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New identities, new individualism

Eric L. Hsu

Introduction: historical and intellectual development of individualism

At least since the early modern era, the concept of individualism has been extolled within social theory as contributing new and significant understandings of identity. This is especially the case in recent times. Here, research on individualism has been used to track broader social developments and changes. But what exactly does individualism connote and why has it received so much attention? Why have authors as far ranging as Alexis de Tocqueville, Anthony Giddens, Stephen Lukes, Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert devoted so much time to its study and what do they each have to tell us? This chapter seeks to address such questions by offering a broad overview of how individualism has been explored in both classical and contemporary social theory through an investigation of its historical and varied meanings. In doing so, it ultimately argues that the recent introduction of a temporal dimension has been a major breakthrough in how individualism has come to be understood.

To date with a few notable exceptions, the core concern of most research on individualism has been to highlight its contrast to a more collectivist disposition within society. Absent, however, in this account is a consideration of how quickly or slowly that individualism now occurs in the Western world. Correspondingly, the work of some contemporary social theorists – of which Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert come foremost to mind – has been concerned about addressing this particular deficiency. Here what is fundamentally at issue is the claim that speed matters when it comes to understanding individualism. Likewise to such an end, this chapter seeks to extend this line of thought by exploring what new insights are gained when the speed of individualism is taken into account. Further, it looks at aspects of speed that have not yet been explored with regards to the individualist mindset. In turn, it advocates for a temporal conceptualization of individualism that not only considers how it has been accelerated but also how social deceleration plays a factor as well.

The etymological origins of individualism

Before it is possible to grasp why some contemporary social theorists have found individualism to be a concept of great utility, it is first necessary to trace its origins to the early modernist
One of the places where the term “individualism” first entered popular intellectual circulation was in early nineteenth-century France. Initially, it was employed to criticize what some saw were the dangers of the French Revolution (1798–99) and, in turn, the Enlightenment. As Stephen Lukes writes, “[t]he Revolution was proof [for some conservative thinkers] that ideas exalting the individual imperiled the stability of the commonwealth, dissolving it into ‘an unsocial, uncivil, unconnected chaos of elementary principles’” (1973: 3). “Individualisme,” the French variant of individualism, thus came to stand for the belief that the individual is more ultimately important than the collective social order. As such, those Enlightenment philosophers who were seen to be supportive of *individualisme* such as John Locke and Immanuel Kant were depicted as dangerous figures because they pushed for a society which appeared to be lawless and unruly.

Of those who wrote in this vein, it was decidedly the disciples of the influential French thinker Claude Henri de Saint-Simon who brought “*individualisme*” into common usage in the broader European intellectual landscape. They did so by contrasting the term with “organic” periods of history which represented a more harmonious and collectivist-centered society (Lukes 1973: 6–7). For them, “*individualisme*” represented a time when society was thrown into chaos – this is because it conjured up a time when individuals thought exclusively for themselves and not for the good of the larger public.

Of course, individualism still today carries this pejorative connotation of selfishness within much of Western contemporary social thought as it still does presently in the French language. However, this by no means is the whole story; for as is commonly known, other interpretations of individualism exist today as well.

These other takes on individualism also find their roots around the same period as when the term first came to connote an egoistic mindset. One of the other ways that individualism was viewed was through a more positive lens. This occurred – although perhaps unintentionally – in Alexis de Tocqueville’s 1835 text, *Democracy in America*. As a French writer sent by his government to better comprehend the New World, Tocqueville sought to understand in this work just how different the United States of America was to Old World Europe.

Out of his many observations, a more notable conclusion of his was that individualism played a significant role in allowing the US to have a democratic form of government. However, Tocqueville, like the followers of Saint Simon, saw this rise of individualism to be a rather negative consequence; for like them, he linked individualism to selfishness. What Tocqueville identified as being principally troublesome about individualism was its isolating quality. Because it encouraged the common man to “withdraw to one side with his family and friends,” this meant that eventually, society at large would eventually be forsaken – something that Tocqueville wrote with great lament (Tocqueville 2000: 482).

Of course, to be sure, Tocqueville did not just have negative things to say about the American enterprise. For, at the same time, what he considered to be most impressive about the American spirit was that Americans could overcome their selfish tendencies. They did so by addressing the pitfalls of their individualisms by setting up what he called “free institutions.” In more direct terms, this meant that American society did not dissolve into anarchic self-interest because they had political and social structures in place which would temper any such transgressions. Nevertheless though, Tocqueville still saw individualism as an obstacle to be dealt with. If not for other mitigating factors, individualism he believed would thwart the establishment of an orderly society in America.

Despite this initial negative understanding of individualism, however, Americans themselves would come to see things differently. In fact, the term in the US would become less of an insult
as it did a point of celebration. Much of this change had to do with the American tendency at the time to celebrate free-market capitalist principles and liberal democracy (Lukes 1973: 26). Thus, Tocqueville’s usage of individualism became less a denigration of American culture as it did a rallying cry for the American way of life. Stephen Lukes in his study of American individualism identifies this shift in thinking by tracing the work of a Transcendentalist writer a few years after Tocqueville’s work was published. Here, Lukes quotes the author as having:

inaccurately but significantly expounding Tocqueville’s concept of individualism as expressing “that strong confidence in self, or reliance upon one’s own exertion and resources” and as “the strife of all our citizens for wealth and distinctions of their own and their contempt of reflected honours.”

(ibid.: 27)

As Lukes and others have pointed out, this revision in thinking about individualism was repeated many times elsewhere in the American popular press. So much so that individualism became one of the core foundational values of the American spirit. This, for instance, was quite notably reflected in E.L. Godkin’s 1896 essay “Aristocratic opinions of a democracy.” Here, Godkin criticized Tocqueville for misunderstanding the nature of individualism. Rather than being the quality which would bring down the crucial structures of society, Godkin believed individualism was what gave Americans their strength to carry on as a free and democratic society and not the other way around (Arieli 1964: 200).

Of course, it almost goes without saying that much more can be said about individualism’s long and storied history, as witnessed by Lukes’s other investigations of individualism in the British or German context. But what hopefully appears apparent in all of this is that individualism did not simply emerge in a vacuum. Alongside it also were a whole host of other social developments, such as the Enlightenment, Capitalism, Liberalism, Modernity, etc. To speak of individualism then is also to have bearing on these other issues and vice versa.

Major claims and developments of the field, and key contributions

As varied as the early history of individualism has been, the same can be said about its meaning in the present day. Max Weber perhaps summed it up best in 1930 when he made the observation that “the expression ‘individualism’ includes the most heterogeneous things imaginable.”

