Paradoxes of Individualization
Social Control and Social Conflict in Contemporary Modernity

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ASHGATE

PARADOXES OF INDIVIDUALIZATION

Dedicated to Jaap de Koster, born February 25, 2011

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Acknowledgments

This book has its origins in a symposium titled *Paradoxes of Individualization*, organized on April 13, 2006, at the initiative of Marjolein Kooistra, public relations officer at Erasmus University's Faculty of Social Sciences. Its formal aim was the presentation of a handful of research projects conducted at what would later become the Centre for Rotterdam Cultural Sociology (CROCUS) to an interested academic and non-academic audience. Intellectually speaking, however, the organization of the seminar challenged us to explore the common ground underneath apparently distinct and isolated research projects, addressing issues ranging from computer gaming to political conflict and from holistic spirituality to consumption. It quickly became clear that what constituted their common denominator was the theoretical problem of individualization, or more precisely: the increased social significance of moral individualism, this modern cultural ideal *par excellence*, which has not only massively proliferated in Western countries in the last half century, but has in the process grown into a major source of moral, religious and political conflict, too.

All three of us believe firmly that it is up to the social and cultural sciences to make the social world that we live in more comprehensible rather than obscuring it only further by taking refuge in idle postmodern or statistical messing around. This is why our plan to elaborate the seminar presentations into a full-blown book in Dutch elicited the ironic suggestion from one of us (Willem) that 'We must definitely make sure that the book becomes at least as complex as social reality itself.' A conversation with Ashgate's Neil Jordan in the Summer of 2008 convinced us to change course, however, and made us decide to write the book in English instead. From that moment on the project unfortunately started suffering from delay, particularly due to massive teaching assignments and a broad range of competing publication projects that demanded our precious time and attention. Because of that, the project could only start in earnest after two of us had been exempted from parts of their heavy teaching assignments from September 2009 onwards, although even then it had to compete with other publication projects that had suffered from delay.

The progress of this book has been impeded by two iron laws of contemporary academic life, in short: teaching always receives priority over research, and short-term journal articles always receive priority over long-term book projects, principally due to the ceaseless stream of revisions and resubmissions invoked by the former. We are grateful to Neil Jordan for his patience and his understanding that academia is no longer the quiet and easygoing environment for peaceful reflection, deliberation and discussion that it used to be in the past. The final obstacle to the

completion of this book came as recent as February of this year, even though it had been forecasted with scientific precision no less than nine months in advance: the birth of Jaap de Koster, son of Willem and Masja van Meeteren. If only for this brave and stubborn, yet in the end fortunately unsuccessful, attempt to incur further delay on this book, it would be unfair to dedicate it to anyone else but him.

Even though it is very much the outcome of ongoing discussions at the Centre for Rotterdam Cultural Sociology (CROCUS) at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, this book's argument has first been systematically developed in the inaugural address by one of us (Dick, see Houtman 2008), which as such informs much of the introductory chapter. Finally, we are grateful for permission to reprint (more or less revised versions of) three journal articles:

- Chapter 3, Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: Why New Age Spirituality is Less Privatized Than They Say It Is, is based on: Aupers, S. and Houtman, D. 2006. Beyond the spiritual supermarket: The social and public significance of new age spirituality. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 21(2), 201-22.
- Chapter 5, 'Stormfront is like a Second Home to me': Social Exclusion of Right-Wing Extremists, is based on: De Koster, W. and Houtman, D. 2008. 'Stormfront is like a second home to me': On virtual community formation by right-wing extremists. *Information, Communication & Society*, 11(8), 1153-75.
- Chapter 7, Two Lefts and Two Rights: Class Voting and Cultural Voting in the Netherlands, 2002, is based on: Houtman, D. and Achterberg, P. 2010. Two lefts and two rights: Class voting and cultural voting in the Netherlands, 2002. *Sociologie*, 1(1): 61-76.

