge and science. This work was already implicitly phenomenological, breaking with assumptions of the subsumptive (possessive) individualism of the Enlightenment and positivism. For Beck, as for phenomenology, the knowing individual was already in the world with the objects of his/her knowledge. This subject could only grasp a certain portion of the object, in connection with what Husserl called the subject's 'attitude', in Beck's case the interest-constituted attitude of the knower. Thus the objectivity of simple-modernity individualism is replaced by the intentionality of knowledge in the second modernity. This intentionality is again at centre stage in *Risk Society*, now tied up with the ecological problematique. Science and industry for all their claims to objectivity, and to being somehow objective and outside of the world, are indeed in the world with their own proper interest constituted intentionality. The problem here, although it is at the same time its saving grace, is that what is intended leads to the most extraordinary unintendedness, to side effects, to unintended consequences.

The Cartesian subject of simple modernity, of Descartes' *Metaphysical Meditations* is reflective. So is the Kantian subject of determinate judgement. Beck often describes today's non-linear individual in terms of, not the 'I think therefore I am', but instead in terms of 'I am I'. 'I think, therefore I am' has to do with reflection. 'I am I' has more to do with reflex. And Beck often indeed works from the contrast of 'reflex' with reflection. Reflexive he argues has more to do with reflex than reflection. Reflexes are indeterminate. They are immediate. They do not in any sense subsume. Reflexes cope with a world of speed and quick decision-making. The contemporary individual, Beck never tires of saying, is characterized by choice, where previous generations had no such choices. What Beck often omits to say is that this individual must choose fast, must – as in a reflex – make quick decisions. Second-modernity individuals haven't sufficient reflective distance on themselves to construct linear and narrative biographies. They must be content, as Ronald Hitzler has noted, with *Bastelbiographien*, with bricolage-biographies in Levi-Strauss's sense. The non-linear individual may wish to be reflective but has neither the time nor the space to reflect. He is a combinard. He puts together networks, constructs alliances, makes deals. He must live, is forced to live in an atmosphere of risk in which knowledge and life-changes are precarious.

So what is at stake here? The second modernity and its non-linear individualism is a result of the retreat of the classic institutions: state, class, nuclear family, ethnic

group. The roles that reproduced linear individuals and systems in the first modernity are transgressed. Yet the result is not the disappearance of the subject, or a general irrationality. The subject relating to today's fragmented institutions instead has moved from a position of reflection to one of being reflexive. Yet this subject is so constantly in motion that it makes little sense to talk about a subject-position. The subject is still with us and so is knowledge. Only knowledge itself is of uncertainty. What happens now is not non-knowledge or anti-reason. Indeed the reflexive-modern individual is better educated, more knowledgeable than ever. Instead the type of knowledge at stake changes. It is itself precarious as distinct from certain, and what that knowledge is about is also uncertain – probabilistic, at best; more likely 'possibilistic'.

Beck has written extensively about globalization, about cosmopolitanism, in the years since the publication of *Risk Society* and *Reflexive Modernization* (1994). But Individualization and the individualization thesis more generally is not about the extensivity of the global, but instead the intensivity of the individual. Cosmopolitanism is in fact as much a property of the individual as it is of the global system. Indeed cosmopolitanism itself presumes a certain movement of strategic locus both extensively and intensively away from the nation-state. A number of chapters of this book thus address the family. What happens to the family in the second and reflexive modernity? What happens is to a certain extent a generalized outsourcing. In Beck's *Risk Society* or what John Urry and I at about the same time called 'disorganised capitalism', there is a generalized outsourcing of functions, of operations. The hierarchical economic organization begins to regularly make decisions, not to 'make' but to 'buy'. A whole host of functions of the firm are outsourced in this age of vertical disintegration. The welfare state begins to outsource functions onto private and charitable sector organizations. There is it seems also an outsourcing of the family. At stake here is first an anomic disorganization but then a new normalization, which again is a normalization that institutionalizes abnormality, institutionalizes not the normal but the state of exception (as Carl Schmitt might have it). It is in a sense a routinization of Weberian charisma that winds up not as bureaucracy but instead as somewhat more regularisable charisma.

