

INDIVIDUALISM

AND

CONFORMITY:

THEIR DEVELOPMENT

AND

INFLUENCE ON

THE AMERICAN CHARACTER

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Individualism vs Conformity

The Clash of Opinions

I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America.

Alexis de Tocqueville
Democracy in America

We are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free as he ought to be . . . Here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, self-interest.

M. St. Jean de Crevecoeur
Letters from an American Farmer

The land of the free! This the land of the free! Why, if I say anything that displeases them, the free mob will lynch me, and that's my freedom. Free? Why, I have never been in any country where the individual has such an abject fear of his fellow countrymen. Because, as I say, they are free to lynch him the moment he shows he is not one of them.

D. H. Lawrence
Studies in Classic American Literature

What is common to all the other-directed people is that their contemporaries are the source of direction for the individual—either those known to him or those with whom he is indirectly acquainted, through friends and through the mass media. . . . This mode of keeping in touch with others permits a close behavioral conformity. . . through an exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of others.

David Riesman
The Lonely Crowd

What Reisman has called the central feature of the modern American character - other-directedness - is, in fact, the dominant element in our national character through most of our history.

Carl Degler

For more than a century we have lived with the contrasting images of the American character which Thomas Jefferson and Alexis de Tocqueville visualized. One of these images presented the American as . . . an independent individualist, the other a mass-dominated conformist; one an idealist, the other a materialist. . . Is it possible to uncover common factors in these apparently contradictory images, and thus to make use of them both in our quest for a definition of the national character?

David Potter
The Quest for National Character

In this increasingly self-conscious society almost everyone craves self-definition. One of the chief justifications for the study of purely American literature or American history assumes that Americans are fundamentally different from other peoples. Such an assumption is generally accepted as valid and never questioned very seriously.

Consequently, there has been, since the first settlements began in the "New World" over 400 years ago, an attempt to characterize exactly what makes this American, this new person in relationship to the world, different from his European counterparts. The quest for the definition of an American character has involved many questions -- What are Americans' basic traits? How did we come to be the way we are? Has the character changed over time?

The answers to these questions have involved many different people in many fields. The answers given are sometimes broad generalizations which oversimplify the entire question, and at other times they offer such specific solutions that it is easy to pass them off as fanciful. There does seem to be some common ground to many of the ideas, however. David Potter, a well-known authority in the field of American social history, has noted that "It is probably safe to say that at the bottom there have been only two primary ways of explaining the American, and that almost all of the innumerable interpretations which have been formulated can be grouped around these two basic explana-

tions... one depicts the American as primarily an individualist and an idealist, while the other makes him out as a conformist and materialist."¹ Even foreign observers noted these contradictory tendencies long before the dawning of the twentieth century.

The English writer Harriet Martineau's account sounds at times as if she is paraphrasing modern critics of mass society. She wrote during the 1830's:

"There is fear of vulgarity, fear of responsibility; and above all, fear of singularity. . . There is something little short of disgusting to the stranger who has been unused to witness such want of social confidence, in the caution which presents probably the strongest aspect of selfishness that he has ever seen. The Americans of the northern states are, from education and habit, as accustomed to the caution of which I speak, as to be unaware of its extent and singularity...."²

The most famous observer of America, Alexis de Tocqueville, saw evidence of both individualism and conformity in the American character. He wrote, "The inhabitant of a democratic country compares himself individually with those all around him, he feels with pride that he is the equal of any one of them..."³ He also observed, however, that "in democratic states organized on the principles of the American republics, this is more especially the case, where the authority of the majority is so absolute and so irresistible that a man must give up his rights as a citizen, and almost abjure his qualities as a human being, if he intends to stray from the track which it lays down."⁴

The most celebrated post-Civil War visitor to America was James Bryce. He saw inherent in American society "self-distrust,

a despondency to fall into line, the acquiesce in dominant opinion."⁵

The general behaviours recorded by Bryce and Martineau as well as Tocqueville, were mentioned by many other foreign observers. Baron J.A. Graf von Hubner wrote: "Nothing can excite the contempt of an educated European more than the continual fears and apprehensions in which even the 'most Enlightened citizens' of the United States seem to live with regard to their next neighbors, lest their actions, principles, opinions and beliefs should be condemned by their fellow creatures."⁶

Clyde Kluckhohn, a more modern observer suggests,

"Today's kind of "conformity" may actually be a step toward more genuine individuality in the United States. "Conformity" is less of a personal and psychological problem - less tinged with anxiety and guilty. . . . If someone accepts outwardly the conventions of one's group, one may have greater psychic energy to develop and fulfill one's private potentials as a unique person. I have encountered no substantial evidence that this "conformity" is thoroughly "inward"."⁷

Foreign travelers' observations provide us with a comparative mirror in which we can look at ourselves over time. It is important to note, therefore, that the behaviour which many critics regard as distinctly modern was reported by many of the earlier travelers as a peculiarly American trait in their day.

