INDIVIDUALITY AND MODERNITY IN BERLIN

Self and Society from Weimar to the Wall

MORITZ FÖLLMER

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INDIVIDUALITY AND MODERNITY IN BERLIN

Moritz Föllmer traces the history of individuality in Berlin from the late 1920s to the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. The demand to be recognised as an individual was central to metropolitan society, as were the spectres of risk, isolation and loss of agency. This was true under all five regimes of the period, through economic depression, war, occupation and reconstruction. The quest for individuality could put democracy under pressure, as in the Weimar years, and it could be satisfied by a dictatorship, as was the case in the Third Reich. It was only in the course of the 1950s, when liberal democracy was able to offer superior opportunities for consumerism, that it finally claimed the mantle. *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin* proposes a fresh perspective on twentieth-century Berlin that will engage readers with an interest in the German metropolis as well as in European urban history more broadly.

MORITZ FÖLLMER is Associate Professor of Modern History at the University of Amsterdam. His previous publications include *Die Verteidigung der bürgerlichen Nation: Industrielle und hohe Beamte in Deutschland und Frankreich 1900–1930* (2002).

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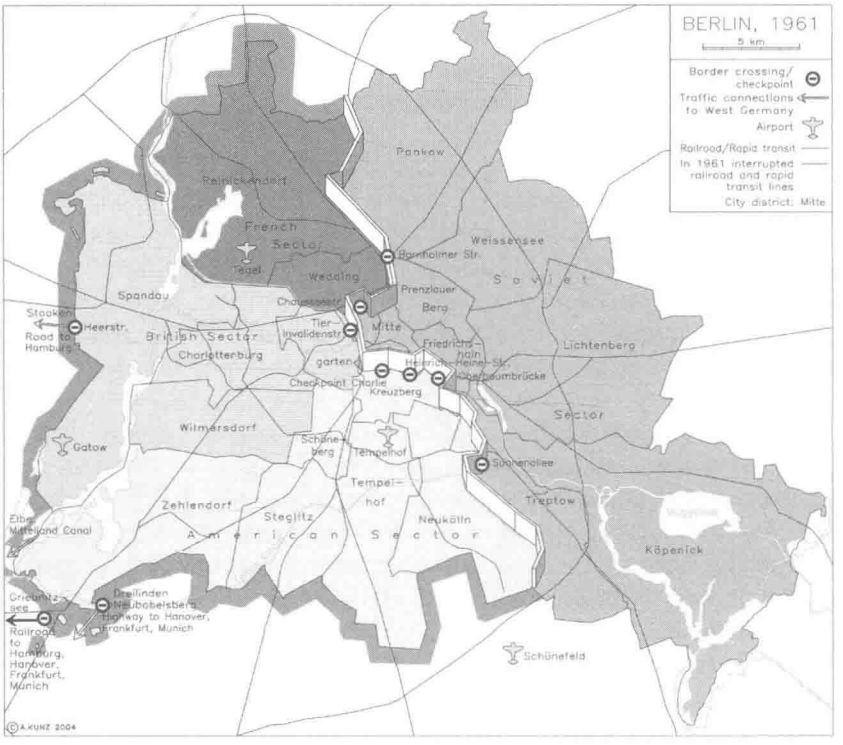

Map of Berlin in 1961.

Contents

Introduction

This book is about the relationship between individuality and modernity in Berlin between the late Weimar years and the construction of the Wall in August 1961. I argue that, throughout these three decades, individuality was central to Berliners' expectations of themselves and of society, even if their quest was frequently frustrated or denied. Precisely because individuality played such a crucial role, it was bound to reflect the diversity so characteristic of Germany's capital. Consequently, opinions differed as to what it meant, or should mean, to be an individual, which led to myriad conflicts, debates and dilemmas. Economic depression, dictatorial intervention, wartime destruction and post-war reconstruction exacerbated these conflicts. Welfare and the consumer society promised to solve them, while raising new concerns about depersonalisation and uniformity. Nonetheless, while whereas the notions of *Individuum* and *Individualismus* were often associated with a bygone, easily caricatured liberal age, the vast majority of Berliners had little desire to eliminate individuality or render it unimportant. Hence, both the Nazi and the Communist dictatorships found themselves compelled to adapt their visions of, respectively, a racially defined *Volk* and a proletarian society – at times against their original intentions, at times deliberately – to exploit the dynamics of urban society. It is a key argument of this book that the Third Reich was largely successful in this endeavour, combining ordinariness and extraordinariness, offering new forms of personal agency and pitting legitimate against illegitimate individuals. Nazism should, thus, be understood through the prism of a distinct form of modern individuality rather than as a collectivist ideology and regime. The quest for individuality did not re-emerge at the end of the 1950s after decades of crisis but lay at the heart of Berlin's protracted history of democracy and dictatorship, of peaceful consumption and violent turmoil.

