Introduction

Few recent developments in the cultural and political life of the West have received as much intellectual interest as the alleged “rise of the individual” and obverse “death of the social” (Rose 1996). Contemporary processes of “individualization” have attracted the attention of scholars in many disciplines, each with their own interpretations of the phenomenon and its consequences. Arguably the most prominent and influential perspective has emerged from political sociology, in the works of authors who have come to be known as the “individualization theorists”: Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim, and Zygmunt Bauman. Taken together, their analyses are often grouped and understood as a coherent “individualization thesis.” The ideas of these individualization theorists were developed as contributions to debates in the last decades of the twentieth century about the changing nature of modernity, including the impacts of globalization, cultural pluralism, post-materialism, individualism, and ethical permissivism. In addition, this work directly engages the governmental politics of “late modernity,” in particular the ascendancy of neoconservative and neoliberal valorizations of self-reliance, as well as backlashes against individualistic modernity found in new forms of communitarianism, fundamentalism, and terrorism. This work on individualization is part of a larger narrative that integrates influential concepts such as “risk society” and “reflexive modernity.” In true sociological fashion, these analyses connect personal experiences of individualization with economic, social and political developments that transcend the individual.

The individualization theorists draw extensively from the works of classical sociologists, but they also attempt to reinterpret and renew these intellectual legacies. At the core is an attempt to give an account of the rise of the individual not in terms of the decline of the social, but as a social phenomenon. In this respect, they engage with many of the same puzzles as the classical sociologists, such as how it is that individuality and self-identity become more important in epochs dominated by impersonal and increasingly global institutions. They claim that individual freedom and authentic self-identity are not only compatible with contemporary institutions, but also heavily dependent on them.

While the individualization theorists share crucial assumptions, commentators and critics have often overlooked their differences (Howard 2007). The theorists use divergent
Individualization

Theoretical bases and methodologies, focus on different empirical data, and produce different, at times even contradictory, portraits of the contemporary individual. Taken individually and together, their works highlight the diverse elements of contemporary processes of individualization, the tensions and dilemmas forced on individuals, and the risks and anxieties that currently confront people in their daily lives.

This chapter provides a summary of work on the individualization thesis and its implications for identity. It starts by locating the thesis in its historical context. The chapter then addresses the key contributions of the theorists, with particular attention to the disagreements and contradictions within and between their works. The following section addresses the most common and most important critiques of the individualization thesis. Finally, I end with a discussion of the significance of the individualization thesis for studies of identity.

**Historical evolution of the concept**

The individualization theorists draw primarily from the sociological tradition and engage questions that have vexed sociologists for over a century. How can individuals exist and coexist within large societies? How should we understand the simultaneous rise of emphasis on individual freedom in modernity, along with the growth in mass organizations, technologies of impersonal exchange and instruments of destruction and violence that are too large and complex to be controlled by individuals? How does the modern individual maintain an authentic and coherent sense of self – an identity – if they are cajoled and coerced into adopting ascribed identities embedded in ethnic, racial, industrial, national, and supra-national groupings? In short, how does the individual survive and thrive given the social encroachments modernity has built?

The founders of sociology addressed these puzzles by showing how the individual and the social are interdependent in modernity. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Max Weber posited that individuality was encouraged by protestant sects which stressed that God gave each individual a “calling,” that only individuals themselves could discover their calling, and which proposed individual material success as a way of assuring oneself of spiritual salvation. Weber’s work on bureaucracy showed how rationalistic impersonal social organization actually facilitated individual difference by sequestering personal and professional lives, thereby allowing people private space to develop their identities (cf. du Gay 2000). In *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893) Emile Durkheim argued loyalty in modern societies was no longer achieved through sameness, but through specialization and interdependence within a complex division of labour, since the division of social roles produced spaces for individual difference. In his 1903 essay “Metropolis and mental life,” Georg Simmel claimed modern cities, in which interactions take place between strangers and anonymity is ensured by the crowd, permitted a greater degree of individuality than small, tightly knit communities.

The individualization theorists also engage with more recent sociology, as well as work from other disciplines. One important influence is Norbert Elias, who addresses the ways in which children are encouraged to develop a coherent sense of themselves and their needs, wants, and desires through the recognition and coercion of others in *The Society of Individuals* (1939). In the absence of these external recognitions, the will of the individual does not develop coherence and persistence. For Elias, individuality reflects the differences in how each individual internalizes and embodies “psychic self controls.” Michel Foucault has also influenced the work of the individualization theorists. Foucault’s arguments in *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison* (1977), about how “disciplinary” institutions such as schools, prisons, and military barracks can be simultaneously totalitarian and individualizing, show that individuality can go hand in hand with mass society and “total institutions.” Furthermore, his focus on the politics of the body,
and how individuals are encouraged to reflexively work upon themselves, is taken up extensively by Giddens in *Modernity and Self-Identity: self and society in the late modern age* (1991).