In my research I have found that these two theories are involved in a continuing debate among historians, sociologists and political philosophers. Some experts insist on adhering to one side or the other of the argument. I, however, view the American as being a product of both of these forces which have simultaneously acted upon him throughout history. During

our history, people have admired individualism highly. It has always been qualified in some way, however, either by the Puritans with their insistence upon social conformity while preaching that the individual was free to communicate with God as he chose, the nineteenth century Southern planter who saw himself as a true individualist while simultaneously keeping slaves to work his fields, or the robber-barons of the turn of the century who turned their individual talents and opportunity into millions by exploiting those less fortunate than they.

Today's American is an amalgam of both of these forces. The importance of individualism and conformity in the historical development of society, can be demonstrated and the current debate concerning the evolution of America into a mass society throws further light on this issue. The prevailing thesis guiding the discussion of modern America centers around the recognition that America in the twentieth century has become a mass society but that this transformation is not necessarily inherently destructive to the individual and in fact it can be shown to increase the opportunity for individual expression, experience and freedom in certain areas of life. The greater freedom is largely the product of the technological society which arose after World War II.

As society evolves over time, a greater variety of life styles are created as the constraining traditionalism of the past gives way to ever-increasing individual expression.

Furthermore, the democratization of society allows everyone to share in the fruits of the age: increased leisure allows people to experience a wider variety of things, higher levels of education have opened up new possibilities for exposure to different things, and the right to choose between many alternatives in many areas of life now belongs to everyone. Modern society enhances freedom and the opportunity for individuals to pursue whatever interests of lifestyles they want to because the decline of tradition, of a hierarchical social order and the consideration of love, individuality and personal relationships as the right order of life, has created greater diversity, variety and a hunger for experience as more and more aspects of the world come into the purview of the ordinary man.

It would be foolish to ignore the criticisms of this view. Many experts see modern society as entirely bad, stifling to individual creativity, based on conformity and unquestioning masses, manipulating those who create and perpetuate it, and leading to cultural stagnation. I recognize and understand these criticisms, but I neither believe that the consequences are always as bleak as these authorities say, nor that the future of society is totally without hope toward progress, individual self-fulfillment or increased development of the human potential.

Certainly technological society can be more impersonal, more complex and more rapidly changing than earlier more traditional societies. But one does not have to lose one's

individual identity, feel insecure, alienated or helpless. Because of the greater variety of lifestyles, entertainment and experiences and the greater tolerance for and understanding of individual pursuits, the opportunity exists for greater self-fulfillment than in past ages. All the individual has to do is to take advantage of the opportunities provided by technological advances. One can now be exposed to world culture, avante-garde art or ethnic music if one so wishes. People can backpack in the Alaskan tundra or search for ruins in the jungles of Mexico if so inclined. Because scientific advances have made communication, travel and the dissemination of information so much easier, more people are free to pursue whatever interests them. If people lack the courage to follow their own interests, then the path is laid for them to become a member of the non-thinking, inactive, conforming lonely crowd. This usually happens because people feel the many societal pressures working toward conformity more strongly than they want to pursue their own interests.

One cannot fail to be impressed with the strength of the pressures working against the freedom of the individual, both now and in the past. Many view the American past as the era of rugged individualism where everyone was free to do exactly as they pleased, often with disregard for the law or their fellow beings. But upon closer examination of America's history and past tradition, one is constantly reminded that individual freedom has been one of the characteristics of the nation

since its beginnings in the seventeenth century, but that it has always been challenged through social and religious codes as well as community peer pressures. The past was highly bound to traditional ways and was highly resistant to change. But change is built into the modern technological society and all kinds of self-expression and individual fulfillment are readily accepted and even encouraged. This is due to the relative homogeneity (culturally) of the American people today. Many things were not accepted in the past because the country was made up of various homogeneous groups struggling for survival in a vast wilderness.