The topic and approach of this book require a broader conceptual discussion, for they have relevance beyond Berlin and Germany, as well as beyond the three decades from *c.* 1930 to 1961. To explore individuality

is still an unusual proposition for historians of twentieth-century Europe, in contrast to the attention that specialists of the Middle Ages, the early modern period or the nineteenth century have devoted to this topic. It responds, however, to a pressing need, for assumptions about individuality play an important role in some of the most prominent accounts of the 'age of extremes' (Eric Hobsbawm). Mark Mazower and others emphasise a contrast between a collectivist period up to 1945, during which countless Europeans gave their support to extremist ideologies, and the subsequent individualist decades, when they prioritised consumption and domesticity.[1] By contrast, Harold James sees a trend toward individualism that spanned the whole century.[2] Such generalisations should stimulate empirical studies, which are in turn likely to engender critique and modification of the original positions. As always, the process of historical scrutiny and argument is bound to complicate as well as clarify the issues at hand. But this is also the case for other dimensions of modernity such as urbanity or industrial society, whose historians generally accept that shorthand formulas are not sufficient to grasp and convey the complexities involved.

Some studies have already made important steps toward historicising individuality in twentieth-century Europe and have, crucially, identified it where it is usually assumed to be lacking. In Russia before and during the Revolution, proletarian writers cultivated an idea of the self that revolved around notions of individual suffering. In the interwar decades, French Communists acted as champions of small property holders and suburban settlers, downplaying their ideological commitment to collectivisation. During the same period, Catholic pedagogy in Spain, responding to parental demand, emphasised the personal development of children instead of their subordination to hierarchical authority.[3] Beyond these empirical findings, such studies suggest that individuality has been multi-faceted, depending on the meanings attached to it in a given political, social and

[1] Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1999), pp. xi, 194–200, 306–13; Ulrich Herbert, 'Europe in High Modernity: Reflections on a Theory of the 20th Century', *Journal of Modern European History*, 5 (2007), 5–20, here 16–17; Richard Bessel, 'Society', in Julian Jackson (ed.), *Europe, 1900–1945* (Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 116–37, here, p. 37; Paul Ginsborg, 'The Politics of the Family in Twentieth-Century Europe', *Contemporary European History*, 9 (2000), pp. 411–44, here pp. 422–3, 436–7.

[2] Harold James, *Europe Reborn: A History, 1914–2000* (Harlow: Longman, 2003), pp. 38–9.

[3] Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910–1925* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Laird Boswell, *Rural Communism in France, 1920–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), esp. pp. 154–61; Tyler Stovall, *The Rise of the Paris Red Belt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Till Kössler, 'Toward a New Understanding of the Child: Catholic Mobilization and Modern Pedagogy in Spain, 1900–1936', *Contemporary European History*, 18 (2009), 1–24, here 9–11.

cultural context. As the sociologist Göran Therborn aptly puts it: 'There are different kinds of individualism and collectivism in this world'.[4] Research by other sociologists and by cultural anthropologists corroborates this statement, questioning the received wisdom that individuality is somehow absent from non-Western cultures. It explains how 'honorific individualism' was central to the self-image of medieval samurai and subsequently left deep imprints in the culture of modern Japan or how a sense of individual uniqueness and autonomy matters to people in South Asia who are supposedly defined by kinship and collective identity.[5]

Analogously to recent conceptualisations of modernity, it would, thus, make sense to speak of 'multiple' or 'alternative' individualities rather than to aim for closure through any single definition.[6] This also corresponds to some important sociological theories, which emphasise ambivalence and thus take us beyond the classical narratives of either the individual's tragic decline through rationalisation and mass culture or of its dangerous rise at the expense of traditional social cohesion.[7] As early as 1901, Georg Simmel pointed out the co-existence of different individualisms, one based on the Enlightenment's insistence on equal human rights and the other inspired by Romanticism's praise of each person's distinctive features. He also argued that capitalist, urban societies have ambivalent consequences.