At minimum, we can say that the individualization theorists are updating the sociological contribution to reflect the social changes of the last half century. To this end, the individualization theorists divide modernity into “early” and “late” phases. These authors associate a number of critical developments with the late modernity that distinguish it from the early phase, including the rise of administrative and welfare states, changes in the nature of the family including increased divorce, the emergence of new technologies such as the contraceptive pill, an increasingly “global” outlook driven by new communication technologies, accelerated movements of trade and people, the demise of the Eastern Bloc, and greater awareness of the transnational nature of threats such as nuclear proliferation and environmental damage. In terms of scholarship, the theorists consciously engage arguments that Western societies have given up core elements of modernity and are now “post modern,” “post-Fordist,” “post-industrial,” “post-material,” and so on. As we shall see, the theorists agree with aspects of these claims, yet they are unwilling to accept the implication that we have left the essential components of modernity behind. Their discussion is focused on how modernity has evolved and adapted.

**Major claims and developments in the field**

The individualization theorists draw from a shared intellectual heritage, respond to similar concerns, and make many similar observations. In the first part of this section I address the common points of Giddens, Bauman, and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim. Next I deal with the distinctive points presented by each author. I will suggest that even though the individualization theorists all regard self-identity as a key concern of late modernity, they disagree about the extent to which individuals can create and maintain authentic, unified senses of self.

Bauman, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and Giddens all start with the observation that modernity has corroded social structures that once compelled people to live according to historically predetermined and externally imposed rules and norms. Like their forebears in classical sociology, these authors highlight the declining importance of tradition (the notion that actions and structures can be justified by the fact that people have always acted the same way, and the same structures have always existed) in determining the direction and content of people’s lives. Whereas the early sociologists focused on the historical period in which the authority of tradition was confronted and overcome by the disruptive forces of rationalist modernity, the individualization theorists concentrate on the experience of living after traditions have been dismantled – in a “post-traditional” society (see Beck et al. 1994). They point to the fact that certain traditions such as patriarchal authority lingered in and were to some extent reinforced by elements of early modernity; for example, Fordist modes of governance relied upon patriarchal traditions to legitimize full-time male employment and the relegation of women to the private sphere of social reproduction. Their arguments are consistent with Weber’s observation that early modernity benefited from the inheritance of pre-modern status traditions because these eased social acceptance of new forms of stratification and submission such as bureaucratic hierarchy.

According to the individualization theorists, modernity has also undermined important social groupings that in the past prescribed behaviors, supplied identities, and offered material and emotional support to members. The family no longer provides set roles and reliable supports: the high rate of divorce in late modernity makes financial reliance on spouses problematic, while women’s increased participation in the labour market and social expectations of gender equality throw open the question of how partnered women (and men) will allocate their time and define their roles (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). Labour unions, which formed stable collectives...
and supplied material supports and shared identities to the working class in the early modernity, have been sidelined by economic and political transformations to the point where workers in most industries can no longer rely on them for career security. Conventional churches have also experienced marked declines in participation and membership, and with this a loss in their capacity to engage in behavioral regulation. With growing geographical mobility, increased urbanization and new communication technologies, local communities have lost their powers to monitor, control and sanction behavior. The result, according to the individualization theorists, is that individuals have been liberated to take greater control over their lives, but at the same time, they also face greater responsibility for meeting their own needs, and they have lost the certainty that came with tradition and collective responsibility for individual circumstances. In this sense, the rise of the individual is both a cause and a consequence of the shift toward “risk society” (Beck 1992).

It is tempting to conclude that these observations are a variation on the familiar story of individual emancipation from social constraints (Howard 2007). Yet the individualization theorists reject the idea that social factors and forces are less significant in late modernity than in earlier periods. Instead they argue that the nature of social structure has changed, so as to encourage and ultimately compel people to become individuals. As Beck puts it, “individualization is the social structure of the second modernity” (in Beck and Willms 2004: 63, emphasis original). Our lives are no less dominated by social structure than in previous times; it is simply that social structure compels us to be individuals. Hence individuality is not a matter of individual choice – it is a social obligation (see Bauman 2000).

It is also a mistake to interpret the individualization theorists as arguing that individualization means the wholesale removal of external supports, forcing people to fend for themselves and become completely independent. To be sure, individualization does suggest the withdrawal of certain supports, but Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and Bauman do not argue that individualization unambiguously represents greater independence and self-sufficiency. Instead, they show how individualization involves a shift in dependency, away from traditions and collectives, and toward modern institutions. The theorists point to several critical institutions on which modern individuals depend: the labour market, education systems, welfare states, the discipline of psychology, the mass media, and consumer capitalism. These institutions are different from the old objects of dependency for several reasons. First, they do not supply coherent ready-made identities, or “default options,” that people can select and thereby avoid the effort and uncertainty of self-definition. Second, they usually provide supports that enable individuals to shape their own identities and differentiate themselves from others. Third, they almost always demand those who participate in them share responsibility for decisions and outcomes.

None of the individualization theorists believe contemporary processes of individualization are completely linear and straightforward, for individuals or societies. All acknowledge that there are great tensions in the process – for instance, between the demands of different individuals for their own spaces for personal growth and freedom, and between individual priorities and institutional pressures. For Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001), women especially experience individualization as a series of tensions, since they are caught between continuing to bear a disproportionate share of caring and household work, and the expectations and in some cases necessity that they actively take part in paid work. Yet these contradictions – between career and family, for instance – which reflect structural problems, are not met with comprehensive structural or systemic solutions. Rather, individuals are compelled to “seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001: xxii), meaning they must individually work out how to survive and live meaningful lives in the context of economic, political, and social forces beyond their control.
Finally, while processes of individualization are ultimately non-negotiable, some segments of society put up considerable resistance to the personal responsibility and uncertainty associated with individual self-definition. The individualization theorists suggest new movements have emerged to cater these needs, including ideological and religious fundamentalisms, as well as new philosophies of and experiments in communitarianism. Bauman, Giddens and Beck are consistently hostile toward contemporary efforts to reassert community and tradition – they see in these movements the potential for authoritarianism, violence, and denial of personal growth. These agendas pose particular dangers for traditionally depersonalized subjects, including women, migrants, and persons with disabilities, because of the risk of a re-emergence of the violence that was systematically visited upon such people within traditional communities. Thus the authors place themselves in disagreement with scholars who condemn the late modern erosion of community and the rise of individualism, such as Etzioni in *The Spirit of the Community: rights, responsibilities, and the communitarian agenda* (1993) and Putnam in *Bowling Alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (2000).

