

## Topic Page: [Individualism](#)

Definition: **individualism** from *Routledge Dictionary of Economics*

Seeking to maximize the utility of an individual person rather than a collective entity such as society at large or a corporate body. Individualism is often equated with self-interest or even selfishness. The individualist values economic and political freedom but prizes personal responsibility highly. Individualists respond to incentive mechanisms and contribute to the dynamism of an economy.

See *also*: altruism

### Summary Article: **Individualism**

From *Encyclopedia of Global Studies*

Although individualism is at the heart of the social assumptions that are part of many understandings of contemporary globalization, it is nonetheless a contested and sometimes controversial concept in the global age. Individualism refers to all sorts of philosophical, moral, political, ideological, or social systems of thought that focus on the individual. Each of these brings with it a specific perspective: Individualism expresses a cultural value highlighting the worth of the individual. In doing so, individualism sets the individual in relation to a community, a collective, or the masses.

The individualism approach can be considered crucial for achievements of modern societies, but equally critical when it comes to interactions, correlations, and even tensions among people of different cultural backgrounds. This is the case because the prevailing modern notion of individualism, along with its expressions in the economic, legal, political, or social sphere, is mainly rooted in Western history and tradition. Understanding this path dependence, along with the accompanying assumptions and attitudes toward the surrounding environment, is a first step in being able to consider and analyze phenomena that take place even on a global level.

As Geert Hofstede puts it, individualism describes societies in which bonds between individuals are loose; people are expected to care for themselves and their immediate families. The comprehension of this important complex also matters to scholars and students of global studies. By making the human individual the central unit of analysis, all actions and phenomena, organizations and institutions, as well as social texture right up to the global level, can be traced back to individual activities. Further, understanding individualism as an ideologically prevalent standpoint helps to distinguish cultural conflicts and tensions, as well as positions, achievements, attitudes, and the image of the other and of oneself.

In parallel with the topic of individualism, the discourse on the process and consequences of individualization dominates several academic disciplines, including sociology and religious studies, and, in a broader sense, draws in the wider public in industrialized countries, which are said to be heavily affected by individualization tendencies. These manifold, sometimes subtle processes of change are the focus of scholars and students of global studies that take into account topics such as disintegration or anomy.

Ultimately, the complex issue of individualism is closely intertwined with all discussions on identity. The quality and expectation of being an individual offers several possibilities and challenges for a person to choose his or her identity, especially because some contexts are given, while others can be selected. In a globalized and globalizing world, this condition makes postmodern life an expression of the constantly

conflicting priorities of any value comparisons with others.

This entry traces the history of the concept of individualism in philosophy and other social sciences, provides an overview of several individualistic characteristics in societal spheres, and introduces the current state of research on the individualization paradigm. In conclusion, further research questions and links to global studies are suggested.

## History of Individualism

There is little consensus among scholars regarding the origins of the concept of individualism. Because the individual represents the indivisible entity that had been mentioned in antiquity, many authors trace the concept's origins to the complex past of Roman law, Greek philosophy, and early Christendom. However, other authors focus on the periods of the Enlightenment and the Renaissance as a starting point. Anthropologists tend to distinguish between more individualistic cultures, denoted by hunters and gatherers, and more collectivist cultures, denoted by agriculturalists.

Whichever the case may be, by the time the term was introduced in the 19th century, individualism had already experienced a massive push in Western societies. Initiated by the intellectual movements of the Renaissance and Humanism, processes of reflection on oneself and the world placed the individual at center stage. In his prominent study on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, Max Weber identified a strong emphasis on the individual in the religious sphere of ascetic Protestantism. The writings of John Stuart Mill, for example, referred to the increased importance and normative appreciation of individualism in the economic sphere. Alexis de Tocqueville used the term in association with the democracy he observed in America and in contrast to the still aristocratic regimes he knew from the European context.

Still, belief in the supremacy of the individual soon pervaded all fields of society at that time, leading to an ongoing process of differentiation, specialization, and a specific strategy of legitimization of social order, along with the nascent institutions and associations. The establishment of property rights or human rights serves as prominent examples for the institutionalization of individualistic thoughts. The notion of freedom, in this case individual freedom, is closely intertwined with all these developments. The specific values and ideas are also reflected in literature: *Faust* or *Don Quixote de la Mancha* depict well-known examples of Renaissance myths of the individual; later, the 1719 published novel *Robinson Crusoe* can be interpreted as symbolic embodiment of the values and attitudes linked with developing individualism.

During the course of industrialization and the accompanying social changes, the notion of individualism flourished, leading to radicalizations or counterproposals. In a pointed manner, developing theoretical structures such as anarchism, liberalism, or 19th-century existentialism symbolize the progression of the basic individualistic complex. By contrast, the opposing approaches of socialism, nationalism, or fascism emphasize the collective and the communitarian momentum. For Karl Marx, for example, individualism represents a bourgeois principle that is linked with the economy of capitalism. In this area of tension, individualism as a concept becomes normatively loaded; it takes on the status of a core ideology outlining the belief of a positivistic society based on freedom. This dichotomous worldview of individualism versus collectivism persists to the present day, not only in the form of opposing political concepts and ideologies within one cultural circle but also in the form of different histories of various cultural circles.

## Individualism and Individualization

For those societies considered to be the original sources of individualism, modernization has brought along developments associated with the term *individualization*, in a manner of speaking, synonymous with the term *disenchantment of the world*. In industrialized nations, the structural process of releasing individuals from traditional contexts exercises far-reaching influence on social life. As Ulrich Beck puts it, individualization conventionalizes the individual as the central point of reference for himself or herself and for society as a whole, making the individual the unit of reproduction. This development involves diverse lifestyles, the dissolution of commitments and liaisons, and a growing, exaggerated responsibility for one's own actions. This immediate focus on a singular person involves possibilities, challenges, and burdens for social texture and structure. Individuals are free to create their life and lifestyle according to their own beliefs and skills, and, therefore, they must do so.

Individualization represents a cultural feature that, in the course of the current globalization processes under Western auspices, has been raised to a global level, where the idea faces cultural opponents and divergent cultural circles but also strives for dominance. Furthermore, it has been suggested that individualization also leads to a decline and transformation in social solidarity. In this situation, new forms and shapes of cooperative social behavior develop—for example, the various forms of citizens' involvement.

### Research Questions

The previously mentioned topics illustrate areas of interest and research for scholars and students of global studies. In light of current globalization processes, the success story of the concept of individualism, at least in Western society, seems to be coming to an end. Increasingly, the need to explain and solve current global issues and tensions in a way that benefits all stakeholders is no longer merely a philosophical or theoretical question, but rather a pragmatic one. In this situation, cooperation and solidarity seem to be called for, much more so than individual, “go-it-alone” efforts. The extent to which cooperation versus individualism leads to better results in a globalized world is a question for continued research.

In the context of individualism, one could also examine the effect of global processes at the level of the individual. To what extent are individuals free to create their life and lifestyle according to their own beliefs and skills in the current age of globalization? How have identities changed? How does this affect the level of individual responsibility for oneself and for the broader society as well as future societies? The answers to these and related questions could help individuals find their place in the current globalized world.

### See also:

Capitalism, Community, Cosmopolitan Identity, Culture, Notions of, Enlightenment, The, Free Speech, Humanism, Ideologies, Global, Modern Identities, Values

### Further Readings

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