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Introduction: The Myth of Individualization and the Dream of Individualism

Introduction

'However plausible, and at first sight convincing it is to see an autonomous, self-directing, self-realizing individual emerging from the ashes of scarcity, religious belief, tradition, and authority, the diagnosis of individualization is empirically untenable', Mark Elchardus (2009: 152) concludes about the theory of individualization brought forward by sociologists like Zygmunt Bauman (1995, 1997, 2001a), Anthony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). If individualization would really have occurred, he maintains, strong relationships between 'standard sociological characteristics' (idem: 150) or 'standard sociological variables (such as class, level of education, gender)' (idem: 148) and how people think, feel and act would clearly be the last thing one would expect to find. With this argument Elchardus echoes Paul de Beer, who brings in similar evidence to demonstrate that what people think, feel and do is still strongly related to 'their objective characteristics' (2007: 394).

But how could it be otherwise? Sociologically speaking, such a notion of individualization is not at all 'plausible, and at first sight convincing', but is in fact absurd since it suggests that the discipline's distinctive approach to social life—based on the notion that people are inevitably socially shaped—can and needs to be treated as a testable hypothesis. Because of this, the question of whether or not 'individuals' are still socially shaped, produced and controlled is too general and non-sociological and hence needs to be replaced by the more feasible question of whether, why and how modes of social control are undergoing a process of transformation. We have, however, major doubts about whether a theory based on the notion that individualization is an inherently non-cultural process, as Elchardus and De Beer proclaim, can provide much of an answer to this question.

Even though it remains perfectly obscure why De Beer chooses to include religiosity as one of his 'objective' independent variables, while treating people's moral and political values as 'subjective' dependent ones (idem: 394), the theory of individualization critiqued by him and Elchardus is informed by a distinction between 'objective' independent and 'subjective' dependent variables. This assumes that culture is basically irrelevant and non-consequential—that it is merely a 'reflection', 'consequence' or 'outcome' of a 'more fundamental' and 'more real' 'underlying' social reality. Such a positivist account of culture as causally insignificant, Jeffrey Alexander (2003: 13) explains, assumes that:

explanatory power lies in the study of the "hard" variables of social structure, such that structured sets of meanings become superstructures and ideologies driven by these more "real" and tangible social forces', whereby culture 'becomes defined as a "soft", not really independent variable: it is more or less confined to participating in the reproduction of social relations.

To demonstrate how difficult it nonetheless is to dispel the specter of culture from a sociological theory of individualization, we start with an interrogation of the ambiguities of De Beer's (2007) and Elchardus's (2009) treatments of individualization and individualism. We then outline our own cultural-sociological theory that gives individualism, this modern cultural ideal *par excellence*, its full due as central to the process of individualization. Analogous to the late Bryan Wilson's (1982: 149) conceptualization of secularization as 'that process by which religious institutions, actions, and consciousness, lose their social significance', we hence define individualization as 'that process by which a moral notion of individualism increases in social significance.' In doing so, we conceive of individualism as central to a (post)modern worldview that operates not unlike its religious counterparts in providing the world with meaning and informing the social actions of those who accept it (for example, Campbell 2007, Chaves 1994, Weber 1963 [1922]).

The Myth of Individualization and the Dream of Individualism

Individualization without Individualism?

De Beer's (2007) and Elchardus's (2009) notion that individualization can be understood as an inherently non-cultural process is not only remarkable for its sociologically naïve assumption that it is actually conceivable that selves are *not* socially shaped, so that this needs to be empirically studied, but even more so because the ambiguities in their own critiques confirm how difficult it actually is to dispel the cultural specter of individualism from a theory of individualization. Indeed, at a closer and more critical look, their accounts contain the seeds of a sociologically richer treatment of individualization that opens it up as a cultural-sociological problem.