The above outline of shared themes in the works of Bauman, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and Giddens glossed over important differences. The theorists employ different methods: Giddens uses ideal types to characterize contemporary individualization processes, and as such it is not always clear that he intends to provide an accurate description of late modern self-identity. Bauman’s work, which draws heavily on cultural material such as literary fiction, news and entertainment media, does not give explicit consideration to epistemology. The Becks are the most clearly empirical, using case studies, statistical data, interpretive interviews, and comparative analyses to support their arguments about the complexities and contradictions of late modern individuality. As a result, these authors produce divergent portraits of individual self-identity.

In Giddens’s account, late modernity encourages a particular kind of reflexive individuality, tied to a coherent self-directed path or “trajectory.” Although Giddens shares with his contemporaries the notion that late modern life contains contradictory pressures and fragmenting discontinuities, his work on identity stresses the ways in which individuals can surmount these conditions to develop a coherent sense of self-identity. To do this they rely on institutions, in two ways. First, late modern institutions “sequester” our experiences, meaning they shut out difficult existential and moral issues, as well as troubling phenomena such as madness and death, which might produce contradictory and emotionally overwhelming psychic states. Although some see specialization and the division of labour as alienating and depersonalizing, Giddens (1991) suggests these technologies actually enhance choice and self-determination, by carving out spaces in which individuals can control their lives without taking into consideration deeper existential questions.

Second, late modern institutions provide tools for individuals to make rational choices about and thus take deliberate control of their lives. Giddens sees institutions as stores of specialist expertise that can help people to better understand their circumstances and the constraints they face, enabling them to more systematically make life choices. Here Giddens challenges the conventional critique of professional expertise as a source of power that allows experts to unilaterally dominate lay people. For example, Giddens addresses psychological therapy, which for him is not only a profession characterized by asymmetries of expertise between therapist and patient, but also a set of tools and practices for self-discovery and self-healing. Therapy typically encourages individuals to work on themselves and to implement practices such as journaling and “autobiography.” Giddens regards autobiography as a crucial self-practice of late modernity that allows individuals to stitch together diverse experiences from the past, present, and future into a coherent self-narrative.
Individualization

Other late modern social institutions also promote self-trajectories. For instance, whereas intimate relationships were once formed and structured according to external commands and conditions, such as the economic necessity to find a spouse or to marry in the case of pregnancy, as well as the patriarchal traditions that governed gender roles in marriage, in *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) Giddens suggests relationships are now more likely to be governed by the internal desires and aspirations of the parties involved. The contraceptive pill and social acceptability of divorce have turned intimate relationships into pure expressions of the personalities, interactions, and wills of partners, who are free to “exit” whenever they choose. Although these “pure relationships” create stress and insecurity for partners, they also open up space for individuality. Importantly, Giddens suggests that these kinds of pure relationships, in which partners seek each other for their individual characteristics, do not just tolerate but actually affirm and reinforce self-identity. In this way, we see how Giddens’s work interprets late modern individuality as socially rooted. Formal and informal institutions of late modernity compel and support the formation and maintenance of a coherent self-identity.

Giddens is vague about how much reality matches these ideal types, though he strongly implies that the coherent self-trajectory is the norm in late modernity. He does this in part by exploring exceptions that prove the rule, or examples of self-identities he regards as “pathological.” Giddens draws upon R.D. Laing’s concept of the “ontologically insecure individual” in *The Divided Self: an existential study in sanity and madness* (1964) to describe those cases where sense of self and of continuity is “fractured” (Giddens 1991: 53). According to Giddens’s account of Laing, the ontologically insecure individual sees life in terms of “[d]iscontinuity in temporal experience” and interprets time “as a series of discrete moments, each of which severs prior experiences from subsequent ones in such a way that no continuous ‘narrative’ can be sustained” (ibid.: 53; see also Yeatman 2007). Such persons are “obsessively preoccupied with apprehension of possible risks to [their] existence” and, as such, are “paralysed in terms of practical action” (Giddens 1991: 53).

Other deviations from the norm occur when the reflexive planning and self-control implied in the trajectoral biography become excessive and dysfunctional, as is the case, according to Giddens, in sufferers of anorexia nervosa. This disorder reflects a “pathology of reflexive self-control” in which some women try to reconcile the prevailing social discourses of individualism and gender inequality with their continued oppression by exercising an extreme form of reflexivity over their bodies (ibid.: 105). In anorexia, the attempt to exercise control over one’s future, to set a trajectory of change and improvement, becomes compulsive and self-destructive. Furthermore, while Giddens recognizes that modern life creates several “dilemmas,” he argues that these lead to disjointed biographies only in exceptional cases (ibid.). Hence, in Giddens’s analysis, the normality of reflexive biography is reinforced by casting as pathological and dysfunctional those individuals whose subjective experiences do not conform to his linear model of self-development. In this way, Giddens implies that a coherent self-identity is both possible and normal.