Early America's most prominent feature was its diversity and fragmentation. Every colony was founded for a different purpose and had a different ethnic, religious and political background. By and large they were extremely homogeneous settlements with, more often than not, laws governing social and religious conformity. When anyone disagreed with policies of a specific colony, he was free to move into the wilderness to follow his own philosophies.

Virginia, for example, was almost exclusively Anglican and royalist in policies. Any free man from any country was welcomed as long as he would swear an oath to the English sovereign and abide by the colony's social and political rules. Conformity was so important that masters of slaves and indentured servants had to assume responsibility for the outward conformity of their employees. Everyone who wanted to live differently from the

prevailing rules and manners was decidedly unwelcome. A group of Puritans who tried to test this was harrassed so much that they finally moved to New England afted the governor, who had the power to oust all religious nonconformists, told them to leave.⁸

New Amsterdam allowed no Jews, Quakers or non-reformed Christians. Maryland was a Catholic colony, but like the Pennsylvania Quaker colony, sincerely tolerated any newcomers of differing beliefs. Massachusetts went so far as to pass an ordinance in 1647 which forbade the entrance of Jesuits to the colony unless they were shipwrecked or on diplomatic business errands.⁹ These New England colonies were perhaps more rigid in demanding conformity than the other young settlements in the New World.

This can be attributed to the fact that a certain amount of conformity was necessary to carve a settlement out of the wilderness. In such a struggling society, everyone was expected to first pull his own weight in the maintenance of society and secondly pursue his own life interests. The task of building a society in a wilderness with Indians and harsh weather working against them made it necessary for the settlers to establish some expectations of conformity and outline the priorities and manner in which things should be done.

All of the settlers in the various colonies, the Puritans as well as the German and Quaker sectarians underwent a social process known as "tribalism."¹⁰ They all became exclusive and withdrawn (in differing degrees) in an attempt not only to cope

with the pluralistic nation which was developing around them. They generally abandoned any sense of salvation except for their own kind as a way to combat potentially destructive forces which might serve to weaken the fabric of the society for which they had crossed a treacherous ocean and fought a forbidding new land to preserve. They weren't going to travel 3,000 miles and not get the kind of social system that they wanted. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the New England Puritans.

The Massachusetts colonies were probably the most homogeneous societies in America until the beginning of the eighteenth century. The central feature of this society was its religion. All actions must accord with God's rules, and so social and political thinking was forced to conform with religious conclusions. The two essential elements of seventeenth century Puritanism contained both individualistic and collectivistic notions. The first was the mystical element of passion which each person had to feel toward God. This individual notion went hand in hand with the collective idea, the demand for rational obedience to an external social code. Thus the Puritans generated respect for individual freedom as well as the need for external discipline and conformity. At times these two factors were juxtaposed against one another and are the cause of some interesting paradoxes in Puritan social thought.

The central doctrine of religious thought was the "justification by faith," (the insistence that one look inward to one's own heart to discover the presence of God.) An individual could communicate directly with God so no intermediary priests

were necessary. They also believed that man was predestined by God to be either one of the chosen, or elect, or one of those who were sentenced to eternal damnation. Nothing that man could do could change the outcome of this previously decided fate. The only way one would perhaps get an idea whether one was elected or not was to outwardly materially prosper. Thus the incentive existed to work diligently to prosper, but it wasn't applied in an individualistic sense because one couldn't prosper for one's own personal benefit, it rather had to be for the benefit of God. The Puritan work ethic was deeply ingrained in the religion, but it was also to serve only the religious goals and not the individual personally.

These strong aspects of individualism contrasted sharply to the need for collectivism in the new and unstable societies struggling for existence in the wilderness. The Puritans' societal order was founded on covenants established shortly after the first settlers arrived in America and the contractual arrangement among men to live within the bounds of society sharply limited one's ability to express individual ideas which markedly differed from those held by the majority. Anyone who threatened the basic character of the community was excluded. This sentiment is aptly expressed by Winthrop when he wrote:

"if the peace of our cohabitation be our owne, then no man hath right to come into us, etc., without our consent. . . We lawfully refuse to receive such whose dispositions suite not ours and whose society will be hurtful to us."¹¹

This is evidenced by the expulsion of Roger Williams in 1636,

Anne Hutchinson in 1638 and the Quakers in the 1650's.