However, this is not to say that individualism is an empty term. For example, much has been done in recent times to distinguish the expression from other concepts such as individualization. Whilst the two terms are somewhat related, it is nonetheless said that individualization still means something different because it connotes a type of process whereas individualism more strongly entails a type of belief or attitude.

Yet how can this sort of work be possible given that individualism holds so many different meanings? What does individualism actually mean and can it even be properly defined given its multi-dimensional character?

To begin to answer such questions, an appeal to the Merriam Webster English dictionary might be helpful. There it defines individualism as “a doctrine that the interests of the individual are or ought to be ethically paramount.” This, however, is just one part of the story. In the eyes of one pre-eminent scholar of individualism, Stephen Lukes, the term has also come to encapsulate four other key characteristics: (1) the inherent dignity of the individual, (2) autonomy, (3) privacy, and (4) self-development. In his view, only when we begin to understand these different elements can we begin to gain a truer picture of what individualism actually entails.
When it comes to the first key characteristic of individualism – the inherent dignity of the individual – Lukes points out that this quality can be historically traced back to certain religious movements which occurred many years prior to the modern industrial period. This is a thread also taken up by the twentieth-century French anthropologist, Louis Dumont. In a work entitled, “Essays on individualism,” Dumont sets out his thesis that the notion of the individual as such could be detected in early European Christian history (1986: 24). Here, what he first identifies is the fact that the individual was a construct that did not always exist in the Western world. That people can be considered individually separate from one another was something that had to come about. Beforehand (and to some extent still today), the prevailing view was that people did not have their own individual existence. This he identified in the concept of “universitas” which posited the “social body as a whole of which living men are merely the parts” (ibid.: 63). After certain “revolutions” of thought, however (of which a great number of them are listed in Dumont’s scholarship), Dumont contends that this way of thinking about individuals eventually gave way to the individualist mode of thinking that most of us in the West are more presently familiar with: the view that each of us is a distinct entity which is in some way irreducible to a larger whole.

One such revolution that led to this type of thinking was the one advanced by the work of certain Enlightenment thinkers – particularly those who advocated for Democratic Liberal ideals – occurring around the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. At the center of this revolution was the shared idea that people should not be thought of as mere parts of a puzzle. Politically and morally speaking, this translated to the belief that “Man is too noble a being to serve simply as an instrument for others” which was how one particularly influential thinker, Jean Jacques Rousseau, described it (quoted in Lukes 1973: 49). Accompanying this view were a whole host of other like-minded expressions that came from other philosophes, which included such notable names as Immanuel Kant and John Locke. Of course, while there was certainly some variation as to how each thinker articulated their particular sentiments, nevertheless, a unifying theme for these philosophes was that individuality was of paramount importance. And in turn, this is what eventually filtered into the language of individualism.

Another characteristic of individualism that Lukes identifies is autonomy (ibid.: 52). By this, Lukes means to say that individualism also encapsulates the idea that individuals by their own accord can change their respective destinies. Principally, this is accomplished by appealing to one’s own faculties and resources. Such a view can be contrasted to the notion that it is the larger whole of society which determines in toto the course of life that each of us will live. To be individualist then is to reject such deterministic ways of thinking.

While Lukes draws out a number of lines of thought which contributed to this connotation of individualism, one in particular deserves special mention. This is the thought of the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Benedict de Spinoza. Although Spinoza’s views were sometimes inconsistent, as the Spinozan scholar Robert McShea tells us, nonetheless “there is enough evidence to establish Spinoza as an unmitigated individualist” (1975: 108). How Spinoza expressed his individualist view was by linking the usage of one’s individual ability to reason with the idea of freedom. As he writes,

I call a man completely free in so far as he is guided by reason, for then he is determined to action by causes which can be adequately understood through his own nature alone.

(quoted in McShea 1975: 109)

This amounts to saying that, for Spinoza, freedom is attached to the condition of thinking rationally for oneself. It is by not accepting what has been already decided that captures the autonomous quality of individualism.
In the present day, individualism still retains this connotation in a number of arenas, although to be sure not just in the way Spinoza articulated. A good example of this can be found in David Reisman’s work *The Lonely Crowd*. There, he is famously noted for postulating that “the ‘autonomous’ are those who on the whole are capable of conforming to the behavioral norms of their society . . . but who are free to choose whether to conform or not” (Reisman 1961: 241). It is this quality of choosing which individualism still to this day connotes.

Besides the inherent dignity of the individual and autonomy, individualism also encapsulates the characteristic of privacy in Lukes’s account. What this refers to is the articulation of a “private existence within a public world, an area within which the individual is or should be left alone by others and able to do and think whatever he chooses” (ibid.: 59).

As a number of scholars of individualism have noted, a major strand of thought which has made the case for this conceptualization is historically that of Political Liberalism – which Lukes goes most in-depth with through the writings of John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth-century English political theorist. One of Mill’s arguments that features prominently in this discussion is his claim that individuals should be left alone by the sovereign of a society if his or her “conduct affects the interests of no persons besides himself” (2008 [1859]: 84). Mill reasons this should be the case because allowing people to decide what is best for their own lives is what enables any happiness to be experienced in the greater society. This stands in stark contrast to a social environment which does not allow individuality to flourish (ibid.: 63).

In turn, Mill is keen to mark out a personal sphere of existence then that cannot be breached except in extreme instances. This is a thread in his work which emphasizes the importance of preserving minority thoughts and opinions. Why the minority must be preserved, according to Mill, is because the majority is not always correct, which he puts down to the fact that no one person is ever completely privy to the experience of others (ibid.: 93).

Correspondingly, Lukes is convinced that because of ideas such as these from Mill, individualism has come also to be connected to the notion of privacy. However, as he also notes, this has given grounds for some other social thinkers to criticize individualism, a theme that is explored later in this chapter.

Finally, in addition to the three other features of individualism which Lukes attributes, the last characteristic Lukes explores is the feature of self-development (ibid.: 67). What self-development partly refers to is the idea that the self is both mysterious and to an extent always unfolding.

Of those who brought about this connection between individualism and self-development, one strand of thought which Lukes considers to be extremely influential is that of Marxism (ibid.: 70). And according to Lukes, this connection is quite obvious. One way this is made so is by looking at Karl Marx’s conceptualization of human nature as being about the actualization of its creative potentialities. Marx partly dwells on this topic in his famous essay “Estranged labor.” Here, one of the claims he makes is that what makes humans unique in comparison to the inorganic and animal world is by virtue that humans produce even “when [they] are free from physical need” (1969: 113). This is so because for Marx, humans can relate to that which they produce through the process of reflection which in turn allows them to “form things in accordance with the laws of beauty” (ibid.: 114).