Whereas Giddens’s model of contemporary identity strongly emphasizes the continuity of the self, Zygmunt Bauman’s approach to understanding personal identity stresses fluidity. Bauman suggests that late modern life has no certainties and that individuals are compelled to face and embrace biographical discontinuity. He argues it is increasingly difficult to settle one’s self-identity because the accelerating pace and widening scope of cultural, economic, political, and social change forces individuals continuously to dispose of existing identities and replace them with fresh biographical narratives. In this context, all arrangements and relationships become fluid, impermanent, and unpredictable, such that, even at the level of intimate and personal associations, continuity cannot be taken for granted, and commitments are only sustained “until
further notice” (see Bauman 2003: 10). The changing nature of personal life, and the new demands of governance and political economy, favor those who can move quickly and are able to adapt to changes and exploit emerging opportunities, unencumbered by commitments to particular identities, others, and places. According to Bauman (2000), inhabiting a liquid-modern world is like living in a labyrinth, with no clear paths or directions, many options, and little ability to look forward or backward in time and space, since one’s footprints are always disappearing.

While Bauman’s late modern individuals need to move and change, all do not have equal facilities and resources at their disposal for undertaking biographical reinvention (Bauman 2000; see also Bauman 2004). His analysis suggests that those with the power and resources to regularly adapt their identities will do so. He gives the example of Bill Gates, who, at first glance, might be said to embody and express a trajectorial biography comprising a spectacular accumulation of accomplishments and attainments. Yet, in spite of all that Gates has achieved, he allegedly dislikes “permanence,” is not emotionally committed to or invested in his past accomplishments, and prefers a “network of opportunities” from which he can choose to develop new affiliations and experiences (Sennett in Bauman 2000: 124). In late modernity, the nomad, once regarded as primitive, becomes the coveted model of individuality, while those tied to time and place are disadvantaged by their biographical fixity. For Bauman (2000), the key mechanism of power in liquid modernity is the ability to “escape” from bonds and commitments to one’s self and others, and for this reason individuals, institutions, and organizations increasingly avoid long-term involvements and set out to keep their options open.

Bauman’s model of disposable biography is closely related to his observation that the transition from “solid” to “liquid” modernity involves a shift from production to consumption as the primary source of individual identity (Bauman 2000). In a society of producers, as existed in the “heavy” or “solid” modernity (Bauman’s preferred terms for early modernity), individuals see their primary roles and tasks in terms of the production of valuable things. Individual actions are necessarily regulated through the imposition of discipline and routine, while personal advancement depends upon the acquisition, mastery, and augmentation of specialist skills over time. Self-development in the context of production and work follows the logics of career and promotion, a sense of accumulation of achievements, advancing toward a goal or position. However, in the consumer society of liquid modernity, these producer-oriented values are increasingly irrelevant and counterproductive. Instead of building their biographies, individuals now purchase ready-made components of self-identity, choosing from a range of options. Not surprisingly, industries have sprung up to commodify and profit from the distribution of biographical components; chat shows on commercial television networks, such as Oprah, which supply viewers with examples of biographies, are an excellent example (ibid.). Critically, unlike producers, consuming individuals do not attempt to invest in and work on what already exists, but rather continuously refresh their stock of identity goods. Biographical improvement in liquid modernity thus occurs through updating, a central component of which is the disposal of existing self-narratives, or the willingness to discard old self-identities (Bauman 2003: 21, 49).

Bauman claims that there has been a general deterioration in the quality and quantity of collective dialogue about public issues in recent decades, and he attributes this in part to the rise of identity-politics (Bauman 2000, 2004). Whereas some commentators interpret the emergence of identity-politics in the 1960s and 1970s in terms of the opening up of personal life to public scrutiny and political contestation, Bauman suggests that such movements encouraged individuals to turn away from the public sphere and to focus inwardly on their private tribulations. He argues that contemporary identity movements on the “cultural left” tend to be preoccupied with issues of personal identity at the expense of pressing public concerns such as job
insecurity, poverty, and social inequality (Bauman 2004: 36). Thus, Bauman suggests that we are witnessing

the renunciation of the duty which intellectuals who were social critics once believed they owed to the rest of their contemporaries, particularly those who were less privileged and happy than themselves. With that duty no longer acknowledged, their descendents may now focus on their own tender, touchy and sore spots, struggling to raise the respect and adulation they enjoy to the level of the economic heights they have already gained. They are, stubbornly, self-concerned and self-referential. . . . The war for social justice has therefore been shortchanged for a plethora of battles for recognition.

(ibid.: 37)

As a result of these and other recent developments, Bauman suggests it is increasingly difficult to mobilize individuals around collective causes, and that the public sphere has gradually been colonized by individuals who feel compelled to divulge personal experiences and private issues, to the extent that discussion of public concerns has been crowded out by self-stories (Bauman 2000).