The individualism bound up in the religious tenets and the enforced conformity of the social sphere were always counterpoised against one another, and slowly Puritanism took on a new look. Paradoxically, its demise was due largely to its success in reaching the goals it had earlier established. As the settlement became older and more prosperous, and the inhabitants became more familiar with the natural phenomenon, the awfulness and incredible power of God as manifested in the physical environment took on a tamer character and a greater sense of confidence in the individual's abilities arose.

The early literature chronicles this changing philosophy well. In Winthrop's and Bradford's journals, God is clearly the protagonist. In Bradford's Plymouth Plantation, for example, the author makes it clear that without God's help and protection the journey would never have been completed. All future success of the colony was in God's hands rather than dependent upon the settlers' efforts. But later, in Mather's Magnalia Christi Americana (1702), man is the protagonist. Here, the prosperity and success of the colonies was due to man's resourcefulness and industriousness rather than a whim of God's. Man was beginning to understand how to control the world around him. The decreased sense of mystery of the world was accompanied by an increased willingness to allow experience to dictate man's values.

Because of this new confidence in man, the turn of the century saw the advent of two rival movements important to the individual. They were the Enlightenment, based on reason and individual conscience, and the Great Awakening, with its emphasis on direct individual experience of God. Both of these movements were going strong by mid-century. The Enlightenment stressed the belief in reason and the natural rights of man. It taught that since man was endowed with reason by the creator, he was able to observe the universe which was orderly and predictable. It also taught that man was endowed with certain natural rights, e.g., the right to be secure, to pursue one's own desires. These rights should be preserved by a consensual, contractual form of government. The Enlightenment thus placed tremendous confidence in the individual, and recognized that he was supreme and had a right to pursue his development to the fullest. This philosophy had a tremendous influence on the Revolution and served as the founding fathers' guiding philosophy in writing the Constitution. Because of it, the separation of church and state, the emphasis on individual liberties and the existence of the Bill of Rights is a part of the American tradition of law.

The Great Awakening was an attempt to rekindle the fires of religious zeal and was filled with theatrics and emotion. The idea of human depravity survived in an attempt to frighten people into renewing their belief in God, but the need for individual

experience of God's existence was stressed. Consequently, there was much emotion and drama in this movement. Men like George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards were major leaders in this movement. An outbreak in religious individualism, long fettered by the standing order of New England churches resulted as people revolted against the ruling oligarchy in religious disguise. Many New England towns were still governed by the church instead of a majority of citizens. This movement was partially an attempt to allow the majority to rule instead of the church, and can be seen as the beginnings of a movement which culminated in the American revolution.¹²

The movement didn't last long, however, because the justification of the theology was soon made into an intellectual pursuit and was confined largely to the divinity schools. People became alienated from the churches because they couldn't understand the extremely dry and complex intricacies of the doctrine. This development, combined with the political situation of the 1750's and '60's provided the impetus needed for the people to turn away from the clergy as their intellectual leaders to the politicians. The absolutism of the Puritan God became as objectionable as the absolutism of the English king as the political consciousness of the colonies rose. The age of popular rule and individual decision was upon America. Individualism rose hand-in-hand with democratic theory.

The Revolution was America's statement of individuality in that it mandated to England that the colonies be allowed to govern themselves in their own interests according to their own priorities. The Articles of Confederation and the Constitution resulted from the Revolution. Both documents were based on the liberal concept of popular rule and contractual government which were products of the Enlightenment. The government derived its power from the people and existed for their common benefit. Majority rule was the guiding decision-maker, but minority rights were protected. No longer could the majority inflict itself on the unprotected so that individual freedom was increased.

The Declaration of Independence recognized that all men were inherently separate and equal. But at the time of the writing, this was meant to mean only those who owned property and were of the male gender! It was felt that individuals who owned no property lacked the necessary stake in society to make reliable citizens. Therefore, individual influence, power and rights were qualified and contingent upon certain conditions.