These points are made all the more salient by Marx’s analysis of how the capitalist system has in some ways stunted the human propensity to be creative. Marx refers to this stunting as an *estrangement* or in other translations, alienation. Why estrangement is an essential feature of capitalism for Marx belongs in large part to how products are produced in its system. This is a process whereby workers by and large do not control what they are actually creating. In fact, Marx prefers to think of labor in a capitalist system as not so much being voluntary as much as
Workers in this climate, in his view, are for the most part told what to do, without immediately the power to change why they are told to do so.

Against this backdrop, one of Marx’s projects then is to overturn this way of producing things by way of a Communist revolution. One of the consequences he believes will come about when capitalism is overturned for communism is that people will finally be free to explore their individual possibilities. To illustrate, what Marx cites in his co-authored work with Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, is the example of artistic painting. Whereas now in a capitalist system, “the exclusive concentration of artistic talent” is bound up in particular individuals because of the division of labor, “in a communist society there are no painters but at most people who engage in painting among other activities.” In other words, Marx believes that communism allows people to experiment with their identities and in doing so, allows their distinctly human capabilities to develop.

Of course, as Lukes notes, there have been other ways in which self-development has been linked to individualism – ones that have been perhaps less communally focused than the approach Marx employed. Nonetheless, Marxism still plays a role in perpetuating this association.

Taken in sum, individualism then can be said to entail at least four different characteristics: the inherent dignity of the individual, autonomy, privacy, and self-development. However, there are other ways of covering how individualism can be thought about. Another way to define individualism, as a number of social thinkers tell us, is to look at the different ways in which it can be applied: these include political individualism, economic individualism, moral individualism, and methodological individualism.

While the ultimate goal of this chapter is not to explore in any substantial depth each of these applications, nevertheless, what is important about these different meanings and usages is that they encapsulate a great number of dimensions of social life. Individualism thus is not just an economic matter nor is it just a cultural one. The same can be said about its varied meanings and connotations. Neither is it just about autonomy nor just about privacy.

**Contemporary usages and applications**

That individualism has so many meanings and connotations is also in some measure why it has occupied so much public debate in recent times. This has been manifest in the sheer number of recent academic and popular texts that have been devoted to its study. Because of its multi-faceted nature, politicians, social commentators, and academics alike have all engaged with the issue in whole host of different ways – some of which have been in dialogue with one another and some of which have been irreconcilable.

One of the key themes that have emerged out of this varied discussion has been whether or not individualism still even exists in contemporary Western society – specifically if it does so in the USA. For some, this question is rightfully answered in the affirmative. This is a thread picked up by Paul Leinberger and Bruce Tucker, who in their work *The New Individualists* (1991) contend that the moral and economic individualist mindset in America has over the last few decades become significantly heightened. They make such a claim by comparing the actions and attitudes of those individuals in America who were studied in William Whyte’s work *The Organization Man* (1960) in the 1950s with the actions and attitudes of their children just a couple of decades later. One of the key differences that Leinberger and Tucker find between the two groups is just how dependent each are to their respective social structures – of which the workplace is given particular emphasis. Whereas those in the “organization” man generation expressed more loyalty to their places of employment (which in turn was also reciprocated vice versa), Leinberger and Tucker believe that such a world no longer exists for the organization man’s offspring.
This view is guided by a number of recent developments in both the American and the global workplace. First and foremost of these is the fact that nowadays “job security” is increasingly considered to be a sort of oxymoron. To work is to be in a sense insecure since the prospect of unemployment constantly lurks at every corner. For Leinberger and Tucker, that companies no longer necessarily keep salaried employees on the payroll through difficult times speaks to the force of this point. At any moment, companies can make massive cuts to their resources and downsize their staff, depending on market conditions.

In turn, Leinberger and Tucker write that principles such as loyalty are no longer so well prized in this new economic climate. This applies not only for those on the top but also those on the bottom of the organizational structure: managers and workers alike face a world where “at any time they can wake up and discover that their job – or company – no longer exists” (1991: 210). Further, Leinberger and Tucker point to the fact that little opportunity remains for young workers to “rise steadily through the ranks.” Instead, they believe that these days, “jobs mobility must often be sought outside one’s company in a constant game of musical chairs throughout entire industries and professions” (ibid.).

As result, Leinberger and Tucker believe a new ethos of identity has arisen because of these new workplace conditions. This ethos is one which celebrates flexibility and provisional arrangements, a stark contrast to earlier times which had placed a higher premium on values such as trustworthiness and reliability. To drive home this point, Leinberger and Tucker make a distinction between the practice of “choosing” and “having chosen correctly.” Whereas the organizational man was more focused on doing the latter, Leinberger and Tucker suggest that the former is nowadays considered to be the more important virtue (ibid.: 260). Why this is the case is because the status of conformity has changed in recent decades. No longer, they write, is it ultimately something which individuals concern themselves with. Instead, the focus has shifted onto wanting to be unique and creatively self-actualizing. In turn, the act of choosing has taken on a desirable quality because it indicates that one is always on the move. By contrast, “having chosen correctly” is denigrated because it suggests one’s immobility.

If Leinberger and Tucker are to be believed, then individualism thus thrives in today’s social climate because of this new restless spirit. Concepts such as community are in urgent need of re-description because the social bonds which have traditionally held us together have changed considerably. And this, they say, is due mainly to the new individualism which is now upon us.

Affirming Leinberger and Tucker’s thesis that individualism has taken hold in contemporary American society is also the work of the American scholar Robert Putnam. This link is most clearly established in Putnam’s most widely known text, *Bowling Alone* (2000). There Putnam paints a picture of American society which highlights its ever-increasing lack of civic engagement. Gone are the times when people more fully interacted with one another. This for Putnam can be clearly seen in the ways in which Americans nowadays take a less active role in the social and political life of their own communities, especially when compared to the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.

A metaphor that Putnam deploys to illuminate his arguments involves the practice of ten-pin bowling. This activity, he argues, was once considered to be a more collective pastime. As evidence, Putnam cites statistics which showcase the popularity of bowling leagues from the 1950s to the 1970s. During this period, bowling membership in America hit such a high note that at one point, 8 percent of all American men and nearly 5 percent of all American women considered themselves members. But this participation, as Putnam notes, was not to last, for just a few years later, bowling league membership would see a significant drop in numbers – a trend which continues to the present day.
Curiously though, as Putnam notes, bowling as a recreational sport has not lost its popularity. In fact there are figures which suggest that in the present day it is as prevalent as ever, which Putnam buttresses by quoting the eye-opening statistic that 25 percent more Americans bowled at some point in 1996 than voted in the 1998 congressional elections (2000: 113).