Whereas Giddens portrays contemporary self-identity as a coherent trajectory, and Bauman tells a story of biographical fluidity and uncertainty, Beck and Beck Gernsheim (2001) focus on individuals’ creative efforts to build identities for themselves in the face of structural contradictions. The institutions of late modernity force people to take responsibility for their own lives, compelling them to make themselves the focus of their efforts. However, many of life’s problems remain structural, or beyond the immediate control of individuals, such as the continuing disconnect between women’s career expectations and the reality of unequally distributed household work. Formal institutions reinforce these contradictions: while some, like schools and universities, actively encourage and support women to pursue careers in the paid workforce, others, such as social insurance and welfare systems, fail to provide supports for women’s independence, including adequate organized child care and income support for single parents. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim claim that it is not possible for individuals to find complete biographical solutions to structural problems, and in the absence of collective or public efforts to overcome these difficulties, individuals are forced to search for the best means of creatively coping with the contradictions and tensions they encounter in their own lives.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that this context demands that individuals adopt an experimental attitude toward their lives, that they create and test a range of biographical prototypes in order to find models that will offer comfort and meaning in a world of contradiction and uncertainty. Importantly, individuals cannot devise biographical responses on their own, but rather depend fundamentally on institutions for support and guidance. In this account, the welfare state plays a critical role in facilitating experimentation.

Like Giddens, Beck (Beck and Willms 2004: 82–3) regards “basic security” as a fundamental prerequisite of modern individualization, and he sees the welfare state as a key component in this framework of ontological certainty. Yet Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s notion of the experimental biography differs from Giddens’s linear model of self-identity because it assumes a degree of contradiction and risk that precludes neat trajectories. While institutions offer a mixture of supports that individuals can take up in their search for individualized coping strategies, these supports do not overcome the dilemmas and uncertainties of late modern life. Thus, individual biographical experiments are always at risk of failing, and self-identities face the constant threat of “breakdown” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001: 3). Furthermore, in contrast to Giddens’s arguments about the sequestration of experience, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim suggest that
late-modern institutions do not shut out or overcome difficult moral questions, but rather introduce new dilemmas and compel individuals to deal with paradoxes on a continuing basis (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). For example, pre-natal screening technologies force expectant parents who interact with modern medical institutions to confront profound ethical and decisional dilemmas that did not exist in earlier eras. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s approach also diverges from Bauman’s in their focus on the need for individuals to invest time and energy in creating and maintaining viable biographical coping strategies, implying that people do not simply consume and discard pre-made identity components.

Beck (Beck and Willms 2004: 83) argues that in order to facilitate biographical experimentation, it is necessary to institute a system of guaranteed basic incomes for all citizens. Although Beck believes that the post-war welfare state enabled new levels of independence for many individuals, he also argues that this system reinforced a number of important traditional dependencies and inequalities. Social supports in many countries were (and in many cases are still) tied to participation in the labor market, and recent welfare reforms have tightened the nexus between paid work and support, removing assistance from those who seek alternative lifestyles or who undertake activities, such as caring, that do not involve direct engagement in the labor market. By contrast, the model proposed by Beck would do away with these employment conditions by extending a minimum income or “basic wage” to all citizens. Such a system would ameliorate many of the pressures and tensions of late-modern life, and should allow individuals the freedom to test biographical alternatives without the fear of falling into poverty if their experiments fail.

To summarize, the individualization theorists all document the demise of tradition and community in determining and supporting behaviours, the rising dependency of individuals on institutions, and the risks and dilemmas associated with individualized biographies. Their accounts differ on the possibility of maintaining a coherent self-identity in late modernity.

**Criticisms**

While influential, the individualization thesis has also been subject to vigorous criticism. Here I address five objections:

1. The individualization thesis is largely a restatement of existing social theories, since these ideas were previously addressed in classical sociology and other disciplines.
2. The individualization thesis erroneously suggests inequality is no longer structural, because it rejects the explanatory validity of class and other structured forms of stratification.
3. Individualization is inappropriately presented as a universal experience, whereas individualized identity is properly understood as only experienced by a privileged few.
4. Individualization is better understood as a governance strategy, rather than a social structure.
5. The normative aspects of the individualization thesis are problematic.

The first criticism of the individualization thesis suggests that it is not as novel as its proponents suggest. Instead, it essentially represents the continuation of a tradition of work in sociology and related disciplines (see above) into the late modernity. Even if it incorporates contemporary observations, the underlying theoretical frameworks and epistemologies are not new (Schroer 2000; Mills 2007; Nollman and Strasser 2007). The same fundamental insights into de-traditionalization and the structural rise of the individual were captured by Tonnies in *Community and Civil Society* (1887), Weber (1905) and Durkheim (1893); similar connections were made between personal relationships and individualized identity by Freud in *Civilization and Its*
Individualization

*Discontents* (1930), Elias (1939), and Laing (1964); the thesis resonates with work on reflexivity and the body by Foucault (1977, 1978); and arguments about the carving up of public spaces into individualized realms are found in earlier work by Foucault (1977) and Sennett in *The Fall of Public Man* (1977).

The individualization authors do acknowledge and engage with earlier contributors. They also explicitly differentiate themselves. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) argue that Weber’s portrait of a modernity haunted by pre-modern traditions and statues is not relevant in the second half of the twentieth century. Similarly, Bauman (2000) suggests Weber’s idea of modernity as increasingly instrumentally rational, and dominated by a small number of institutions which dictate morality, has been replaced by a society in which there are no centralized value-defining institutions, leaving individuals preoccupied with what ends they should seek given a plethora of means. Giddens (1991) argues that his work on self-identity suggests a need rethink the historical emphasis on internalization of social norms, since late modernity encourages individuals to regulate themselves according to their own desires, not prohibitions. The point, as Giddens stresses, is not to reject these earlier theorists, but to provide a more nuanced account that considers complex, non-linear developments and trends within modernity and in the formation, compilation, and negotiation identities. In this way, the individualization theorists move away from the early modern story of progressive social evolution toward individualism and rationalism.

