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# Challenges of individualisation

Nikolai Genov

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## Varieties of individualisation

In the 1980s, the academic debates on individualisation started with inspiration from two major sources. The first consisted of everyday life experience in western European and North American societies, the second of loosely related theoretical ideas. From this background, the discussion initiated by Ulrich Beck (1983) mostly concerned the diminishing relevance of traditional social structures (class, community, family) in determining the choices and behaviour of individuals in the societies of the “late” or “second” modernity. New options for individual orientation, decisions and behaviour in the life course and in families, for participation in working life and in politics, and for ethnic and religious self-identifications and self-reflexivity have spread and attracted the attention of researchers. The changes were interpreted by Beck as liberating and simultaneously as risk ridden, due to the rise of social complexity and responsibilities requiring reflexivity and sophisticated practical responses. This dominant theme, style of analysis and argumentation continued in influential works by Antony Giddens (1991) and Zygmunt Bauman (2001). Recent discussions on post-modern reflexive individualisation (Atkinson 2010) or critiques of ideologies (Dawson 2013) follow the same pattern. Step by step, attempts at operationalising

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parameters of the concept of individualisation have been developed. The outcomes have been applied in empirical studies based as a rule on the analysis of available data sets (Delhey *et al.* 2014). Longitudinal studies or original international comparative research on individualisation have been largely missing until recently. The first serious effort in this direction came as a by-product from the analysis of data collected in the World Value Survey in the recent publication by Christian Welzel (2013), which focused on the trend of empowerment and emancipation amongst individuals.

In the meantime, debates related to individualisation have taken a turn towards prominence outside academia. In 2012, the National Intelligence Council of the United States published its report *Global trends 2030: alternative worlds*. The authors called the first megatrend they identified *individual empowerment* and defined it as “the most important megatrend” (NIC 2012, p.8). In this way, they underlined the historical relevance of the contemporary democratisation movements and the academic debate on the global trend of individualisation (Genov 1997; 2012, pp.10–17) became a matter of strategic political interest. The relevance of the new political discussion on individual empowerment can be properly understood alongside the importance of the other three megatrends dealt with in the report: *diffusion of power*,

*demographic patterns and growing food, water and energy nexus.* In this way, the empowerment of individuals, as one of the key dimensions of contemporary individualisation, reached the highest ranking concerning its relevance in strategic political discussions and decision-making. The far-reaching implications of this political interpretation of the current global situation for social sciences are unavoidable.

In a different context, the riots of young people, mostly those neither in employment, education or training (NEETs) attracted public attention to the problems of a young generation at risk worldwide (International Labour Organization 2013). The causes of these potential or manifest social tensions can be identified as rapid and parallel openings and closures of labour market options for the development and realisation of individuals. The tensions are also due to different and diverging personal capacities to cope with the new freedoms and responsibilities of individuals. Both parameters characterise the challenge of individualisation as a rapid and controversial phenomenon. It was analysed by British social scientists as a “fundamental social problem facing young people and society” two decades ago (Furlong and Cartmel 1997, pp.5–6). The problem might be simplified as follows. If individual efforts do not bring about the desired outcomes, then feelings of disorientation and helplessness tend to provoke reactions, such as meaningless vandalism. If the feeling of disorientation and helplessness is widespread, then the social mechanisms of crowd building tend to multiply the destructive energy. This is the mechanism of destructive individualisation.

Therefore, the outcomes of the megatrend *individual empowerment* might largely vary between the poles of constructive and destructive developments. In recent cases of mass rallies, the united forces of individual empowerment toppled authoritarian regimes and helped the establishment of fragile democracies. The city riots of NEETs might support such socially constructive processes with prospects for the constructive individualisation of young people (Mascherini *et al.* 2012). However, under various circumstances the self-empowerment of people in crowds can shift towards breaking legal and moral rules. Therefore, the effect of the building of fluid and short-lived communities of protesters might be the construction of a new, more efficient and just social order. However, the effect is often the

destructive questioning or undermining of general social trust, social solidarity and regular community life. Recent processes in the Arab spring vividly exemplified both options (Haseeb 2013).