For a start, De Beer (2007: 390) explains that the Netherlands constitutes an ideal case for the study of individualization because of 'social and cultural trends over the last 25 years that (...) are most aptly characterized by the term "individualization"' and also, referring to Ronald Inglehart's work about 'postmaterialist values' and 'postmodernization', which both 'clearly centre on the individual', because this country 'moreover [*sic*] stands out as one of the most progressive and liberal countries.' Whereas the word 'moreover' suggests that these 'cultural trends' are somehow unrelated to and different from the non-cultural conception of individualization De Beer sets out to critique, he simultaneously

asserts the exact opposite when he claims that the Netherlands is an ideal case study because of its marked progressive and liberal emphasis on liberty, cultural tolerance, postmaterialism, etcetera, which makes it one of the most individualized countries of the world.

Having thus effectively defined individualization in two competing ways, De Beer subsequently leaves his readers puzzled when he proclaims that 'one must, of course, first define individualization' (idem: 390), stating as a matter of fact that '*individualization should clearly be distinguished from individualism*' (idem: 391, our emphasis). Given the immediately preceding argument about the Netherlands as an ideal case, it remains unclear why this is 'clear' and his explanation that 'individualism is *commonly* understood as a personal attitude or preference' (idem: 391, our emphasis) fails to convince for its absence of literature references and its failure to critique such a naïve and non-sociological conception of individualism. Indeed, towards the end of his article De Beer no longer asserts confidently that moral individualism has 'clearly' nothing to do with individualization, but more modestly acknowledges that his own analysis 'does not shed any light on *this interpretation of individualization which I prefer to call individualism*' (idem: 406, our emphasis). Needless to say, this leaves him caught between two competing notions of individualization, which urges him to defend the thesis that the Netherlands is highly individualized (the cultural basis for its selection), yet is not really individualized (going by the relationships between variables he has found). The principal conclusion to draw from De Beer's article, then, is that despite his desire to dispel individualism, conceived as a cultural emphasis on individual liberty and cultural tolerance, from the theory of individualization, the awareness that it has in fact everything to do with it looms so large that it even informs his case selection.

A similar ambiguity can be found in Elchardus's article (2009), which in its opening pages also insists on a distinction between 'individualization' and 'individualism'—'a property of the choices people make' and 'a discourse or a vocabulary of motives', respectively (idem: 147)—, to enable him to effortlessly bash the resulting ('plausible, and at first sight convincing') sociologically naïve straw man to death. Having rejected the non-sociological notion that individual selves may be decreasingly shaped by social forces, Elchardus then proceeds to outline a more sociologically informed theory of individualization, central to which is the notion that the latter does not entail a disappearance of social control, but rather a transition to a new mode of social control: 'This new mode of control is centered around the self. It is, literally, self-control, not in the 19th century meaning of self-restraint, but in the sense of control of the self through the self …, using among other things individualism as a vocabulary of motives, socially constructed as an individual that views itself as a choosing agent' (idem: 153). So there we are again: at second thought, Elchardus, much like De Beer, abandons his positivist notion that what people do is not culturally informed, so that cultural discourse is made causally irrelevant and comes in only as a legitimation of what they have already done. At the same time Elchardus recognizes that a

good sociological theory of individualization must be a theory of social control, according to which people are increasingly socialized and stimulated to think of themselves as individuals, so that a cultural notion of individualism needs to be central to it after all.

Similarly, Atkinson (2007: 536) critiques the notion that the class constraints of the past have somehow made way for free, reflexive and unconstrained lifestyle choices within the context of an ongoing process of self-construction, pointing out that such a theory misses an awareness of 'the role of resources and processes of inscription by privileged others in producing self-identity.' The major problem with this type of individualization theory, Atkinson (idem: 542) echoes arguments made by Bellah et al. (1985), is that it cannot explain 'why, exactly, ... different individuals and groups choose different lifestyles', commenting on Giddens that 'it is hard to see how lifestyle choices, including the decision to change lifestyle altogether, could be made *without being guided by the orientations furnished by the lifestyle already adopted*. Either the self must somehow, in a way left unexplained by Giddens, be able to transcend the orientations of its lifestyle in order to choose or else lifestyle choices are not as "free" as he would like to make out' (his emphasis).