What is happening however is not just an outsourcing but also an insourcing. Anthony Giddens of course has always been well aware of this. A number of properties, functions and activities previously attributable to the nation-state, the welfare state, the hierarchical firm, the family, and the centralized trade union have been otherwise located. Some of them have been extensively displaced onto global instances, while others have been intensively displaced, onto the individual, to conscious or unconscious subjectivity: in any sense more private instances. Even the shift of activities onto small forms have been such an intensification. Today's start-ups – not so much the dot.coms, but patent-generating technology firms and copyright-generating new media firms, have very private, personal and intense characteristics. They are not so to speak paternalistic as they were in the bygone days, not the least because women now run a number of them. It has to do with the fact that so many of the employees are freelance and sub-contractors and hence eminently individualize. It has to do with the individual not

the paternalist charisma of firm leaders. These are not so to speak ‘leaders of men’, but risk takers and innovators.

So there is in our times an outsourcing of governance functions of the state, of national rights to become global rights, of accountancy organizations, of economic functions onto supra-national economic bodies, and supra-national cultural instances like the world-wide spread of biennales. There is just as much an offloading of functions onto private instances. Thus we have globalization, on the one hand, paralleled by individualization on the other – both as the constitutive features of the second modernity. In the first modernity the individual was constituted in consonance with a set of roles in a variety of institutions. Now these institutions are in crisis, and functions which were once taking place at the interface of institution and individual in the role are now taking place much more intensively and closer to the individual. What has happened is that there has been a de-normalization of roles. The individual has become, and Beck too uses this word, ‘nomadic’. There has been a move toward complexity, indeed towards ‘chaos’. But it is somehow a regularizable chaos. The ‘roles’ of the first modernity depended very much on what Kant called determinate judgement; on prescription, on determinate rules. Now the individual must be much more the rule finder himself. Determinate judgement is replaced by ‘reflective judgement’. Reflective judgement is not reflection because there is now no universal to subsume the particular. In reflective judgement the individual must find the rule. Reflective judgement is always a question of uncertainty, of risk, but it also leaves the door open much more to innovation. Thus Beck and Beck *Der ganz normale Chaos der Liebe* has appeared perhaps misleadingly in English as *The Chaos of Love* (1995). The German title translates literally as ‘The Totally Normal Chaos of Love’ and this need to be taken seriously. Love here becomes dissociated from roles and hence chaotic. Yet this chaos becomes totally normal. Becomes regularized in a fashion. Becomes even more or less predictable. Yet at the same time it remains nonetheless chaos. Chaotic love, regularizable chaotic love is non-linear love to parallel the Beck’s non-linear individualization.

This all leads to the question of institutions. Today’s debates about globalization and cosmopolitanism have led to a considerable literature on the extensive outsourcing of, in this case, sovereignty. The pursuing for example of governance as discussed by Held, of economic functions as discussed by Sassen, of rights (Homi Bhabha). But what about institutions that regulate the above mentioned insourcing of functions. What kind of institutions can regulate what Beck and Beck since the early 1980s have understood under the heading of ‘a life of one’s own’ (*Eigenes Leben*). What kind of institutions can regulate an individual whose *differentia specifica* is precisely not to be determined by the rules of institutions. What institutions can enable individuals to be reflexive in the sense of being rule-finders. At issue here is an individual that is not so much anomic as auto-nomic. And this is the 64-dollar question. Governance of second-modernity flows is always going to be a lot different than governance of first modernity structures. Perhaps at stake is a question of institutions so different that for us they are almost unrecognizable as institutions. It may make sense in this context to think in terms of two types of institutions: of institutions that proffer us two types of rules. Let

us go back to the distinction between constitutive and regulative rules. Constitutive rules are those that let us play the game, much akin to constitutional law. Without them there is no playing field. Regulative rules are more prescriptive. What kind of constitutive rules, we may ask, are consistent with a set of regulative rules that do not regulate? What type of constitutive rule is consistent with a set of rule-finding, as distinct from rule-determining, activities? Perhaps new second modernity institutions must be comprised primarily of not regulative, but constitutive, rules. And in this sense they may not be recognizable to us as institutions.

