

Nikolai Genov



Challenges of



Individualization



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To the memory of Natalia

Preface

The aim of the present monograph is to contribute to the sociological diagnosis of our time. It is marked by the enormous rise of the rights and responsibilities of individuals. Their orientation, decisions, and actions matter a lot to the local and global economy, politics, and culture. The life projects of individuals, the means by which they are carried out, and their outcomes are a fundamental component of the contemporary historical situation. That is why the topic of accelerated individualization is so attractive for scholars. Styles of study vary as a result of dealing with human beings in time and space, with statistical averages concerning the parameters of individualization or with explanatory models of the interplay between individuals, groups, communities, organizations, and societies. Thus, the study of individualization is already broad and sophisticated enough to bring about highly relevant results in both scientific and practical terms. However, one major obstacle lies in the way of a cumulative understanding of the subject: the plurality of individualization concepts. When talking about individualization, it is not always clear what is the subject of discussion.

The analysis and argumentation in this monograph is guided by the understanding of individualization as upgrading individuals' capacities

social trend with deep historical roots. The analysis and argumentation is guided by the idea that this global trend powerfully shapes contemporary social life and will shape it in the future. This happens in the interplay of individualization with three other global trends: upgrading the rationality of organizations, the spread of instrumental activism, and the universalization of value-normative systems.

There are multiple factors fostering or hindering individualization today. Most influential among them is the increasing active involvement of individuals in the global division of labor, which offers them a plethora of opportunities to reach global markets. Modern means of transportation and communication have greatly condensed time and space, thus allowing for the diversification of individual aspirations and activities. The increase in labor productivity and the related spread of relative affluence have also facilitated the autonomy of individuals, particularly those who belong to the growing global middle class. Democratization has transformed national and international political systems by enabling millions of people to actively participate in political life. Millions are involved in a cultural exchange which has already brought forth a global culture. Its value-normative core is the respect to the universal human rights of individuals together with the stress on the existential relevance of the idea and practices of sustainability.

These developments have strengthened the key importance of personal choices concerning the location, type, direction, and form of activities for the reproduction and change of social structures. The pool of options for choice and action is wide and expanding. A plethora of opportunities for individual educational paths has emerged all over the world. Increased levels of education empower individuals who possess advanced cognitive capacities and occupational skills. The individuals who can learn quickly have access to myriad new career choices too. Individuals less and less often make their life decisions under the pressure of restrictive economic and political circumstances, or of cultural traditions, as this was the case with previous generations.

As far as the personal development and realization of millions are concerned, the processes outlined so far are highly encouraging. As seen from a critical vantage point, they are quite controversial at the same time. Deepening of global and local inequalities constraining the

constructive individualization of large groups has accompanied the growth of the world economy and the related global triumph of individualization. The rapid rise of insufficiently regulated financial flows bears the potential to provoke repeated regional and global crises, thereby profoundly changing the paths to individualization of millions as this has been repeatedly experienced. Man-made changes in the natural environment have endangered the global ecosystem which is a key condition for constructive individualization. In contrast to the widespread well-being in economically advanced parts of the world, millions in other places still experience their individualization as a struggle for the basic necessities to survive. For the poor people, the very opportunity for autonomous, reflexive, and constructive personal development remains a dream.

The global enlargement of options for personal choice goes hand in hand with new requirements for efficiently handling increasingly complicated tasks. The competition is fierce, and the risks of personal failure in task management are omnipresent. The institutional control and punishment for inefficient personal action are high on the agenda. Decisions concerning the management of local conflicts taken by politicians and military leaders have triggered local wars that could potentially expand to a scale that existentially threatens human civilization. Due to these complex processes, the vast range of opportunities to design and implement plans for personal development and realization is simultaneously full of promising prospects, potential contradictions, and inherent conflicts.

These controversial developments have been intensively debated in recent decades. Discussions have long focused on processes in societies representing the 'post-modern' or 'late modernity'. Yet, coordination and clashes of beliefs with the interests of individuals, their conformity to social conditions, or rebellion against them have been retold by myths, philosophy, and literature throughout history. Historical records are filled with narratives about individuals who have brought about unusual achievements by following paths of extraordinary individualization. Some personal achievements have shaped the fate of civilizations. Taking such cases under scrutiny, one may notice that the basic patterns of individualization display some universal features. Another major finding is that there have been continuities and discontinuities, breaks, and qualitatively new starts of individualization in history.

The present monograph provides the reader with information about the manifold processes studied under the umbrella of individualization. The analysis and arguments also suggest possibilities for integrating, as well as operationalizing, key concepts in the study of the subject. The expected outcome is a contribution to systematic descriptions and explanations of individualization across various social contexts. The background idea is that the best diagnosis of our times might be achieved by applying the conceptual framework of four global trends that shape the global system of contemporary societies. This includes double-sided challenges of individualization. It comes about as a controversial result of tension-ridden changes of social structures and the active and creative adaptation of individuals to the structural changes. As seen from the opposite point of view, the variety and quality of often diverse and uncertain individualization paths pose permanent challenges to the stability and change of economic, political, and cultural structures. Thus, the study of individualization becomes crucially important for the elaboration on a multidimensional diagnosis of contemporary social development. Such a diagnosis would be indispensable for the strategic orientation and guidance of individual and collective action in times which are, by and large, marked by uncertainty.

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