[4] Göran Therborn, *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies, 1945–2000* (London: Sage, 1995), p. 283. In a similar vein, see also the illuminating chapter on the 'limitless claims of individual liberty' in Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 76–100.

[5] Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Mattison Mines, *Public Faces, Private Voices: Community and Individuality in South India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Martin Sökefeld, 'Debating Self, Identity, and Culture in Anthropology', *Current Anthropology*, 40 (1999), 417–47. Both Mines and Sökefeld take issue with the prominent interpretation of Indian society in Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (University of Chicago Press, 1970). See also Anthony P. Cohen's wide-reaching plea for an anthropological engagement with individual selfhood: *Self Consciousness: An Alternative Anthropology of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994).

[6] See Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (ed.), *Multiple Modernities* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (ed.), *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

[7] See Markus Schroer, *Das Individuum der Gesellschaft: Synchrone und diachrone Theorieperspektiven* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp. 15–283. Schroer attributes the first narrative of the individual's decline through rationalisation or mass culture to, respectively, Max Weber and Max Horkheimer/Theodor W. Adorno. Classic analyses of the rise of the individual jeopardising social cohesion include the work of Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons. One might add that the much quoted works of Sennett and Bauman combine both narratives by highlighting the rise of privacy at the expense of public life as well as the 'corrosion' of true individuality through flexibility and consumerism. See Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, rev. edn (London: W.W. Norton, 2000); Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of the Modern Capitalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), pp. 53–90.

On the one hand, individuals are dependent on a greater variety of factors, and much less likely to matter personally, than in old-style villages and small towns. On the other, it is precisely the impersonal character of modern cities that provides their residents with unprecedented freedoms and opportunities.[8] Attempting to come to terms with the social changes since the 1960s, Ulrich Beck has coined the influential term 'risk society'. For individuals, this implies that they are less restricted, but also less protected, by class, religion or family. They enjoy 'risky liberties', striving to define and lead their own lives, while also being compelled to do so. Social and gender inequalities persist, but they are intertwined with the more recent dynamics of individualisation.[9] And Niklas Luhmann has emphasised how the transition to modernity from the seventeenth century meant that individuals began to be affected by multiple social systems simultaneously and were, thus, not fully defined by any of them. Hence, they had to define themselves and cope on their own, which entailed both new pressures and unprecedented opportunities. Conversely, people began to expect individualised treatment in various social spheres, ranging from personal relationships to the welfare system.[10]

Simmel and Beck thus highlight that individuality is produced by modern society through, on the one hand, creating new spaces for self-realisation and, on the other, decreasing the difference people can make and forcing them to cope on their own. Luhmann shows how modern society compels people to define themselves as individuals but is in turn shaped by their demand for individualised treatment. His emphasis on this twofold expectation, directed by society at individuals as well as by individuals at different social spheres, is especially valuable in the context of this study. Luhmann, in addition, places particular emphasis on the semantics surrounding individuality. Although he is chiefly concerned with seventeenth- to nineteenth-century texts, his approach is applicable to more popular

[8] Georg Simmel, 'Die beiden Formen des Individualismus' (1901), in Simmel, *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901–1908*, vol. II, ed. Rüdiger Kramme, Angela Rammstedt and Othein Rammstedt (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995), pp. 49–56; Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903), reprinted in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 409–24. See Schroer, *Individuum*, pp. 284–327.

[9] Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992), part II; Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (eds.), *Riskante Freiheiten: Individualisierung in modernen Gesellschaften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994). See Schroer, *Individuum*, pp. 381–420.

[10] Niklas Luhmann, 'Die gesellschaftliche Differenzierung und das Individuum', in Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung 6: Die Soziologie und der Mensch*, 2nd edn (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005), pp. 121–36; Luhmann, 'Individuum, Individualität, Individualismus', in Luhmann, *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik: Studien zur Wissenssoziologie der modernen Gesellschaft*, 2nd edn (Frankfurt, 1998), pp. 149–258. See Schroer, *Individuum*, pp. 223–74.