It has become commonplace to say that in the global information age, in the second modernity, that power and inequality operate less through exploitation than exclusion. Beck is very cognisant of this with his notion of 'Brazilianization'. The point I am trying to make here is that exploitation takes place through regulative rules while exclusion take place through constitutive rules. This is consistent with Hardt and Negri's argument in *Empire* that the transition from one mode of production to another is governed less by class struggle than by 'lines of flight'. Here the subordinate class escapes literally as flight, flow, or flux away from the dominant class and its institutions. So perhaps the key institutions at stake in the second modernity are those that govern exclusion. And here is where I have my strongest quibble with Beck's work. I think that a great number of these characteristically second-modernity institutions, if that is the word for them, are now not solely social, but socio-technical. Now this is completely consistent with the technologization of science thesis that has been so prominent in Beck's work. Pivotal for me among the socio-technical (constitutive more than regulatory) institutions that govern contemporary power relations are platforms, operating systems, communications protocols, standards, intellectual property and the like. There is a certain awareness of such socio-technical institutions also in Elisabeth Beck's work on genetic databases in this book. But I do not think that the technological dimension is sufficiently taken on by the Becks. Nor the dimension and extent to which social relations are mediated through the (now interactive) mass and non-mass media of communications. Individualization, the Becks in this book argue, is a question of 'place-polygamy'. My point is that such place-polygamy is always necessarily technologically mediated, by cheaper air flights, by mobile phones, by microprocessors in various smart boxes, by protocols and channels enabling communication at a distance between individuals.

This brings me back to the centrality of non-linearity in Beck's notion of the individual. The first modernity was linear, the second non-linear. The first modernity a question of determinate judgement and rule following, the second a matter of rule finding and reflective judgement. There is as I argued above a very loose and implicit notion of complex (open in both senses) and non-linear systems in Beck's work. But these are always social systems. The point I want to make in this preface is that there has been a shift here, which again is implicitly addressed in Beck's work. In the first modernity we were faced with relatively mutually exclusive and exhaustive systems: of (Parsonsian) social systems, on the one hand, and engineering-like technical systems, on the other. The second modernity's totally normal chaos is regulated by non-linear systems. It is also regulated by an extraordinarily powerful interlacing of social and technical systems: by,

precisely, socio-technical systems. It is at the interface of the social and the technical that we find the second-modernity's individual. It is at this interface that we take on the precarious freedom of a 'life of our own'; that we 'invent the political', that we take on ecological responsibility. The individual in the second modernity is profoundly a socio-technical subject.

Scott Lash
April 2001
London

This introduction draws on a number of long discussions with Jakob Arnoldi and June Hee Jung. I am grateful to them for a number of points here. The judgements here however are my own, and they should not be held responsible for them.

To be fair to Giddens, his notion of agency has important dimensions of non linearity, especially with the centrality of unintended consequences and the individual as experiment in his work.

Foreword by Zygmunt Bauman: Individually, Together

The title given by Norbert Elias to his last, posthumously published study, 'Society of individuals', flawlessly grasps the gist of the problem which has haunted social theory since its inception. Breaking with the tradition established with Hobbes and reformed by John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer and the liberal orthodoxy into the *doxa* – the unexamined frame for all further cognition – of our century, Elias replaced the 'and' and the 'versus' with the 'of'; and by so doing he shifted the discourse from the *imaginaire* of the two forces locked in a mortal, yet unending battle of freedom and domination, into that of 'reciprocal conception': society shaping the individuality of its members and the individuals forming society out of their life actions while pursuing strategies plausible and feasible within the socially woven web of their dependencies.

Casting members as individuals is the trademark of modern society. That casting, however, was not a one-off act. It is an activity re-enacted daily. Modern society exists in its activity of 'individualizing', as much as the activities of individuals consist in that daily reshaping and renegotiating of their mutual engagements which is called 'society'. Neither of the two partners stays put for long. And so the meaning of 'individualization' keeps changing, taking on ever new shapes – as the accumulated results of its past history set ever new rules and turn out ever new stakes of the game. 'Individualization' now means something very different from what it meant 100 years ago and what it conveyed in the early times of the modern era – the times of extolled human 'emancipation' from the tightly knit web of communal dependency, surveillance and enforcement.