Studies on individualisation reveal their relevance for society and for social sciences not in the context of constructive or destructive scenarios alone. The area of related problems, debates and actions is much larger. It is becoming increasingly obvious that attempts at managing social development in different structural contexts have to rely on analyses concerning possible, desirable and non-desirable consequences of individualisation. The economic reasons for the relevance of these analyses are clearly defined by Swedish researchers: “Individualization, new groups and changing values open up new opportunities for new products and services and provide a strong potential for economic growth” (European Commission 2008, p.14). Consequently, the growing relevance of individualisation is obvious in the current shift in business practices. The management of organisational change by business firms increasingly moves away from the traditional re-organisation of departments or structures of decision-making towards managing the conditions for human capital development or towards channelling the motivation of personnel. In industrial production the specific needs and preferences of individual customers are more and more often taken into consideration in customer-tailored products. The typical mass production of cars is under pressure to move towards the individualisation of cars’ internal design and equipment. Industrial services continue developing their long tradition of efforts for individualisation of service along the same pattern. The trend has been particularly strengthened by the individualised design of software systems and their maintenance. In the field of social policies the trend is towards the search for the optimisation of social services by their increasing individualisation (Yeatman 2009).

Another major dimension of individualisation in present-day societies is the growing autonomy of individuals in gender roles and in gender relations. The major achievement and, simultaneously, the major topic for intensive debate in this context is the emancipation of women. The process is advancing all over the world, with the Scandinavian countries being the leaders in this respect. Societies that have been strongly influenced by religious and traditional practices restricting the

public appearance and activities of women are tending towards the reduction of these restrictions (Khondker 2012). The driving forces of the process are the advancements in economic prosperity, the political and cultural effects of the constitutional respect for individual human rights and the all-pervasive modern means of mass information and communication. Considerations and policies aiming at the development of human capital in a given country, and thus at its international competitiveness, also play a significant role in the process. In the long run, local politics can only support the increasing involvement of women in the labour force due to the demands of market economy, the declining institutional pressure of religion and family and the dissemination of knowledge as a basis of autonomous individual decisions (Levy and Widmer 2013).

The same factors together with the advancement of pharmaceutical research, medical technology and medical care support individualised control of sexuality and reproductive behaviour. These developments, along with the growing recognition of individual human rights, contribute to sweeping changes in the definition of the body, sexuality and related practices. The process could be clearly described as the emancipation of individual decisions from biological, economic, political or cultural constraints (Gert and Giami 2014). The typical effect is the decline of fertility. Thus the emancipatory processes impact on the age structure of societies. The outcome is pressure on the common good of intergenerational solidarity as a fundamental value-normative regulatory factor in the reproduction of societies. These processes are closely related to the changing role of religion and churches. They are also influenced by current individualisation (Pollack and Olson 2011).

In the broader context of human rights, the right of individuals for free economic activity is legally and institutionally respected and protected in most present-day societies. The political and cultural relevance of individualisation of choice and behaviour is recognised at its basic level, although a plethora of open questions accompany debates on the variety of sexual relations and patterns of marriages. The crucial issues concern the practical observation of the universal rights of individuals by balancing the interests of individuals and society. At stake is the very much needed mutually supportive relation between personal autonomy and commu-

nity life, as well as between individual rights and social integration.

These developments provoke controversial interpretations and reactions. There is a widespread view that individualisation comes as a blessing for millions of human beings in the present-day historical context. Another influential view holds that the rise of individual rights and freedoms has its price. The numerous openings for autonomous decisions and actions of individuals imply the rise of individual responsibilities. Placing an exclusive stress on the expansion of rights and freedoms of individuals by disregarding or underrating the concomitant rise of individual responsibilities brings about social pathologies. They undermine solidarity as the glue of social life (Søren 2013). Thus, individualisation might come about at the expense of various forms of common good in general, and of various forms of solidarity in particular. Individualisation is accompanied by the rise of precarious freedoms (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p.1f.). The very high and growing rate of incarceration in the highly individualised society of the USA is a vivid example of the difficult relationships between individualisation and the observation of the moral and legal norms of community life (Travis *et al.* 2014).

The alarming signals do not come from the sharp difference between success and failure in individualisation. There is another profound and deeply alarming issue concerning individualisation worldwide. The process advances quickly together with the fast quantitative growth of the global middle class. Developments in Chinese and Indian societies give encouraging examples of the constructive individualisation of hundreds of millions of people in economic, political and cultural terms. However, hundreds of millions of human beings are currently undernourished across the world. The rising global GDP is distributed rather unevenly in and between countries. The gap between the people receiving high and low incomes is getting deeper and deeper worldwide (World Economic Forum 2015, pp.8–10). The bulk of the undernourished people are dramatically isolated from all or from the most promising patterns of present-day individualisation and from access to good quality education first of all. The funding of educational institutions in countries with low levels of GDP is correspondingly low and does not allow for occupations offering high quality options for individualisation. Hundreds

of millions of poor individuals still use the most primitive means of production for making their living. Creative individualisation is possible even under such conditions of production but the quality of this individualisation is usually very low.