What then is to explain this particular phenomenon? Why has membership in bowling leagues decreased so dramatically even though bowling itself has become more popular? For Putnam the answer to this riddle can be found in the decline of what he calls “social capital,” which he defines as the “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (1995: 67).

One possible explanation that Putnam offers for why social capital has declined in recent times is that there are many aspects of contemporary life which no longer require the presence of others. This, in Putnam’s account, has much to do with the rise of certain technologies such as the television and telephone. The path they have led us down is one where we can witness (and even in some cases interact with) a great number of events that might not have happened in previous times. However, Putnam focuses on the fact that this has come at the expense of our no longer having to be actually be there to witness a person accomplish some landmark feat (ibid.: 75). We can simply do so through the “miracles” of the television. Consequently, Putnam contends that this is why many of us lead such isolated lives.

Another explanation that Putnam offers for the recent decline in social capital rests on the issue of suburbanization. Here, what Putnam contends is that the founding of suburbs has created a great number of places in the US where individuals no longer necessarily have to form strong bonds with their neighbors, which in turn has made life for many suburbanites a very privatized experience (2000: 210).

Taken in sum, a consequence of Putnam’s thinking then is that contemporary American society appears to us as being extremely individualistic, especially in its connotations of privacy and atomization. In this new age, values such as community and organization are no longer so well prized, which Putnam generally believes that the American people are worse off for.

A third voice which echoes the view that individualism has taken hold in Western society belongs to the noted British sociologist Anthony Giddens. However, unlike the first two approaches, Giddens is decidedly more optimistic (or at the very least more nuanced) about the onset of an individualist mindset.

One particular way in which Giddens expresses this optimism is through his discussion of what many have termed the rise of a “me-first” generation. This discussion typically proceeds from the claim that individualism is to blame for destroying common values and shirking public responsibilities. Giddens, however, believes this not to be the case. What Giddens finds to be particularly problematic about the “me generation” thesis is that it too readily posits that we are currently in an age of moral decay – which is another way of saying that people are fast becoming amoral. Giddens prefers to see things in a different light; in his view, ours is not so much an age of moral decay as much as it is an age of moral transition. The reasoning behind this lies in Giddens’s attention to detail as to what the new individualism actually entails. Pace many contemporary thinkers, Giddens tells us that individualism is not just about “economic selfishness” or coterminous with a hyper-consumer culture. In his view, what we must also consider about individualism is that it “is a structural phenomenon in societies breaking free from the hold of tradition and custom” (2001: 4). This is another way of saying that individualism is not just about thinking for one’s own well-being alone as much as it is also about the de-legitimization of tradition as bearer of absolute authority.

Consequently, Giddens contends that this is why we should think of individualism more positively. Dismissing it altogether neglects the fact that individualism has in some cases made
advances on a number of social problems, of which changing gender relations are a particularly salient instance. Owing in part to individualism, Giddens writes that “women no longer are inevitably ‘fated’ to lives of domesticity and the rearing of children”; additionally, Giddens cites the fact that women have also “entered the labour force in large numbers and have acquired many of the freedoms that were long mainly the freedoms of men – including the right to divorce” (ibid.). Those who would criticize individualism in toto then ignore such positive outcomes – however incomplete as they may be.

Giddens though is still aware of the reality that the new individualism continues to possess its own shortcomings. It may be the case that individualism does indeed share overlap with the selfish ideology of egoism. It may also be the case that individualism does in some important measure lead to a decline in social solidarity. However, Giddens is not convinced that this is all that there is. In an age where individualism takes hold, “new worries and anxieties come to the fore” but as he writes, so too do “many more positive possibilities” (1998: 37).

Main criticisms

While the notion that individualism has more or less run rampant among the West has been an influential one, there are still those, however, who present a countering view. Their version of contemporary society is one which portrays individualism not on the increase but on the decline. One such voice who expresses this sort of sentiment is the American thinker Richard Botelho. For Botelho, there is cause to believe that individualism no longer holds sway in the Western world – specifically in the US – because people no longer feel like they can be autonomous. This has a lot to do with, in his mind, the fact that we are now “conditioned to believe in the superiority of others, presumably those in power positions” (1996: 6). Why we do owes in some part to the dependent relationship that many of us now hold to our social institutions, for it is they we now trust over our own “abilities, judgments, characters and intellects” (ibid.: 14). Botelho evidences this claim by looking at the lack of “self-correcting” mechanisms in a whole host of social arenas of which the US political system serves as an exemplary case. Why the US political system is proof that individualism has been in decline is because “after virtually every election, the electorate is left with the feeling that nothing will ultimately change” (ibid.: 7). Botelho puts such a situation ultimately down to the fact that individuals no longer trust themselves to address large social problems. After all as this line of thinking goes, what can one person do in the face of a broken but overwhelming system?

Accordingly, this is what fuels Botelho’s argument that there needs to be a revival of individualism amongst the general populace (ibid.: 12). If individualism is not more embraced, Botelho fears that many social ills and problems such as widespread poverty will become exacerbated.

Botelho, however, is not alone in his belief that individualism needs to be reinvigorated. A similar thread can also be detected in the famous American sociologist C. Wright Mills’s work The Sane Society. Mills, who was writing in the 1950s, likewise echoes that individualism is no longer the popular sentiment that it once was. In his view, this can be attributed to the shift away from a public to a mass society. Whereas before a healthier public sphere encouraged people of all kinds to publicize their own opinions, nowadays Mills believes that such a world is no longer with us. In its place, Mills writes, is a mass society which discourages people from making their views known to others. This is a society in which people “have no autonomy from institutions.” In fact, according to Mills, just the opposite appears to be happening. Institutions themselves appear to have control over the people they were originally meant to serve and this
is in large part due to the fact that people no longer feel welcome or even able to change the
social world around them.

Hints of Mills’s claims about mass society can also be detected in the research of more
recent authors. This is particularly the case if we examine, for example, Jaron Lanier’s noted
work *You Are Not a Gadget*. Here, Lanier paints a picture of the world which at first appears
to be in stark contrast to the world of which Mills wrote. With the advent of the Internet
and many new tele-visual/communication devices, gone are the days when the media had a
monolithic hold over a captive audience. This is particularly true of what many have termed to
be the Web 2.0 revolution. What Web 2.0 commonly refers to is that Internet content these
days is not something exclusively determined by experts. This is because Internet users them-
selves are nowadays expected to play a hand in the process, whereas before they were largely
absent.