The second body of criticism suggests the individualization theorists overestimate the decline of structures of inequality such as class and gender. Beck has written extensively about the “death of class,” much to the chagrin of scholars who see class continuing to profoundly affect identity and material circumstances (Goldthorpe 2000; Savage 2000; Coté 2003). Beck stresses that late modernity has transformed the relatively rigid hierarchies of industrialism into much less stable patterns of inequality, where no one is completely insulated from the threat of poverty and social alienation, and where individual decisions now carry greater risks because there are no traditional supports such as the family, community, corporation, and union to fall back on (Beck 1992; Beck et al. 1994). Significant empirical evidence has been assembled suggesting that class continues to have an important impact on both identification and life chances (see Mills 2007). In light of this, some critics read Beck’s arguments as suggesting that everyone faces the same risks of hardship, the same opportunities for success, and that individualization means individuals are now solely responsible for their material fates (Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Gillies 2005; Mythen 2005). Beck does indeed suggest that late modernity, individualization, and risk society create new insecurities for the privileged, but he does not see the death of class as the death of structures of inequality. Rather, new forms and axes of inequality have emerged to replace industrial modes of stratification, based around intra- and international disparities in access to institutional resources (Beck and Willms 2004). Furthermore, Beck suggests experiences of inequality become sharper and more painful when juxtaposed against late modern discourses of individual opportunity and self-reliance. As Bauman (2000) stresses, inequality has not diminished, but the disappearance of class from public discourse leaves individuals without vocabularies to publicly convey their “private” struggles. Recent interpretive research on class and self-identity suggests a complex mixture of individual and structural stories and identifications (Mills 2007; Nollmann and Strasser 2007).

The third criticism suggests the individualization theorists tend to universalize the social processes they describe, implying that all people, irrespective of class, gender and race, feel compelled to develop distinct self-identities (Roseneil 2007). Critics note access to the spaces and supports that allow for identity building is not evenly distributed, so that individualized identity itself can become a key dimension of inequality (Elliott 2002). Others argue individualized
identity is a luxury that one can only turn one’s attention to once basic needs are met, equivalent to the role of self-actualization in Mal'sow’s hierarchy of needs (Mills 2007). In Class, Self and Culture (2003) Skeggs claims the individualization theorists mistakenly apply their own middle-class experience and interest in reflexivity to the population as a whole. Coté (2003) observes that youth who are unable or unwilling to invest the effort, resources, and time necessary to individualize their identities end up falling back on “default biographies” in which they adopt an orientation of conformity with fads and fashions.

The individualization thesis is also criticized for failing to take gender into account. Hey (2005) uses interview research to argue that working-class women do not identify with reflexive self-hood as suggested by the individualization theorists. Furthermore, numerous observers have expressed opposition to Giddens’s account of the “pure relationship,” and in particular the implication that women now generally experience intimate relationships as empowering and liberating. They note the ongoing presence of gendered disparities in paid work and care, the continuing dominance of “heteronormative” relationship models, and the compounding effects of intersections between gender, class and race (Duncan and Edwards 1999; Jamieson 1999; Ribbens McCarthy and Edwards 2002; Skeggs 2003). Bauman rarely mentions gender (Howard 2007). One worry is that the individualization theorists tell the story of men’s experiences of individualization as if they apply equally to women as well. For instance, Giddens’s notion of self-identity as a trajectory fits better with men’s uninterrupted career paths than women’s discontinuous and shifting engagements with paid work and household labor (Howard 2007).

Considerable empirical evidence has been assembled to show that individualization is not a universal experience. Yet, as Roseneil (2007) suggests, it is a mistake to see these observations as “fatally undermining” the concept of individualization. Those who argue individualization is only for the privileged tend to ignore the ways in which life for the disadvantaged has become highly individualized. To be sure, these subjects do not experience individualization straightforwardly as a process of liberation, self-expression, and personal fulfillment, yet their lack of resources means they frequently confront situations in which they are forced to rely on themselves, make choices and take responsibility for their situations. In this sense, the poor may experience individualization more intensely and consistently than the wealthy (Giddens 1991).

Furthermore, as Ferguson (2007) and James (2006) have argued, the idea that we can neatly separate out questions of material survival and identity is highly problematic. Ferguson (2007) shows how situations of deprivation, abuse, and violence usually go hand in hand with denial of the victim’s autonomy and refusal to acknowledge their distinct identity. This interpretation of the individualization problematizes the binary opposition between “recognition” and “redistribution” (cf. James 2006), along with Bauman’s dismissive characterization of identity-politics as a bourgeois, narcissistic preoccupation. It suggests individual control over biography and identity are not luxuries, but basic prerequisites for the alleviation of social disadvantage in late modernity. For these reasons, the idea that individualization is something that just matters to the powerful and wealthy, who have secured themselves physically and financially, is not tenable. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the content and implications of individualization vary considerably across numerous dimensions, including gender, race, sexuality, and socio-economic position.