In the political realm, oppressive regimes impose restrictions on the options for individualisation in localities or societies. Last but not least, fundamentalist religious or political ideas and practices hinder hundreds of millions of human beings from moving along the path of full-scale creative individualisation which might be possible under the local technological, economic, political or cultural conditions (Martensson *et al.* 2011). Moreover, some traditional values and norms prevent hundreds of millions from taking initiatives or participating in actions to change the conditions that have been recognised as detrimental to their own individualisation. It is not just a blessing or a curse – individualisation is also an ideal and a practical goal. Under various circumstances people still have to learn that a struggle might be needed in order to attain this desirable goal.

Under these circumstances of the rapid global rise of individualisation and the growing diversity of its manifestations and the related economic, political and cultural problems, the variety of studies on individualisation has rapidly increased. The expansion of research interests in individualisation to all major action fields in society (Berger and Hitzler 2010) makes it more and more difficult to reduce thematic complexity and to organise the discussions on individualisation in meaningful typologies. This applies even more so to the search for a common substantive denominator in the studies and discussions on individualisation. At the same time, theoretical and practical needs require a clear strategy for conceptualisation in a field with growing relevance for individuals and society. The time for efforts to facilitate the conceptual and methodological integration of the research on individualisation is overdue. One of the major reasons for the urgent need for analytical conceptualisations is the restricting historical focus of the discussions on constructive *and* destructive, manifest *and* potential, effects of individualisation in contemporary western European and North American societies. Recent studies challenge this self-imposed orientation of the discussions on individualisation only towards the “late” or “second” modernity. There are abundant arguments for

the need for historical and structural analyses of individualisation in historical situations long before European modernity (Joas 2013). Valuable studies on individualisation highlight present-day socio-economic contexts that are different from western Europe and North America (Yan 2009).

These new social and intellectual developments raise profound questions concerning the phenomenon of individualisation and the studies on it. Might it be possible to integrate the large variety of individualisation processes under the common denominator of a generalised analytical concept of individualisation? If this were possible, should the applicability of the concept be restricted to cases of “late” or “second” modernity alone? Are there enough arguments to substantiate the assumption that individualisation is actually a trans-historical and trans-territorial global trend? What could be the practical relevance of the analytically generalised and historically specified conceptual schemes covering individualisation? To what extent and how is the systematic measurement and explanation of achievements and failures of individualisation possible? How could the studies of individualisation processes help the efforts to manage individualisation? The search for adequate answers to these interconnected questions first of all requires intensive efforts for detailed conceptualisations.

## **The analytical concept of individualisation and its applications**

“Analytical concept” means here a universalised frame of parameters developed and applied for the systematic description, explanation and forecasting of structures, functions and processes. In some cases, the conceptual frame of parameters closely follows parameters of phenomena in reality. In other cases, the conceptual analytical parameters and their relationships are predominantly constructed (Nilsen 2005). In the case of individualisation, the development of an analytical concept is a rather challenging task. The large variety of manifestations and parameters of individualisation makes diverse and controversial *interpretations* of the social phenomenon of individualisation unavoidable. Intensive debates have focused on the content and extent of liberation of the individual from constraining economic and political structures or

from traditionalist culture. Recent interpretations have stressed specific contents of the constraining and controlling structures. In this context, individualisation is understood as “the process by which a moral notion of individualism increases in social significance” (Houtman *et al.* 2011, p.2). The major argument in favour of this view is that the current transformation of modes of social control comes about by strengthening the institutional incorporations of the moral ideas of individualism. This logic of analysis and argumentation is one-dimensional. It underestimates the multiple technological, economic, political, educational and value-normative determinants of individualisation and the variety of its contents. The special stress on social control is also one-sided, since the strengthening of personal autonomy vis-à-vis constraining and controlling social structures is part and parcel of individualisation as it can be observed in social reality.

In the analytical concept of individualisation presented below (see Figure 1) *the constraining and controlling* impacts of social structures on the orientation, decision and action of individuals are clearly recognised and respected. However, it is more precise in theoretical terms and more promising in practical terms to lay the stress on the *enabling and empowering* functions of social structures with respect to the autonomous adaptive orientations, decisions and actions of individuals. An important advantage of this approach to theory-building and to the desirable practical relevance of theorising is the possibility of putting the stress on the capacities of individuals and groups of individuals *to actively increase their own adaptability* to social environments by *changing* social structures or *creating* new ones.