Lanier, however, is not convinced that this Web 2.0 revolution has allowed us to become
more individualist. Lanier reasons this is so because the Web 2.0 paradigm increasingly treats
people not as individuals as such but more as parts of a larger aggregate, which he refers to as
the “hive-mind.” Worst yet, Lanier believes that we have forfeited our individualist sensibility
to the “hive mind” of Web 2.0 without many of us actually realizing it. Lanier evidences his
claims by looking at new Web programs such as Facebook and Wikipedia. While he grants that
programs like these do give people the opportunity to express themselves as individuals in some
small fashion, Lanier focuses on the *standardized* and *automated* ways in which such exchanges
occur. What is particularly troubling about these exchanges for Lanier is that the onus is placed
on computerized systems and not the humans who operate them as drivers of knowledge. Case
in point, recent versions of Microsoft Word; whereas before it more akin to a typewriter, nowa-
days, with built in functions such as spelling check and predictive text, Microsoft Word has
evolved to the point where it appears to “know” what you would like to do. Wrongly indent
a paragraph? A pop-up appears. Want to write a letter? The program will automatically fill in
the typical pleasantries. A similar phenomenon can also be detected in search engine programs
such as Google whereby people are more prone to trust computer-generated results than their
own judgment.

Correspondingly, from Lanier’s viewpoint, what this all spells is a world that greatly devalues
individual voices. He thinks this way because he believes that more of our confidence is being
put into computer systems than in personal ingenuity (2010: 27). Correspondingly this leads
Lanier, like Botelho, to believe that individualism therefore needs to be reinvigorated. If we do
not, he fears that the innovative and pioneering quality which once characterized the Internet
will gradually fade into oblivion (ibid.: 4).

Taken as a whole, what thus emerges is a snapshot of individualism which underlines its
highly contested status within contemporary social thought. For some, it indeed exists in the
Western world, whereas for others it is in dire need of a revival. Which camp is ultimately cor-
rect is not something that can be so easily decided. For indeed it may even be the case that both
are somewhat correct.

The point of this chapter therefore is not to decide once and for all which view holds the
most water but rather to identify how the debate over individualism has thus far been couched.
And in this respect, hopefully at least one thing has become apparent: with a few noticeable
exceptions, individualism has for the most part been cast in terms of its opposition to a more col-
lectivist sentiment. Yet, as this chapter argues, other considerations about individualism remain
which have up until this point been rather understudied. It is these aspects that this chapter now
turns to.
The continuing importance of perspectives on individualism, and anticipated future developments

Speed and individualism

Whilst it is clear that much ink has been spilled over the issue of individualism in recent times, what has been conspicuously absent from these discussions has been how the issue of speed might factor in. This is a thread that has been recently taken up by Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert in their seminal work *The New Individualism* (2009b). In this particular text, what Elliott and Lemert highlight is how our understanding of individualism has recently experienced a considerable amount of revision. Whereas before, the discussion of individualism mainly dwelt on whether or not it still existed in Western societies – which was discussed in length in the last section – today, a new concern has come to the fore: to what extent our conceptualization of individualism has been altered by the issue of speed.

When it comes to individualism, there are least two reasons why the topic of speed has come to occupy more attention. The first is related to the fact that in general speed is no longer such a widely ignored concept within contemporary social theory. This stands in stark contrast to earlier times when speed hardly made much of an impact on social thought. Even when it was mentioned, especially in the writings of some classical social scientists, it cropped up at best as a mere “adjunct to other debates and issues” (Tomlinson 2007: 5).

Partly, as some have noted, this had much to do with the absence of a sophisticated understanding of the temporal matters in social research. Why speed did not factor into people’s social theories was because time was such a taken for granted experience. Not so though in this day and age. In more recent times, contemporary sociology has been more attuned to the significance of time and, in turn, the matter of speed. This can be seen in the number of key texts which have outlined speed as a watershed concept for a whole plethora of social phenomena. These have included such seminal ideas as modernity (Tomlinson 2007), globalization (Scholte 2005), and liberal democracy (Scheuerman 2004).

A second reason why speed has become a more prominent issue in discussions about individualism is because the stakes regarding speed have arguably been raised in comparison to earlier times. This view is grounded in the fact that the world we now live in is arguably faster than ever before. Of course, this is not to say that there were not momentous events in earlier times which significantly altered people’s pace of life. To do so would be foolish given the amount of historical record which suggests otherwise. Yet, as many social thinkers have argued, ours is the age where decidedly speed has been taken to heights that it has never been before. John Tomlinson’s work *The Culture of Speed* (2007) adroitly addresses this very issue. There he makes the claim that what distinguishes speed in the present day from earlier times has to do with how significant the concept of *immediacy* has recently become.

Previously, talk of speed in the West mainly centered on its machinist manifestations. That is to say, speed was dealt in terms of how quickly something could be sped up – often under the banner of progress (i.e., railway travel). Tomlinson, however, believes that in the present day, a new cultural understanding of speed has arisen – one which has supplanted the notion of machine speed as the dominant discourse. This new understanding he believes can be encapsulated by the term, “immediacy.” For Tomlinson, what is distinctive about the condition of immediacy is that it suggests that speed in some regards has been pressed to its limits. So much so that it has forced us to re-think basic truths about human life. To illustrate, Tomlinson examines the “gap” we normally assume to exist between the desire for some object and its attainment (2007: 90). As this line of thinking goes, some period of delay always exists in the act of wishing.
So in previous times, if I had wanted to listen to a newly released single, I would have had to wait a certain amount of time to do so because a number of intermediary steps exist along the way (e.g., having to locate and then purchase the single from an outlet).

By contrast, the condition of immediacy dictates that such a gap no longer exists (ibid.: 91). This occurs by virtue that immediacy culture tries to leave us with the impression, often successfully, that waiting is no longer necessary. Thus nowadays if one desires to hear a particular song, one can simply download it at near-instantaneous speeds from a mobile hand-held phone.

The same phenomenon has also been detected in a number of different social practices, including warfare and political polling, to name just a couple. Correspondingly this has led some social thinkers to proclaim that ours is the age where speed, for better or worse, demands our full attention since it is getting more difficult to ignore the impacts of social acceleration.