twentieth-century genres. This implies that the relationship between modern society and individuality is less direct than Simmel and Beck suggest. It is instead mediated by the different cultural forms in which individualist expectations are embedded and articulated, informing the countless experiences that people have and the stories told about them. Although Luhmann himself has not spelled this out, a further insight deriving from his theoretical work is that these expectations are politically versatile. They can assume the shape of liberal individuality, defined in opposition to the modern state, but they can also result in demands for an expansion of the welfare system as long as it delivers 'individual' as opposed to 'mass' treatment.[11] This openness helps explain the struggles between competing ideologies and regimes over the definition of the individual that were so characteristic of twentieth-century European history.[12]

These conceptualisations offer valuable clues for historicising individuality specifically in Berlin, as the site at which most possibilities of twentieth-century modernity were realised. The non-traditionality of the dynamic German metropolis, reinforced by the economic depression and later by the effects of the Second World War, undermined the very idea of a safety net of conventions and orientations. Hence, it left Berliners out there on their own, in what might be dubbed a risk society *avant la lettre*. At the same time, the feeling grew that individuals were painfully dependent on factors outside their control, in simultaneously rationalised and disjointed ways. This duality of a heightened need and a shrinking scope for personal agency led to a plethora of views as to how best to adjust one's individuality – as well as its urban environment – to changing circumstances, some pessimistic, others surprisingly sanguine. High expectations were central to this dynamic, which was directed toward individuals and also by individuals toward interpersonal relationships and the municipal government. Newspapers articulated, amplified and constructed these views and expectations. The resulting diversity of individualities marked the culture of Weimar Berlin. It eluded most intellectuals but was narrated

[11] See Robert Castel and Claudine Harouche, *Propriété privée, propriété sociale, propriété de soi* (Paris: Hachette, 2001), esp. pp. 70–106. By contrast, Nigel Rapport, *Transcendent Individual: Toward a Literary and Liberal Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1997) emphatically identifies individuality with liberalism. This view, while it may be politically defensible, is too limited for a satisfactory analysis.

[12] This is not the place for a fuller discussion, but it is interesting to note that French sociologists have also begun to emphasise the ambivalences of contemporary individuality between uncertainty and isolation and the creation of new social bonds. See Alain Ehrenberg, *L'individu incertain* (Paris: Hachette, 1995); François de Singly, *Les uns avec les autres: Quand l'individualisme crée du lien* (Paris: Hachette, 2003).

and dissected in some of the period's tabloid journalism and middle-brow literature.[13]

The key question of this book is how the relationship between individuality and urban modernity prevalent around 1930 changed under the influence of unprecedented dictatorial intervention and in the context of total war. Here, sociologies of ambivalent individuality are only of indirect relevance. The middle decades of the twentieth century could not have been anticipated by Simmel, and they do not feature in Luhmann's theory of modernity; Beck, for his part, is solely concerned with the decades beginning *c.* 1960. Yet it is important to consider that both the Nazi and the Communist dictatorships professed to solve some of the key problems of modern life pointed out by these sociologists, namely the depersonalising consequences of the capitalist metropolis and the 'risky liberties' enjoyed by persons forced to cope on their own under difficult circumstances. And, very significantly, these dictatorships were confronted with Berliners' individualist expectations, which they in turn attempted to redefine and steer through promises of personal agency. Furthermore, both regimes introduced divisions not so much between collectivity and individuality but rather between legitimate and illegitimate individuals, promising to keep the spectres of inauthenticity and materialism at bay by associating them with deviance. Both regimes witnessed counter-discourses of agency among those subjected to increasingly coercive demands or defined as illegitimate individuals. They also caused important unintentional effects on urban society, namely Allied bombing raids during the second half of the war and migration to the capitalist West in the 1950s.

The undeniable transformation of Berlin from 1933 to the 1950s thus needs to be understood as an interplay between dictatorial intervention and a complex culture of individuality and modernity. The resulting picture will differ from some prominent interpretations, especially of the Third Reich. Nazism may have aimed to create a modernist 'gardening state' hell-bent on eradicating ambivalence, as suggested by Zygmunt Bauman,[14] but was in practice riddled with, as well as fuelled by, a highly ambivalent social and cultural dynamic. Neither did it conform to Hannah Arendt's influential theorisation of European society in the 1930s and 1940s, which holds that modern times created an 'atomized and individualized mass', facilitating the 'complete loss of individual claims and ambition' under

[13] Walter Delabar, *Was tun? Romane am Ende der Weimarer Republik* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1999).

[14] Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991); Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).