The structures in question primarily belong to informal and formal organisations. Informal organisations have accompanied the development of humankind from its first appearance since organisation is inherent in even the most primitive forms of the human division of labour. At present, informal (not legally recognised) organisation, such as the joint activities of friends, continue to be basic constituents of human life. However, the practical relevance of informal organisation has been strongly reduced in relative terms by the penetration of all areas of human activities by formalised organisational structures. In modern societies, the formalised (legally recognised and

regulated) organisations have developed their own dynamics which dominate the dynamics of informal organisation as a rule. The rule is not absolute, since the spontaneous and fluid organisation of protest movements, recently very much facilitated by the new electronic means of communication, might develop the power to annihilate, create or change numerous formal organisations or even the basic organisational principles of the economic and political order (Castells 2012, p.218 f.).

The general trend in the development of both types of organisations is towards strengthening the cognitive basis of organisational decisions and the related increase of the efficiency and effectiveness in their implementation. This double-sided rationalisation is here called *upgrading the rationality of organizations* as symbolised by “A” in Figure 1. The process is at work in all parts of the globalised world. This line of argumentation does not imply that there are no examples of the degrading rationality of organisations. Such phenomena are being registered in the bankruptcy of economic organisations on a daily basis. The decisions leading to the bankruptcy of companies confirm the existential relevance of competition as a moving force for upgrading the rationality of organisations. Economic organisations that cannot keep pace with the permanent and fierce competition from organisations that manage to upgrade their rationality are punished by bankruptcy. Basically the same rules of competition apply to the activities of political parties as to those of religious or charitable organisations. The world of formal organisations is the world of competition and shapes the orientations, decisions and actions of individuals in present-day societies. The implications for individualisation are clear: ups and downs in the rationalisation of organisations mean ups and downs in the chances for individualisation in the given organisational context.

As seen from the opposite point of view, observations and systematic studies confirm the increasing reliance of organisations on the initiative and responsibility of individuals in handling organisational change (Hayes 2010, pp.159 f., 191f). Growing organisational reliance on human capital is itself a major driving force of individualisation. Its mechanisms are twofold: the *structural* dimension of the individualisation is marked by the differentiation and enlargement of social spaces available for autonomous orientation, decision and action of

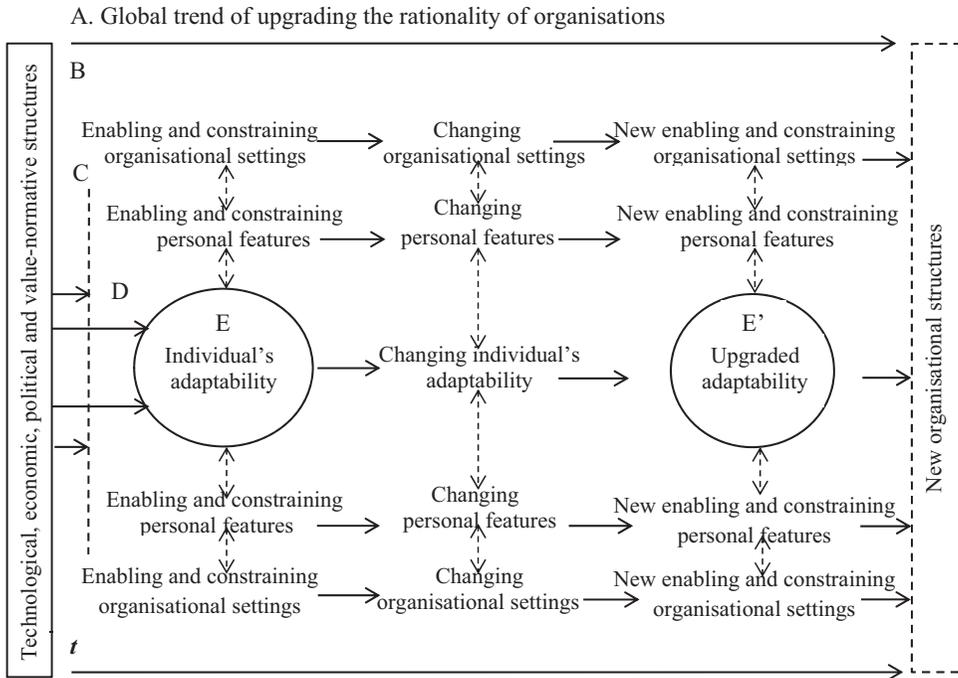


FIGURE 1. Analytical concept of individualisation.

individuals; the *action* dimension of individualisation is represented by the strengthening of the cognitive capacities and practical skills of individuals needed for their autonomous orientation, decision and action. Both dimensions of individualisation are dynamically interconnected. The differentiation and enlargement of social spaces available for the autonomous orientation, decision and action of individuals often comes about as result of their struggle for changing organisational structures.