Taken as a whole it is against this backdrop that talk of speed has also entered into the discourse surrounding individualism. As previously mentioned, the work of Anthony Elliott and Charles Lemert has played an extremely influential role in this endeavor. What they reveal in their numerous texts on the matter is a view of individualism which appreciates its temporal dynamism. However, the speed they most pay attention to is the type of individualism which they believe to be most currently endemic: hyper-individualism, a term which they do not actually utilize, but which conveys much of what they seem to argue.

One of the ways in which Elliott and Lemert suggest that individualism must be rethought is by breaking down the components of what the new individualism involves as a result of its acceleration. Among other things, this encapsulates “a relentless emphasis on self-reinvention; an endless hunger for instance change; a pre-occupation with short-termism and episodicity; and a fascination with speed and dynamism” (Elliott and Lemert 2009b: xi). By all of this, the key point Elliott and Lemert wish to make is just how much individualism has been transformed by the onset of a high speed society.

A key feature of this transformation is what the two authors identify as a “disappearance of context” (ibid.: 13). This is their argument that the erstwhile ways in which people used to make sense of their lives has gradually been made outmoded – to the point where traditional customs no longer hold sway. Instead, Elliott and Lemert write that “individuals are increasingly expected to produce context for themselves” – an imperative which has become “deeply rooted as both social norm and cultural obligation” (ibid.).

Yet in this respect, what deserves particular mention in the author’s view is just how quickly the “designing of life, of a self-project” is expected to occur. Elliott, in his monograph Making the Cut (2008), is particularly interested in exploring this issue. Such is evident in his discussion of “the new paradigm of self-making.” The backdrop he sets the new “reinvention craze” against is the onset of the “fast-paced, techy culture of globalization” (2008: 45). What the new global economy has wrought, he contends, is a world where people are now placed “under intense pressure to keep pace with the sheer speed of change” (p. 46).

Elliott is able to make such a claim because of his sophisticated understanding of what outcomes the new global economy has brought about. For him, profit margins, hiring practices, and capital exchanges are not the only things that have been impacted by recent globalizing forces. Instead, what Elliott seeks to underscore is just how “transformations in the new economy and in self-identity . . . are increasingly becoming intermeshed” (p. 45). This is another way of saying that globalization is not just an “out there” phenomenon as it is something that has in some senses intruded into people’s emotional lives (p. 9).

As such, business practices such as “short-term contracts, endless downsizings, just-in-time deliveries and multiple careers” – which many social thinkers have identified as being largely peculiar to the current time period – have also had great bearing to how individuals nowadays
New identities, new individualism

are able to constitute themselves (p. 122). Elliott identifies one of these personal changes to be a new found “faith in flexibility, plasticity, and incessant reinvention”; qualities which suggest that “we are no longer judged on what we have done and achieved; we’re now judged on our flexibility, on our readiness for personal makeover” (p. 122).

However, what Elliott and Lemert wish to stress is that these “makeovers” and “reinventions” are not merely figurative. The new individualism, as they posit it, has real effects on our conceptions of identity which has also greatly transformed our bodies (p. 46).

For Elliott, this latter point also doubles as a site for empirical study, in that the acceleration of individualism can also be tracked through the rise of cosmetic surgical culture. Here, Elliott’s thesis is that the increase in popularity of cosmetic surgery can in some large measure be attributed to the mounting pressures that individuals feel to be “more efficient, faster, leaner, inventive and self-actualizing than they were previously” (p. 126).

Elliott underscores this point by noting that cosmetic surgery is increasingly seen in this day and age as a measure of one’s plasticity. As this line of thinking dictates, to prove that one can keep up with rough and tumble of today’s changing economic climate, one must be willing to go under the surgeon’s knife. As an illustrative example, Elliott cites a growing trend of highly skilled global professionals willing to get plastic surgery for a leg up on the competition. Says one of Elliott’s interviewees,

I don’t think you understand the reasons these people have for wanting surgery – it’s not vanity or celebrity-inspired. They just don’t want to look fazed at work, or appear too hassled by the demands of the job.

(p. 111)

Elliott is especially keen to pick up on this latter point about plastic surgery and the workplace. In his view, what is most telling is just how much more of an accepted practice plastic surgery has become in the business community. As he writes,

Not all that long time ago, anyone who wanted cosmetic surgery would have been recommended therapy in the first instance. Today, by contrast, there is a widespread acceptance that cosmetic surgical culture is beneficial and even desirable. Especially for tough-minded, highly motivated professionals, to be surgically “freshened up” provides an edge in the marketplace.

(p. 145)

Further, Elliott notes that there is mounting statistical evidence to suggest that this is indeed occurring, not just in the polished cities of the West but in the wider world. Thus, we find studies which report that cosmetic plastic surgery has now grown into an estimated $15 to $20 billion dollars a year industry in the US alone, as well as other studies which report similar findings in the rate of growth in East Asian countries such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Thailand. The message here is thus that not only is cosmetic surgery becoming more widespread, but also that this process is somehow becoming more frequent — in other words, faster.

Yet in the midst of all this, Elliott and Lemert are decidedly ambivalent about these changes to identity brought about by the new individualism. This largely owes to the fact that they read the new individualism “as a doubled edged phenomenon – one that promotes the realization of self-fulfillment as well as the cultivation of self-limitation” (2009b: 12).

On the one hand, the latter is the case because the imperative to constantly be on the move is an endeavor that invariably produces new anxieties and dangers. They identify a few of these
in those who have been on the losing end of the new individualist paradigm. One term which might capture the plight of these individuals is that of “waste.” Drawing upon the work of Zygmunt Bauman, Elliott and Lemert identify a main motor which drives people to perpetuate the new individualist mindset: the “ambient fear . . . of being dumped, on becoming waste, of exclusion” (ibid.: 102). Unfortunately however, this fear is not just a possibility but a reality for a good number of individuals. Played out in cosmetic surgical culture, this is made manifest in the number of high-profile cases of plastic surgery “addicts”; those people who in the process of trying find the right identity, seemingly lose their bearings. Elliott attributes this occurrence to the twisted logics cosmetic surgical cultures can sometimes unleash – namely, that one rarely feels completely satisfied in the long term after they get plastic surgery. This latter point owes to the fact that cosmetic surgical products do not always have the longest shelf life, which Elliott believes to be intentionally so (Elliott 2008: 90). For what drives contemporary consumerist culture is not just the satisfaction of needs as much as it is the creation of them – a reality which is reflected in recent figures which reveal that a high percentage of plastic surgery is done on repeat customers.