Ulrich Beck's 'Jenseits von Stand und Klasse ?' (1983),¹ and a few years later his *Risikogesellschaft: Auf den Weg in eine andere Moderne*, as well as Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's *Vom Dasein für andere zum Anspruch auf ein Stück 'eigenes Leben' – Individualisierungsprozesse in weiblichen Lebenszusammenhängen* (1983),² opened a new chapter in our understanding of the 'individualization process'. The works presented this process and an ongoing and unfinished history with its distinct stages – without a 'telos' or preordained destination but with an erratic logic of sharp twists and turns instead. It can be said that just as Elias 'historicized' Sigmund Freud's theory of the civilized individual, exploring civilization as an event in (modern) history, so Beck historicized Elias's account of the birth of the individual by representing that birth as an aspect of the continuous and continuing, compulsive and obsessive *modernization*. Beck also set the portrayal of individualization free from the time-bound, transient accoutrements that now becloud the understanding more than they clarify the picture (first and foremost, from the vision of linear development or 'progress' plotted along the

axes of emancipation, growing autonomy and freedom of self-assertion), thereby opening to scrutiny the variety of historical tendencies of individualization and their products and allowing a better comprehension of the distinctive features of its current stage.

To put it in a nutshell, 'individualization' consists in transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' – and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance: in other words, it consists in establishing a *de jure* autonomy (although not necessarily a *de facto* one). No more are human beings 'born into' their identities; as Jean-Paul Sartre famously put it: it is not enough to be born a bourgeois, one must live one's life as a bourgeois. (The same did not need to be said, nor could it have been, about the princes, knights, serfs or townsmen of the pre-modern era!) Needing to *become* what one *is* is the hallmark of modern living – and of this living alone (not of modern 'individualization' – that expression being evidently pleonastic; to speak of individualization and of modernity is to speak of the same social condition). Modernity replaces determination of social standing with compulsive and obligatory self-determination.

This holds for 'individualization' in all its renditions and for the whole of the modern era; for all periods and all sectors of society. Yet within that shared predicament there are significant variations, which set apart denizens of successive periods as well as various categories of actors co-inhabiting the same historical stage. The task of 'self-identification' set before men and women of the early modern era, once the stiff frames of estates had been broken, boiled down to the challenge of living 'true to kind' ('up with the Joneses'); of actively conforming to the established social types and models of conduct; of imitating, following the pattern, 'acculturating', not falling out of step, not deviating from the norm. 'Estates' came to be replaced by 'classes'. While the former were a matter of ascription, membership of the latter contained a large measure of achievement; classes, unlike estates, had to be 'joined' and the membership had to be constantly renewed, reconfirmed and documented in day-to-day conduct.

One may say in retrospect that the class division (or gender division for that matter) was a by-product of unequal access to resources required to render self-assertion effective. Classes differed in the range of identities available and in the facility of choice between them. People endowed with fewer resources, and thus with less choice, had to compensate for their individual weakness by the 'power of numbers' – by closing ranks and engaging in collective action. As Claus Offe pointed out, collective, class-oriented action came to those lower down the social ladder as 'naturally' and 'matter-of-factly' as individual pursuit of their life-goals came to their employers.

Deprivations, so to speak, 'added up' and congealed in 'common interests' – and were seen as amenable solely to a collective remedy: 'collectivism' was a first-choice strategy for those on the receiving end of individualization yet unable to self-assert as individuals deploying their own, individually owned, blatantly inadequate resources. The class orientation of the better-off was, contrariwise, partial and, in a sense, derivative; it came to the fore mostly when the unequal

distribution of resources was challenged and contested. It can be said, however, that by and large the 'disembedded' individuals of the classic 'modernity' era deployed their new empowerment and the entitlements of autonomous agency in the frantic search for 're-embeddedment'. And there was no shortage of 'beds' waiting and ready to accommodate them. Class allocation, though formed and negotiable rather than inherited or simply 'born into' as the *Stände* used to be, tended to become as solid, unalterable and resistant to individual manipulation as the pre-modern assignment to the estate. Class and gender hung heavily over the individual range of choices; to escape their constraint was not much easier than to contest one's place in the 'divine chain of being'. To all intents and purposes, class and gender were 'facts of nature' and the task left to the self-assertion of most individuals was to 'fit in' – that is, fit into the allocated niche by behaving as the other occupants did.