The determining organisational structures under scrutiny (marked with B in Figure 1) are basically of four types. First, they represent the technological division of labour based on a given level of development of the productive infrastructure. Second, the economic structures are incorporations of the distribution of income, property and rights to take binding economic decisions. Third, the political structures are represented by the framework of relations making possible the distribution and use of political power. Fourth, value-normative structures define and legitimate (or de-legitimate) the content and expected outcomes of individualisation processes (see also Bourdieu 2008).

The technological, economic, political and value-normative structures usually exert their determining influence on individualisation through numerous intermediary formal and informal organisational settings (C in Figure 1). They are incorporated in socialisation agencies like families, educational systems, peer groups, networks at the work place, etc.

Another set of factors determining individualisation as it was defined above refers to features of the individual's personality (marked by D in Figure 1). These might be tentatively divided into two types. The first type includes features of personality which are to a large extent genetically pre-determined. This applies to the personal characteristics of information collection and processing, the strength of will and the intensity of emotions. The second type includes features of personality which are mostly acquired in the course of socialisation, such as levels and quality of knowledge and skills as well as moral and religious preferences. When integrated in an individual's personality, both types of personal characteristics determine the orientation, decision and action of individuals in a large variety of contexts (Brockman 2011). Personal

characteristics determine the speed and quality of the learning of individuals as a key element of individualisation. The combined influence of organisational structures and personality features determines the individual's adaptability to existing and changing social structures. This adaptability might be passive or active, the latter including change of circumstances according to the interests and preferences of a given individual or group of individuals as an outcome of their own efforts.

These ideas are the backbone of the suggested generalised concept of individualisation understood as an increase in an individual's active and passive adaptability (E to E') to changes in organisational environments and together with changes in the personal features of the individual (see Figure 1).

The change in an individual's adaptability is understood here as the outcome of the dynamic mutual influence of the changing determining factors of individualisation. These include change to the technological division of labour due to breakthroughs in research and development or new schemes in the organisation of technological processes. Economic structures change under the influence of spontaneous market fluctuations but also following social engineering (reform measures) guided by various interests and preferences. Political structures change under the impact of technological, economic or value-normative processes but are also guided by intentions to introduce reforms in the area of politics. Last but not least, individualisation might take turns in one direction or another due to changes in the cognitive basis of the individual or collective action as well as due to changes in the moral or religious preferences in society.

The changes of the intermediary organisational settings C are usually slow since they are marked by social inertia. However, their inertia disappears in cases of profound societal transformations. In such contexts the intermediary organisational settings might become powerful factors facilitating or hindering rapid individualisation.

The largely genetically predisposed features of personality play a very important role in securing the continuity of an individual's adaptability, since they remain most often relatively stable in the course of an individual's development or in the development of society. This does not hold true for features of personality that are primarily acquired in the course of socialisation. The level

and the quality of education of individuals change quickly in modern societies due to the expansion of formalised education and the broadening of opportunities for life-long informal learning. Religious or moral preferences also have potential for long-term stability but they may also change relatively quickly and in a radical way under the impact of deep economic or political crises and societal transformations. The combined effect of organisational changes and changes in personal features is presented in Figure 1 as a transition to a higher level of an individual's adaptability E'. It marks a step forward in individualisation. Its new quality might be identified, measured or governed at different structural levels: the local level of settlements, the structural level of states, the level of supranational integrations like the European Union and the level of the global structures and processes (Beck 2010). Exactly the same determining factors and the same mechanisms of their interaction might also bring about a decline in the quantitative and/or qualitative parameters of individualisation. This usually happens in the aftermath of natural calamities or social unrest.

The major clusters of indicators for the study of causes, processes, achievements, problems and prospects of individualisation might be divided into three types. First, indicators about social-structural conditions and their impacts on the decisions and actions of individuals: to what extent are *autonomous* orientation, decision-making and action objectively possible under given social-structural circumstances? Second, indicators about the conditions of learning: are the *economic*, *political* and *cultural* circumstances fostering or hindering individual learning? Third, indicators concerning motivation: are the circumstances predominantly motivating individuals to *escape*, *reproduce* or *change* the existing conditions of individualisation?

There are always limitations to the capacities of individuals to manage the increasingly complex options and requirements for autonomous orientation, decision and action. Some individuals succeed in efficiently managing the challenges of progressing individualisation under local conditions, while others fail. They might fail because of rather different reasons – structural unemployment, lack of personal aptitude to manage risks or the demotivating influence of welfare state provisions. The combined effect of all these factors has brought

about and maintains the destructive potential of the large groups of young people described as NEETs, for instance.