Another reason why Elliott and Lemert believe we should express concern over the new individualism is because they fear that the promises of a living in a high-speed society can mask the continued growth of “privatized worlds” (Elliott and Lemert 2009a: 61). This concern is not too dissimilar from some of the authors that were discussed earlier, namely Robert Putnam. Like them, Elliott and Lemert too are concerned about the ways in which “people, increasingly are seeking personal solutions to social problems” (ibid.: 62). And in the process, they highlight the lamentable decline of individuals opening themselves to others (2009b: xxi).

At the same time however, Elliott and Lemert also do not wish to discount the favorable aspects of the new individualism as well. This owes in part to the creative possibilities the two authors believe the new individualism has opened up. In particular, they reference the wider avenues in which people now can draw from to construct their sense of self (ibid.: 120). Among other things, these avenues take the form of new tele-communication technologies, such as the advent of the Internet and mobile phone. One particular consequence of this new digital world is that situations are created when people can try out new identities. For instance, Elliott and Lemert find that one of their interviewees, Ruth, is someone who has used the Internet to feel more confident about knowing what her “real” life should be like (ibid.: 125). She was able to be so because online chatting communities opened her life “to others beyond the local determinations of everyday life” (ibid.: 123), which they in some regards identify as being associated with the new individualism. Concomitantly, people such as Ruth are also able to experiment with their identities because there is now a greater culture acceptance of such behaviors. In fact, acceptance is perhaps not the most apt word in this instance as much as is the term “dictum.”

Curiously on this point, however, one of the things explicitly missing from Elliott and Lemert’s analysis is the mention of speed and its positive aspects. That is to say, nowhere in their texts do they directly connect acceleration with issues to do with social justice and/or autonomy, as is the case in other authors (e.g., Scheuerman 2004). Yet, if one reads this point in the context of their wider argument, it becomes extremely evident that speed at the very least lurks in the background. It is because individuals such as Ruth do not need to physically traverse such distances to interact with distant others, which “costs” time, that the new individualism can offer creative possibilities.

In sum, what Elliott and Lemert thus contribute is a view of individualism which appreciates its recent temporal transformation. In doing so, they focus on the way in which the hyper form of individualism radically changes how we might think of the concept more generally. Elliott
and Lemert are also attuned to the new dangers and possibilities created by this transformation of individualism, which they believe have something to do with the issue of speed.

**Toward a theory of decelerated individualism**

If there is criticism to be made about Elliott and Lemert’s work, however, it is that in some respects their scholarship into speed does not extend far enough. Specifically, what seems particularly underdeveloped is a conceptualization of speed and time which looks at not only social acceleration but also at deceleration. That is to say, whilst they deftly identify how differently we might think of individualism in an age of acceleration, what Elliott and Lemert do not attend to well is the varied temporality in which individualism currently exists. This amounts to saying then that the trends to slow down individualism is not something that is explicitly acknowledged in their work. And consequently, this gives us a less than complete picture about the different temporal-scapes in which individualism currently operates under.

To better illuminate the reasoning behind these critiques, it is useful to appeal to the work of the German social theorist Hartmut Rosa, who has become a leading contemporary voice on social acceleration. One of the main arguments he has put forth in recent times is that social acceleration cannot be properly understood if we do not also consider the phenomenon of deceleration. Rosa rests this claim on his observation that most, if not all, types of acceleration invariably encounter resistances and/or countertrends (Rosa 2003: 15). These slowdowns can either be intentional, unintentional or, as is often the case, a mixture of both. Further, these slowdowns in some cases can also be enabling of later acceleration as they can also be possibly genuine contraventions.

One particular example that can be used to illustrate these claims is that of the automobile. *Prima facie*, its invention is supposed to have allowed individuals to get to different places at a faster speed when compared to earlier technologies (i.e., horse-drawn carriage). Yet, as the top speeds of automobiles have gotten faster, a good deal of people, especially those living in urban centers, have not benefited from these technological advances. Much of this, of course, has to do with the phenomenon of the traffic jam where in the pursuit of rapidity, individuals find themselves experiencing delay. Through the lens of Rosa, what this speaks to thus is that the move to accelerate social processes does not always lead to desired outcomes (ibid.: 15). Things may go unintentionally awry.

At the same time, Rosa believes that social deceleration can also occur intentionally as well. This, he argues, is evidenced in part by the integral role decelerations can play in helping later accelerations along. These often times are deceleration which “preserve the capacity to function” so as to make advances in the future. On the individual level, Rosa believes these manifest themselves as “time-outs” which allow people to catch their breaths from accelerating forces, only of course to be confronted with more acceleration down the road (ibid.: 16).

By contrast though, Rosa also wishes to acknowledge the presence of another type of deceleration which actually tries to avoid being enlisted in the service of the broader desire to accelerate. While Rosa believes that historically each of these type of decelerating movements have failed in the long run, nevertheless, they are still important for us to keep in mind for they offer the possibility that at some point acceleration will turn in on itself.

Given then that acceleration is never a smooth or straightforward process, Rosa thus concludes that we should be cautious “about the dangers of an overly general diagnosis concerning social acceleration.” In order to understand the complex nature of social acceleration, we must also be prepared to look at its various disjunctures and paradoxes.
While Elliott and Lemert do not necessarily overtly speak about social deceleration and its relation to individualism, this does not mean, however, that their work has not in some ways had bearing on the issue. Indeed, as it is my claim, even though the two authors have not yet overtly taken up the subject matter, there nevertheless exists in their texts tactful hints on how to proceed with developing an understanding of a decelerated form of individualism.

One place to begin is by exploring their inquiry on how people “survive” the new individualism in the present day. Here, an interesting observation that they make is that keeping up with ceaseless self-reinvention craze is not necessarily the only way to live one’s life in the present moment. Such an approach, they contend, sometimes leads to the recipe of a burnout, as perhaps might have been the case with C. Wright Mills. As an alternative, they point to valuable words of wisdom left by the American psychoanalytic thinker Phyllis Meadow. Her answer on to how “to survive full of creative energy to live a long life” was simply put, “aggression!” (Elliott and Lemert 2009b: 190). Though the authors are quite nebulous at times about what makes aggression a viable life strategy, nonetheless they put much weight into its counteracting potential. In particular, they are keen to note that aggression is linked to a form of persistence (ibid.: 194). Though not explicitly defined as being so, if one interprets closely, then herein rests one of Elliott and Lemert’s thoughts about a decelerated individualism. For them, a temporal dynamism does exist with regards to individualism if one considers that change and liquidity are not the only qualities which occupy the current social landscape.