Fourth, some argue that individualization is better understood as a governance paradigm rather than a social structure. Comparisons are sometimes made between the individualization thesis and the neo-Foucauldian governmentality literature (see Budgeon 2003; Henman 2007; Johansson 2007). Although Beck and Giddens explicitly reject many of Foucault’s theories of individuality, there are very important similarities between their work and the Foucauldian concept of governmentality (Dean 1999; Rose 1999; Brady 2007; Henman 2007). Governmentality
suggests a shift away from “total institutions,” in which individuals are subjected to direct and severe forms of control (Foucault 1977), toward new kinds of regulation and manipulation that work indirectly on individuals “at a distance” (Rose 1999). Foucault and his followers are especially interested in how (neo)liberal societies manage to function in a productive and orderly manner, in spite of the fact that they grant considerable freedom to individuals. Techniques of discipline are still involved, but activities of social governance are increasingly conducted by individual subjects themselves. Institutions do not operate by dominating their subjects, but are rather engaged in a subtle process of instructing individuals in the use of particular “techniques of the self,” which build individuals’ capacities to govern themselves and to assess and correct their own physical, intellectual, and emotional deficits (Dean 1998, 1999). Importantly, these “microphysics of power” are linked to broader neoliberal governance agendas (Dean 1999; Rose 1996; Brady 2007; Henman 2007).

Whereas the individualization theorists are primarily concerned with broad shifts in social structure, governmentality authors tend to analyze specific attempts to govern people as individuals, usually through detailed examinations of particular public programs or policy initiatives. They rely mostly on official texts, documents and administrative manuals, and seek to describe the specifics of how individuals are supervised, constituted as particular kinds of subjects, and encouraged systematically to regulate their own conduct. In this way, they provide a more grounded and contextual understanding of individualization. On the other hand, the governmentality approach tends to overemphasize the coherence of policies and programs, in part because it seeks to establish connections between micro-practices and macro-agendas, but also because most empirical governmentality research addresses official documents, not the subjects being governed (Li 2007; Mitchell 2006). As a result, the approach downplays the contradictions and fissures in contemporary individualization that might form possibilities for individuals to resist and escape neoliberal governance. Rather than regarding the individualization and governmentality theses as rival approaches, this discussion suggests they potentially complement each other by illuminating different aspects of contemporary identity formation.

Finally, the individualization thesis has stirred up a lively debate about whether these developments in late modernity should be seen as positive or negative. Giddens has been criticized for stressing the emancipatory potential of individualization, for suggesting that it makes almost everyone happier (Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2003), and for failing to seriously consider the anxiety and pain associated with increased insecurity in intimate relationships (Roseneil 2007). Bauman, on the other hand, is associated with a negative focus on the uncertainties and stresses associated with increased freedom, to the point that Roseneil (2007) calls him a “patriarchal pessimist,” suggesting his distaste for liquid modernity reflects nostalgia for the comfort and certainty of the patriarchal family. Nevertheless, none of these theorists see the most commonly invoked alternatives to individualization as desirable or sustainable. Current efforts to counter late modern “individualism” and to build “community” and “social capital” are greeted by these authors with great skepticism and trepidation. They say critics who stress the negatives of individualization have yet to clearly articulate how alternative social structures premised on community will not discriminate, dominate, exclude, and normalize.

The individualization theorists are also normative in the sense that they present prescriptions for policy reform to facilitate individualized identities in late modernity. Two key examples are Giddens’s “third way” and Beck’s “basic security.” Both proposals build logically from the authors’ analyses of social trends in late modernity. As we shall see, both proposals are subject to important critiques.

Giddens claims that his interpretation of contemporary self-identity provides an alternative to dominant neoliberal discourses and governing programmes (Giddens 1998, 2000). His “third
way” explicitly rejects the suggestion that governments must withdraw from individuals’ lives in order to expand personal freedom. Giddens observes considerable differences in the abilities of individuals to act positively in shaping their own biographies and managing risks. He is particularly concerned about the “socially excluded” (Giddens 1998: 102–11): such individuals fail to conform to the dominant model of biography because their lives do not assume a positive trajectory. Instead, their biographies are circular and repetitive, since they are stuck in cycles of poverty (ibid.: 109). In Giddens’s vision, the state should intervene and provide support for those excluded from social networks and lacking the skills of biographical self-management, by providing them with skills to help them manage risks in their own lives. This support differs from that provided by post-war welfare state, since it demands that individuals become active in shaping their own lives.

Critics note that in practice there are important affinities between Giddens’s third way and neoliberal governance (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001; Hall 2003). Giddens’s prescriptions have been adopted and adapted to suit neoliberal agendas. For example, third way-style capacity building and life-planning programs have been used in several jurisdictions to compel recipients of state assistance to improve their own labor-market prospects in the name of reducing welfare dependency and improving economic competitiveness (Clarke 2004; Rose 1999; Brady 2007; Brodie 2007; Henman 2007). These programs often fail to open up space for authentic biographical exploration, but instead force individuals to adopt particular identities and make specific lifestyle choices (Brady 2007; Henman 2007).