Some individuals manage the challenges in accordance with the moral and legal norms followed by the majority in their societies. Others try to cope with the options for individualisation by deviating from those norms. Choosing the path of radical individualisation, some try to change the norms (Marquis *et al.* 2011). The tasks of innovators are usually risky due to the inertia of social structures. Disregarding moral and legal norms in attempts at radical individualisation is risky too, since perpetrators may expect various types of punishment. The difference between innovative and deviant variants of individualisation is difficult to establish, because all kinds of innovation come about as a result of breaking norms. It might turn out that the perpetrations against norms are not necessarily acts destroying the common good, but are instead attempts at enriching it (Kirton 1994).

The general issues concerning individualisation and the related controversies might be well exemplified by the selection, reproduction and actions of individuals belonging to elite social groups. The contemporary high-level structural and functional differentiation of elites is linked to the technological and social division of labour in functional subsystems of societies. From the horizontal structural perspective, societal subsystems appear as relatively autonomous action areas of technological development, market exchange, political governance, cultural reproduction, etc. Elite groups appear and act in all these subsystems of society. From the vertical structural perspective, elites are defined as groups having privileged access to resources for binding decision-making. Individuals belonging to these hierarchical groups typically have responsibility for the functioning and development of organisations, societal subsystems and stratification groups. Due to the differences in their access to and use of wealth, political power and prestige these groups might take rather different paths of individualisation in the local, national, macro-regional and global contexts (Daloz 2012)

The double contingency between elites and organisations, subsystems and groups is full of options for creativity and achievements but also tensions and potential conflicts. There are innumerable examples of power-hungry individuals who aspire to individualisation by taking leading positions in

order to satisfy their personal greed for enrichment, power and prestige. The structural circumstances may or may not allow them to obtain the desired resources. However, paradoxically enough, leaders focused on self-interested individualisation might achieve much in enlarging and strengthening the common good of their organisations, communities or societies as well. To the contrary, non-corrupt elite individuals might be inefficient in enriching the common good of organisations, communities or societies due to moral reservations hindering decisive action or due to unfavourable circumstances (Morgan *et al.* 2015).

The opportunities for elite individuals to develop path-breaking initiatives and take crucial responsibilities are most manifest in situations of profound organisational change. The eastern European societal transformations after 1989 offered near laboratory conditions for the observation and analysis of the success or failure of individuals who managed to reach very high structural levels and intensity of individualisation by taking the lead in the political, economic and cultural transformations. Due to national path dependencies and international circumstances, but also due to their personal capacities to take and implement high quality decisions, some of these individuals turned out to be reasonably successful in managing the intensive challenges of the profound changes. Others were unable to cope with the management of all-embracing societal transformations, and failed (Genov 2010, p.94f.).

Alongside the rising global concentration of wealth and power we witness the growing relevance of national or regional elites and particularly the substantial increase of powers and responsibilities in the hands of a few individuals belonging to the top decision-makers of global organisations. The decisions and actions of these individuals together with the specifics of their individualisation exert existentially important impacts on the economic development, political security and cultural exchange in the maturing global society (Kakabadse and Kakabadse 2012).

The turbulence of profound societal transformations tends to facilitate variants of individualisation prone to deviant behaviour. The generalised effect is the spread of individualisation marked by disrespect for the common good and private property, law and shared values and norms. Perpetrators against the common good are typically identified

by national authorities and punished according to national law. However, we are witnessing the greatly increasing relevance of the internationalisation and globalisation of crime. Individual participants in perpetrations against the common good in a particular country are more and more likely to be aligned with long international or global chains of drug smuggling, human trafficking or terrorism. In other cases, the local criminal deeds of powerful individuals in business or politics have left deeply destructive effects in many countries and even worldwide (Beare 2013). Given the rise of internationalised and globalised crime, the activities of international bodies dealing with this are still rudimentary, although the ad hoc international courts on war crimes mark a promising step forward in this direction.

The multiple facets of individualisation outlined above in rather different action areas and at different structural levels of social life can only be creatively and adequately compared in explanatory procedures by consequently and systematically applying a generalised analytical concept of individualisation of the type presented in Figure 1. The task becomes even more intriguing if the efforts to achieve comparative explanations in a synchronic context are expanded in the direction of diachronic explanatory studies. The interpretation of individualisation as a global trend opens the prospect of this type of mutual enrichment of synchronic and diachronic studies on individualisation.

## **Individualisation as a global trend**

There are good reasons for the preference to focus individualisation studies on the most developed contemporary societies. Mass individualisation has reached its peak so far in situations where the protection of the economic, political and cultural rights of individuals is legally most advanced and most respected in institutional practice. It is in such circumstances that both the constructive and destructive effects of individualisation are particularly visible and regularly become the subject of intensive debate.