Despite this, the Constitution did provide steps toward increased individual freedom and fulfillment. The Articles recognized the superiority of men over the government by having the government derive its power from the people, and provided for thirteen separate, individual and independent states which were united for specific purposes as one nation,

but which retained their own characters and sovereignty. Man was seen as a creature of rapacious self-interest, yet the framers wanted him to be free to follow his own pursuit of property. They assumed the state of nature to be the Hobbesian war of each against all, but they didn't propose to end it, merely to stabilize it and make it less murderous. Power was given to the common man; yet it was assumed that the superior man would always lead. Thus, complete individual opportunity for all to attain whatever they wanted, was still in the future because of the implicit notions that only the propertied and educated could lead.

Some of America's leading philosophers of the early nineteenth century held conflicting ideas as embodied in the two contrasting political theories of the Whiggish liberty of individual rights and the democratic principles of popular rule.

Jefferson seems to embody the ambiguities of both with his dedication to the common man's individuality and his firm belief in democratic rule. He saw all governments as evil at best because by their very nature they restricted the individual. As a proponent of the natural rights doctrine, he believed that a national system of self-seeking private enterprise would be intrinsically beneficial to the country as well as the individual and should be disturbed by the government. He also saw the farmer as the well-spring of civic virtue and of individual vitality. These were the people who were truly representative

of the American interest and who alone should be relied upon to express the proper American sentiments. His ideals of equality only extended as far as landowners, however, because individuals who weren't propertied weren't inherently endowed with the qualities necessary to be good citizens and therefore, were not as virtuous and deserving of a voice in government.

Jackson, however, is a symbol for the age of the rise of the common man, when American political democracy was beginning to diverge from the individualistic tenets of Jefferson. Jackson's aim was to bring the representative government under closer popular control, but he actually greatly increased Presidential power over the individual in his attempt. The age was characterized by opportunism, reckless speculation and erratic growth because people realized the material benefits which were to be gained from the primitive technology. Individualism was rampant and nearly everyone was caught up in the pursuit of material prosperity.

Alexis de Tocqueville saw the dangers in this, however. He feared majority tyranny might occur from the unchecked greed of the masses. Distinguishing between freedom for the individual and the American stress upon equality, Tocqueville observed that the love of equality and hatred of privileges, even the slightest, lead to the demand that all rights and privileges be concentrated in the hands of the government. A strong central government requires uniformity and this might contribute

to such social and collective undertakings as war, but it could also lead to a situation where the will of man, if not completely destroyed, would be softened, bent and easily guided. Fearing that the majority would destroy free institutions, de Tocqueville wrote: "I know of no country in which there is so little independence of mind and real freedom of discussion as in America."¹³

But philosophically, the age was extremely favorable to the individual. Transcendentalism, with its belief in the divinity of man and the doctrine of self-reliance, was emerging. This philosophy preached the divinity of man, the duty of self-reliance and the necessity of cultivating one's own possibilities.¹⁴ It was developed in New England by a group containing Emerson and Thoreau who saw the dangers which industrialism posed to the quality of life. It sought to measure everything within man's soul because it taught the unity of man and nature as well as the concept that man is the very essence of God, called the Over-soul. Man was, therefore, inherently divine and was sovereign over himself. Man could rely upon himself to establish his own spiritual existence because his capabilities were almost limitless.

Society to the transcendentalists was an aggregation of cohering individuals which existed only to provide a stable order so the individual could develop as he wished. Emerson rescued the individual from entangling Christian superstitions and preached a doctrine of liberation and individuality.¹⁵ This doctrine gave comfort to men groping for enlightenment in an

era when society was closing in on the individual.

The sense of cosmic optimism which was a part of the Transcendental idealism embodied the lasting qualities of self-reliance and creativity which enjoyed a revival in the 1960's and '70's. In its own period, transcendentalism greatly influenced the abolitionist movement.

Transcendentalism was largely confined to the East because America was divided by sectionalism, and the dissemination of ideas was usually confined within these division lines.¹⁶ The South and West were agricultural hinterlands to the predominantly commercial East. Between 1820 and 1860, the differences between the East and West greatly diminished due to increased communication and transportation systems and by 1850, actually only two sections, the North and South remained.¹⁷ The obvious difference between the two was the institution of slavery which eventually led to the Civil War.

The South considered its culture to be highly individualistic for the white planters. Since only seven percent of the Southern population was urban, connections with cities and their accompanying modes of conformity were absent. Since self-reliance was the basis of plantation organization, contact with cities or other social groups outside of the family were minimal and the conformity-encouraging factors inherent in cities never exerted pressure on the Southerners. The South did have its own social code, but the pressures to conform weren't