Individualism as a Middle-Class Moral Ideal

The strain of individualization theory brought forward by Bauman, Giddens and Beck, Atkinson furthermore points out, moreover 'resonates only with the experiences of the middle classes' (idem: 536), informed as it is by middle-class longings for personal agency that are inappropriately generalized to Western populations as a whole. And indeed, as any number of studies conducted since the 1950s has demonstrated, he could hardly be more correct. It is, after all, the middle class that embraces 'tolerance towards non-conformity' (for example, Nunn et al. 1978, Stouffer 1955) and 'self-direction' rather than 'conformity' as a parental value (Kohn 1977 [1969], Kohn and Schooler 1983, Kohn and Slomczynski 1990). This goes particularly for the 'new' middle class with its 'postmaterialist' value orientation that puts individual freedom and democracy above 'materialist' needs of security and social order (Inglehart 1977, 1990, 1997). To be more precise, the moral type of individualism that these notions capture is not so much embraced by 'the middle class' or 'the affluent' in an economic sense, as these and other 'Marxist-lite' theories have suggested since Lipset (1959) launched his theory of 'working-class authoritarianism' half a century ago. It is instead typical of those with a high level of education, particularly with degrees in non-economic, non-technical, and non-administrative fields—by the well educated conceived as a socio-cultural rather than a socio-economic category, in short (Houtman 2003).

Indeed, the fact that this moral type of individualism is intimately tied up with education does as much to demonstrate that the social shaping of selves is not over and done with, as it does to point out that a sociological theory of individualization worth its salt needs to place the social processes at its center through which this

individualism is constructed, transmitted, appropriated and acted upon. This, however, is not what De Beer, Elchardus and Atkinson do. Whereas they correctly identify the notion of a disappearance of the social shaping of the self as a modern myth, they hesitate to take individualism's role in shaping contemporary social life very seriously, suggesting instead—however ambiguously and inconsistently, as we have seen—that 'individualization has nothing to do with individualism.' In this book, we aim to overcome this ambiguity by adopting an explicitly Weberian cultural-sociological understanding of individualization, central to which is the increased social significance of individualism.

The dual aim of this opening chapter is to develop this theoretical argument and to put some first empirical flesh on its bones so as to set the stage for the remainder of the book. We demonstrate that Max Weber's classical cultural sociology already hinted in the direction of such a theory of individualization, although he was unfortunately hesitant to draw out the full implications of his theory of the disenchantment of the world. Critically confronting the latter with Durkheim's struggle with the problem of individualism over the course of his career, however, reveals that he should have done so. The thesis that we propose in this chapter, in short, is that carefully fleshing out and comparing Weber's and Durkheim's analyses of modern cultural discontents and their corollaries, yields a powerful cultural-sociological theory of individualization that is empirically supported by changes that have particularly unfolded since the counter culture of the 1960s.

Modernity and Cultural Disenchantment

Max Weber and the Disenchantment of the World

Weber's narrative of the gradual disappearance of the metaphysical 'Hinterwelt' that once provided the Western world with solid meaning continues to evoke debate and arouse the intellectual imagination. This process of disenchantment took off, Weber argued, with the emergence of Judaic anti-magical monotheism in ancient times and was pushed a decisive step further forward when the Protestant Reformation unleashed its attack on Catholic magic and superstition in the sixteenth century. The latter's further expulsion from the modern world has since been firmly supported by modern intellectualism's imperative of pursuing truth and nothing but truth, significantly contributing to a world increasingly devoid of meaning—a world in which 'processes … simply "are" and "happen" but no longer signify anything' (Weber 1978 [1921]: 506).

Modern science, because of its anti-metaphysical and empirical orientation, cannot help but further the disenchantment of the world. Potent though it is, it cannot provide answers to what are ultimately the most significant questions faced by mankind—the meaning of life, the purpose of the world, and the life plans to pursue or refrain from: 'Only a prophet or a savior can give the answers' (Weber 1948 [1919]: 153). As an essentially 'irreligious power' (idem: 142), all