However, the variety of profound technological, economic, political and cultural differences dividing contemporary societies notwithstanding, they all belong to one global civilisation. Societies

are currently interconnected by the global division of labour, by global markets, by global political interdependencies and by the spread of common values and norms. The value-normative respect for the universal rights of human individuals belongs to these common cultural patterns. Universal human rights are legally incorporated in the constitutions of the majority of states today. The numerous and sometimes shocking exceptions notwithstanding, these constitutional arrangements are observed at least at a basic level in institutional practices all over the world (Minkler 2013). This trend is powerfully supported by the spread of education. Mass media make it possible that perpetrations against human rights – and thus against individualisation – become the subjects of public debate. Thus the repetition of perpetrations against universal human rights becomes less likely. Under these conditions the culture, organisational settings and action patterns of individualisation are already global transnational and trans-territorial phenomena. In one way or another, key parameters of individualisation are currently present all over the world and play an influential driving role in social development.

The manifestations of the global trend of individualisation are clearly identifiable all over the world and in all action spheres. The drive for individual achievements is among the major factors for the active involvement of millions in research and technological development. A large variety of individualisation patterns belong to the core of entrepreneurial activities worldwide. All democratisation movements are underpinned by the efforts for individualisation of the participants and particularly of the leaders. The culture and practices of individualisation are discernible in everyday life: in the choices for educational paths and institutions; in the preferences for workplaces and professional careers; in the selection of partners and in the shaping of family life. One can also immediately recognise key features of individualisation in reckless financial speculations, political or religious extremism and in the wide variety of local, regional and global criminal activities. Under most diverse circumstances, the general pattern of individualisation is at work in all present-day societies.

The implications of this development are profound. Leaders of teams in research and development, managers of economic enterprises, politicians, opinion makers, etc., know well that the success of their own path of individualisation

depends on the favourable or cooperative orientations, decisions and actions of other individuals in highly competitive local, national and global environments. Usually supported by advanced means of information and communication, activities of self-confident, outstanding individuals may trigger changes in all walk of social life in localities, regions, societies and even in broader supranational or global contexts. Leaders, organisations and societies efficiently facilitating and using the constructive potential of individualisation have the good prospect of becoming winners in the fierce local, regional or global competition. Leaders, organisations or societies unable to understand or efficiently use the constructive power of the multifaceted individualisation of tens, hundreds, thousands or millions of individuals are doomed to be losers in short or long term. Therefore, there are good reasons to stress the tremendous relevance of trans-territorial global individualisation in present-day societies and in the present-day globalised world. The creative learning of individuals and their creative adaptation to changing environments are becoming more and more the decisive element in the functioning, development and management of organisations all over the world. In *synchronic terms*, individualisation is undoubtedly a rapidly spreading global phenomenon.

Is there enough evidence for regarding individualisation as a global trend with strong *diachronic characteristics* in history? Consequently, should the debate on individualisation be exclusively focused on contemporary societies and, further, on the most developed part of them? Taking a closer look at a plethora of events in history, one would immediately recognise that typical organisational or cultural incentives, as well as obstacles, of individualisation are not manifest in present-day societies alone. On the contrary, these phenomena have their deep roots and manifestations in all stages of the history of humankind. This is the case since the potential for individualisation is linked to the evolution of the biological and social capacity of human individuals to learn, accumulate, improve, transmit from generation to generation and systematically apply acquired knowledge and skills. The numerous breaks and retreats in the process notwithstanding, the accumulation of knowledge and skills, accompanied by their more and more efficient use, has marked human history (Hopper 2007; Renn 2012).

Individualisation also has its historical roots in the development of the organisational frameworks shaping lives throughout human history. The evolution of the division of labour perfectly illustrates the fact that the present-day global trend of individualisation actually has its inception in the very early history of humankind. The elementary division of labour by sex and age was replaced by increasingly differentiated and sophisticated patterns of coordination and cooperation in labour. The present-day situation in the division of labour might be well exemplified by the legal definition of 840 occupational categories by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the United States (Standard Occupational Classification 2012). The Bureau has also developed precise descriptions of thousands of jobs (nurse, teacher, lawyer, etc.), containing the requirements for education and training, as well as information about the expected working conditions and earnings related to these occupations. This is an impressive illustration of the very high level of structural and functional differentiation in modern societies and the corresponding highly differentiated division of labour. As a result of technological, economic and social developments, individuals are given the opportunity of occupational choices and experiences which are evermore numerous and qualitatively differentiated. This rise of individualisation is marked by the increase of differentiated and enlarged fields for individuals' autonomous orientation, decisions and actions in occupational life. In addition, due to the rise of mass education and the large variety of opportunities for occupational training, individuals are increasingly better equipped to meet the increasingly complex and complicated requirements of the progressive division of labour.