This is, precisely, what distinguishes the 'individualization' of yore from the form it has taken in *Risikogesellschaft*, in terms of 'reflexive modernity' or 'second modernity' (as Ulrich Beck variously calls the contemporary era). No 'beds' are left to 're-embed' – not for long at any rate. There are instead 'musical chairs' of various sizes and styles as well as of changing numbers and positions, forcing men and women to be constantly on the move and promising no rest and no satisfaction on 'arrival', no comfort on reaching the destination where one can disarm, relax and stop worrying. There is no 're-embeddedment' prospect at the end of the road taken by (now chronically) disembedded individuals.

Let there be no mistake: now, as before, individualization is a fate, not a choice; in the land of individual freedom of choice, the option to escape individualization and to refuse participation in the individualizing game is emphatically *not* on the agenda. That men and women have no one to blame for their frustrations and troubles does not mean, any more than it did in the past, that they can protect themselves against frustration by using their own domestic appliances or pull themselves out of trouble, like Baron Münchhausen, by their bootstraps. If they fall ill, it is because they were not resolute or industrious enough in following a health regime. If they stay unemployed, it is because they failed to learn the skills of winning an interview or because they did not try hard enough to find a job or because they are, purely and simply, work-shy. If they are not sure about their career prospects and agonize about their future, it is because they are not good enough at winning friends and influencing people and have failed to learn as they should the arts of self-expression and impressing others. This is, at any rate, what they are told and what they have come to believe – so that they behave '*als ob*', 'as if', this were indeed the truth of the matter. As Beck aptly and poignantly puts it: 'How ones lives becomes a *biographical solution to systemic contradictions*.' Risks and contradictions go on being socially produced; it is just the duty and the necessity to cope with them that is being individualized.

To cut a long story short: there is a growing gap between individuality as fate and individuality as practical capacity for self-assertion (as 'individuation', the term selected by Beck to distinguish the self-sustained and self-propelled individual from a merely 'individualized' individual, that is, a human being

who has no choice but to act as if the individuation had not been attained); and bridging that gap is, most crucially, *not* part of that capacity.

The self-assertive ability of individualized men and women falls short, as a rule, of what a genuine self-constitution would require. As Leo Strauss observed, the other face of unencumbered freedom is insignificance of choice – the two faces conditioning each other: why bother to prohibit what is anyway of little consequence? A cynical observer would say that freedom comes when it matters no more. There is a nasty fly of impotence in the ointment of freedom shaped through the pressures of individualization; that impotence is felt as all the more odious and upsetting in view of the empowerment that freedom was expected to deliver.

Perhaps, as in the past, standing shoulder and marching step would offer a remedy? Perhaps if individual powers, however wan and meagre, are condensed into a collective stand and action, things will be done jointly which no man or woman on their own could dream of doing? The snag is, though, that the most common troubles of the individuals-by-fate are these days *not additive*. They simply do not sum up into a ‘common cause’. They are shaped from the beginning in such a way as to lack the edges allowing them to dovetail with other people’s troubles. Troubles may be similar (and the increasingly popular chat-shows go out of their way to demonstrate their similarity and to hammer home the message that their most important similarity lies in being handled by each sufferer on his or her own), but they do *not* form a totality ‘greater than the sum of its parts’, and acquire no new, easier to handle quality through being confronted together. The sole advantage the company of other sufferers may bring is to reassure each one that fighting troubles alone is what all the others do daily – and so to reinvigorate the flagging resolve to go on doing just that. One may perhaps also learn from other people’s experience how to survive the next round of ‘downsizing’, how to handle children who think they are adolescents and adolescents who refuse to become adults, how to get fat and other unwelcome ‘foreign bodies’ ‘out of one’s system’, how to get rid of a no longer satisfying addiction or a no longer pleasurable partner. But what one learns in the first place from the company of others is that the only service which company can render is advice about how to survive in one’s own irreparable solitude and that everyone’s life is full of risks which need to be confronted and fought alone.

So there is another snag as well. As de Tocqueville long suspected, setting people free may make them *indifferent*. The individual is the citizen’s worst enemy de Tocqueville suggested. The individual tends to be lukewarm, sceptical or wary of ‘common good’, ‘good society’ or ‘just society’. What is the sense of ‘common interests’ except allowing each individual to satisfy his or her own? Whatever else individuals may do when coming together portends constraint on their freedom to pursue what they see fit for themselves and won’t help such pursuit anyway. The only two useful things one would expect, and wish, from the ‘public power’ to deliver are to observe human rights (that is, to let everyone go his or her own way) and to enable everyone to do it in peace – by guarding the security of his or her body and possessions safe, locking up criminals in prison and keeping the streets free of muggers, perverts, beggars and obnoxious and malevolent strangers.