Whereas Giddens’s third way has been associated with restricting entitlements to income supports, Beck argues that in order to facilitate individualized identities, it is necessary to institute a system of guaranteed basic incomes for all citizens (Beck and Willms 2004: 83). Such a system would ameliorate many of the pressures and tensions of late modern life, and should allow individuals the freedom to test biographical alternatives without the fear of falling into poverty if their experiments fail (ibid.). Unfortunately, Beck has not articulated how a guaranteed minimum income could be reconciled with the contemporary social policy context that features cuts to entitlements and new “workfare” interventions that compel recipients of state support to seek and undertake activation as a condition of receiving assistance (Peck 2006; Brady 2007; Brodie 2007; Henman 2007; van Berkel and Valkenburg 2007).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001: 24) and Beck (in Beck and Willms 2004: 78) insist that their preferred model of “social-experimental” individualization is deliberately antithetical to neoliberal “atomization.” While Beck’s advocacy of a basic income system is inconsistent with neoliberal emphases on self-sufficiency and welfare retrenchment, in other respects, the model is decidedly “liberal” in its assumptions and implications. Beck’s basic wage rests on the liberal premise that individuals are inherently capable of acting as autonomous and creative agents so long as external constraints do not impede their freedom. This implies that individualization is primarily a process of emancipation of inherently capable individuals from bonds of familial and material dependency. Yet this emancipatory model does not address social contexts in which individual “exit” is impossible, such as parent–child relationships. Individualization as emancipation from material dependency is also problematic in situations where institutions are called upon to facilitate the individuality of those who lack certain important capacities, such as persons with intellectual or psychiatric disabilities (cf. Yeatman 1997). This issue connects to the more general question about how late modern institutions should intervene in individuals’ lives to promote and support the development of distinctive self-identities and unique biographies. While Beck and Beck-Gernsheim admit that such interventions are inevitable and necessary, they do not elaborate on the specific principles that should guide the design of policies and programs in the context of “institutionalized individualism” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001).
Beck and Beck-Gernsheim’s public support for social experimentation is presented as being substantially at odds with neoliberal atomism. Yet neoliberals have also embraced the language of state-sponsored experimentation and modified it to fit their own agendas. Brodie (2007) explores how neoliberal policy initiatives appeal to the logic of experimentation in place of notions of linear and universal development and progressive expansion found in earlier social programs (see also Howard 2006; Larner and Walters 2000). In this respect, the governmentality approach, which reminds us that individualization is not just a form of social structure but also a series of governmental projects tied to particular interests and objectives, helps keep the focus on how discourses of individualization are constructed and appropriated by political actors for strategic ends.

This review of key criticisms of the individualization thesis highlighted some important problems with the theories of Bauman, Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, and Giddens. Individualization is clearly a contested and contentious approach within contemporary studies of identity. Yet we have also seen that some criticisms are misplaced, especially those that fail to appreciate the nuance and complexity of the individualization thesis, or which selectively focus on empirical evidence that contravenes the individualization story.

**Conclusion: the contribution of individualization theories**

The individualization theories discussed in this chapter have had a substantial impact on contemporary studies of identity. They combine theoretical and methodological flexibility with compelling empirical insights into what it means to be an individual and to develop and maintain a sense of self in late modernity. The individualization theorists deliberately carry forward the sociological tradition of understanding individuality in the context and as a product of social forces. They update classical approaches to reflect current conditions. Their work is not principally focused on processes of de-traditionalization and linear modernization, but on the progressions and inversions of modernity after the imprint of tradition has faded. The individualization theorists convincingly show that important elements of modernity remain, that the “social” is still central to self-formation, and that we should not discount the significance of structures in the formation of personality and identity. They have spurred debates about the extent to which they really are different from earlier scholars, and arguably contributed to a resurgence of interest in classical sociology. They also challenge us to reconsider the stability and relevance of taken-for-granted concepts, such as class, family, and community.

A great strength of recent work on individualization is its interdisciplinary character. Though rooted in the sociological tradition, these authors promiscuously engage with political science, political philosophy, critical and cultural studies, psychology, and psychoanalysis to make their cases. As a result, they attract the attention of scholars working in many fields, and their ideas have been taken up across the social sciences. Furthermore, the individualization thesis encourages empirical exploration using all manner of methods and methodologies. Some scholars have employed sophisticated quantitative techniques to test the predictions of the individualization theorists in a positivistic fashion; some use state-of-the-art ethnographic approaches to interpret the meaning of individualized self identity; still others eschew empirical methods and focus on textual and discursive analyses of social and governmental practices of individual freedom. This unwillingness to preclude particular ways of knowing makes the body of work complex and powerful.

Finally, the individualization thesis is important because it explicitly confronts currently dominant political discourses of self-reliance and individualism (Howard 2007). It shows that late modern individuals are not independent or self-sufficient; they depend on institutions in
order to build a sense of self and to achieve their life goals. It dismisses the myth that individuals can triumph over social challenges, by pointing out the non-negotiable aspects of social life and the structural contradictions of late modern identity. It suggests the public sphere has not been eradicated, but instead colonized by private interests and turned over to promoters of “identity goods.” Yet it disturbs the faith some have placed in reactions to individualization, on both the left and the right. Political projects based on localism, communitarianism, anti-rationalism, traditionalism, and fundamentalism are all challenged on the grounds that they sacrifice individual freedom in return for a false sense of certainty and security. By recognizing that late modernity requires us to reconcile self-determination with institutional dependence, Bauman, Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, and Giddens offer a compelling starting point for reframing the politics of our age.

References

Individualization