The preparation and implementation of warfare is another area in which the differentiation and sophistication of organisational patterns incorporating individualisation started very early in human history. The definitions of individual rights and responsibilities in military organisations, particularly the rights and responsibilities of the commanders, had already reached high levels of precision in ancient times. Strategic and tactical decisions of ancient military commanders or their ability to motivate the rank and file of their armies belong to the basic education of the future military officers of today (Hanson 2010). However, no military leader would be remembered in history if rank

and file soldiers had not made their individualised contribution to the outcome of battles and wars too (Emden 2009).

In political life, one may follow the long evolution of patterns of political organisation and the roles of individuals in them. The fundamental differences and similarities in the selection and activities of the elite in various organisations basically apply to the selection of political leaders throughout human history (Van Vugt and Ahuja 2011). There is no doubt that the selection mechanisms of political leaders have been rather different in conditions of simple power hierarchies in less developed societies and in democratic or semi-democratic forms of political organisations in contemporary societies. Yet many universal mechanisms of selection, proof and evaluation of democratic political leaders were identified, analysed and compared in both ancient and medieval times too. This acquired and accumulated knowledge has facilitated the development of democratic political organisation for centuries and millennia later. The process includes both the highly individualised performance of democratic political leaders as well as the individual contribution of their supporters to the functioning of the democratic political process (Kane and Patapan 2012).

Spiritual life has also experienced tremendous organisational changes in history from primitive worshipping to the sophisticated organisation of churches, sects and religious movements. Nevertheless, one may identify repeated and persistent trends towards the individualisation of religion throughout history (Rüpke and Spickermann 2012).

Therefore, individualisation is not just trans-territorial but it is also a trans-historical phenomenon. It is a true global trend today with deep roots in the development of previous forms of human civilisation. The evolutionary experience shows that there are always limitations to the capacities of individuals to manage the increasingly complex requirements of their local organisational environments. The search for solutions has brought about the increasingly sophisticated legal and institutional regulations of ever more complex and complicated social processes. These regulations might foster or constrain the potential of individuals for autonomous orientation, decisions and actions. Michel Foucault ([1977] 1995) convincingly analysed the ways in which social structures have been used to “discipline and punish” failures in individualisation as well as

deviant or destructive individualisation through the centuries.

The histories of the success and failure of individualisation in previous generations might not always teach younger generations convincing lessons. Nevertheless, with its historical antecedents, the concept of individualisation as a global trend and its internal controversies offer a powerful analytical tool for the identification and explanation of crucially important social processes in history and in present day societies. Reference to the historical background of present-day processes makes the current reflexive individualisation multi-dimensional and potentially fruitful.

## Conclusions

The current acceleration of individualisation offers immense promise for innovations in research and technological development, in economic and political organisation and in the cultural life of human societies, from local to global scales. The changes tend to liberate individuals from constraints in their development and realisation. Simultaneously, individualisation brings uncertainties, tensions and conflicts. Some of these are relatively easy to manage, given proper understanding of the challenges as well as the knowledge, skills and other resources to handle them. Other situations are more difficult to manage and carry the potential of future clashes at various structural levels. The major mechanism bringing about and reproducing tensions, conflicts and clashes in individualisation is rooted in the objective limitations of economic, political and cultural resources. They are never sufficient to fully satisfy the aspirations to individualisation of particular individuals or groups of individuals. However, the aspirations to individualisation might vary immensely from case to case; and the same applies to the limitation of resources in particular cases of individualisation. There is a burning need for serious theoretical and empirical research on individualisation processes in order to make the variety of their moving forces, content and effects transparent and to facilitate their efficient management. Ideally, the research should be guided by interdisciplinary strategies and by unifying analytical concepts. It should be underpinned by recognition of both the unique and generalisable elements of individualisation as an analytical concept, in order to support its comprehensive operationalisation and

application in empirical studies. The development of the analytical concept of individualisation and its operationalisation would also be best achieved by taking the deep historical roots of present day individualisation into account.

The implementation of this research strategy requires the mobilisation of teams of researchers

and intensive efforts for the conceptual development, operationalisation and testing of theoretical assumptions and empirically based hypotheses. Given the relevance of individualisation in all areas of human activity, this investment will definitely lead to breakthroughs in the understanding and management of fundamental social processes.

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