With his usual inimitable wit, Woody Allen unerringly grasps the fads and foibles of late-modern individuals-by-decree, when browsing through imaginary leaflets advertising ‘adult summer courses’ which Americans would be eager to attend. The course in economic theory includes the item ‘Inflation and depression – how to dress for each’. The course in ethics entails ‘the categorical imperative, and six ways to make it work for you’ and the prospectus for astronomy informs one: ‘The sun, which is made of gas, can explode at any moment, sending our entire planet system hurtling to destruction; students are advised what the average citizen can do in such a case.’

To sum up: the other side of individualization seems to be the corrosion and slow disintegration of citizenship. Joël Roman, co-editor of *Esprit*, points out in his recent book (*La Démocratie des Individus*, 1998) that ‘vigilance is degraded to the point of surveillance, engaging collective emotions and fear of the neighbour’ – and urges people to seek a ‘renewed capacity for deciding together’, a capacity now conspicuous mostly by its absence.

If the individual is the citizen’s worst enemy and if individualization spells trouble for citizenship and citizenship-based politics, it is because the concerns and preoccupations of individuals qua individuals fill the public space, claiming to be its only legitimate occupants and elbowing out from public discourse everything else. The ‘public’ is colonized by the ‘private’; ‘public interest’ is reduced to curiosity about the private lives of public figures and the art of public life is tapered to the public display of private affairs and public confessions of private sentiments (the more intimate the better). ‘Public issues’ which resist such reduction become all but incomprehensible.

The prospects for a ‘re-embedding’ of individualized actors in the republican body of citizenship are dim. What prompts them to venture onto the public stage is not so much a search for common causes and ways to negotiate the meaning of the common good and the principles of life in common, as a desperate need for ‘networking’. The sharing of intimacies, as Richard Sennett keeps pointing out, tends to be the preferred, perhaps the only remaining, method of ‘community-building’. This building technique can spawn ‘communities’ only as fragile and short-lived, scattered and wandering emotions, shifting erratically from one target to another and drifting in the forever inconclusive search for a secure haven; communities of shared worries, shared anxieties or shared hatreds – but in each case a ‘peg’ community, a momentary gathering around a nail on which many solitary individuals hang their solitary individual fears. As Ulrich Beck puts it (in his essay ‘On the mortality of industrial society’³): ‘What emerges from the fading social norms is naked, frightened, aggressive ego in search of love and help. In the search for itself and for an affectionate sociality, it easily gets lost in the jungle of the self... Someone who is poking around in the fog of his or her own self is no longer capable of noticing that this isolation, this “solitary confinement of the ego”, is a mass sentence.’

Individualization is here to stay; all thinking about the means to deal with its impact on the way we all conduct our lives must start from acknowledgement of this fact. Individualization brings to the ever growing number of men and women an unprecedented freedom of experimenting – but (*timeo danaos et dona*

ferentes...) it also brings an unprecedented task of coping with the consequences. The yawning gap between the right of self-assertion and the capacity to control the social settings which render such self-assertion feasible or unrealistic seems to be the main contradiction of the 'second modernity' – one which, through trial and error, critical reflection and bold experimentation, we must collectively learn to tackle collectively.

In *The Reinvention of Politics*,⁴ Ulrich Beck suggests that nothing less than 'another Reformation' is needed and that this calls for the 'radicalization of modernity'. He proposes that 'this assumes social inventions and collective courage in political experiments' – only to add at once that these 'inclinations and qualities... are not exactly frequently encountered, and are perhaps no longer even capable of garnering a majority'. Yet here we are: we have no other conditions in which to act. And in these conditions, like it or not, act we will, bearing the consequences of our actions or our failure to act.

Zygmunt Bauman
February 1999

Notes

1 See Chapter 3 in this volume.

2 See Chapter 5 in this volume.

3 In U. Beck, *Ecological Enlightenment: Essays on the Politics of the Risk Society*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995.

4 U. Beck, *The Reinvention of Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997.

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