How this link can be made between deceleration and aggression owes in great deal to Freudian psychoanalytic notions of the latter term. Sigmund Freud, especially in his later writings, goes to great lengths to emphasize the centrality of aggression in our everyday lives. For him, it is a drama which we must always continually contend with. Yet why this is so belongs to the occurrence of one of Freud’s more contentious but nevertheless seminal theories: the death drive (Todestrieb).

What the theory of the death drive entails is that human beings are impelled on the one hand by the desire for deadness. One particular reason why Freud was compelled to take on such a belief came curiously enough from observing a young child repeat what seemed like a displeasing event: the habitual departure of his mother from the young child’s side. This repetition was played out not through the actual disappearance of the mother per se as much as it was displaced onto a game the child would play. Freud famously notes that this game involved the child “taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner . . . so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business” (Freud [1920] 1961: 13). As he did this, he would make an utterance which closely resembled “fort” (the German word for “gone”) whenever he threw something and then as he recovered an object he would utter the German phrase for “there” (“da!”).

For Freud what was particularly perplexing about this practice was that it went against a core belief of his at the time, which was that the attainment of pleasure was the ultimate goal of human beings. Why then would a child continually play out a scenario which would have him experience the pain of losing a cherished figure? The answer to this question as Freud wrote was not to be found in his theory of the pleasure principle but instead in his concept of the death drive. Freud grounded this claim in his theory that human life was not just about making things anew. For him, this was a truth which could be evidenced by one of the most obvious certainties about the nature of life – namely that eventually it invariably ends (ibid.: 43). In turn, Freud took this fact also to mean that there is an inherent urge in all life to return to a previous state, which to Freud’s mind would also then explain why individuals are prone to repeat painful events. Freud linked the will to master something – of which repetition is one viable path – to the drive to the restore things as they once were.
Accordingly, aggression would factor into this equation because for Freud it was a natural consequence for the death drive to be deflected from the self onto the external world. This process, for Freud, was termed aggression and it led him to postulate in numerous instances that its existence was the greatest obstacle for social individuals to attain some palpable level of happiness.

Freud considered the human propensity to be aggressive as an ever-ongoing obstacle to be dealt with because it did not mesh particularly well with the requirements of living with others. This latter point was famously elaborated in Freud’s most well-known text, *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Here, Freud put forth his thesis that a key condition of living with others dictates that aggression must not be allowed to run unabated. This meant that individuals are not allowed to completely give in to their inclination to destroy some other thing or person, if they are to live cooperatively with others. And yet, for Freud, this did not mean that aggression could ever be overcome. If it was not directed toward others, then its energies would be directed toward one’s self – a point captured in his discussion of his concept of the super-ego.

For our purposes though, what is of particular importance here is how Freud conceptualized the aim of aggression. The point is not just that aggression holds the potential of destroying social bonds but that in large measure it is in the service of a drive which utilizes the practice of repetition and mastery. To be aggressive then is in a sense also to be able to actualize these latter features.

When we return to the work of Elliott and Lemert on this issue, it becomes difficult at first to see how their understanding of aggression meshes with Freud’s conceptualization. This is especially so if we consider that Freud’s idea of aggression is seemingly linked to the destruction of others if not also one’s own self. How then does this allow individuals to “survive” the new individualism as the two authors so boldly claim?

Fortunately, this paradox becomes resolved once we consider the temporal context in which Elliott and Lemert are writing. Read in a different light, aggression in some respects can actually allow a greater amount of sociality to occur because of its persistent quality. This is another way of saying that the drive for repetition – which can also be interpreted as the drive for wanting normalcy – is what can allow people to occupy different temporal frameworks than what is currently configured in the new individualism. By being aggressive, one is opting out of a time which some authors have described as being “timeless,” “accelerated” or “instantaneous.”

This notion becomes particularly clear if we consider that aggression can be in some respects contrasted with the notion of reflexivity. To be reflexive, especially as Elliott and Lemert refer to it, is to be open and responsive to change (2009b: 174). However, aggressiveness clashes with this particular outlook because the former involves the strong tendency to engage in repetition. This occurs at the expense of choosing to have new experiences and lifestyles and is correspondingly why aggression then can stem the tide of the societal pressures for ceaseless change. In the example of Phyllis Meadow, this can be said to be played out in how she sometimes spoke to others. As Elliott and Lemert identify this: “[w]hen people tried to tell her she could not do what she set about doing,” she would often reply, “Of course not. Life is impossible. Don’t try to change me” (2009b: 189).

It is this unwillingness to change which offers the potential of living in a different temporal form of individualism. And in turn, this is why Elliott and Lemert leave the readers of their work *The New Individualism* with a discussion of aggression as a way forward. One of their concerns is that because aggression has become a less well-cultivated capacity, individuals will feel like they have no other option but to submit to the pressures of social acceleration.

Yet there is also a danger here which Elliott and Lemert only off-handedly acknowledge. And that is that aggressiveness taken to its destructive extremes can also potentially close down...
on the possibility of social acceleration and, in so doing, the benefits which might have resulted. This potential becomes all the more real if aggression is more greatly in the service of the death drive. In this case, aggression can develop into a form of self-destructive psychosis – one which attempts to prevent change at all costs.

To avoid going down this path, it is therefore necessary to consider forces which might counteract the mastering tendencies of aggression. In Freud’s account, one possibility lay in the expression of what he termed “the life drive” (Eros). For Freud, what is significant about this drive is that it points to the fact that death and its corollaries are not the only forces that impel us. This is the case because if that were so, human beings would not continue to endure as a species. If there were only the drive toward death, nothing new would ever develop, which as history suggests is certainly not the case. To account for the fact that human beings do undergo transformations and (sexually) reproduce themselves then, Freud famously posited the existence of a drive which could counteract the effects of the death drive. This drive, in contrast to the focus of restoring things to a previous state, primarily seeks to make new connections – which in turn can also be interpreted as complicating life.

Correspondingly, this complicating tendency can also be linked to the move to social acceleration for in both cases the aim is to create novel experiences. Elliott and Lemert, who are privy to this idea, thus point to the fact that in the case of Meadow, she would not have been able to accomplish the things she did “just by being aggressive”; “The aggression was always balanced,” they say, “against the love of others and the constructive desire to join them working to build a better world” (2009b: 193).

Derivatively, this balance is also true of how we might understand the varied temporal dimensions in which individualism now currently exists. Just as there have been moves to live in a world of hyper-individualism, counter-trends can be identified as well. And if the latter do exist, then aggression is a useful concept to identify its manifestations.

On a greater level, if this latter thesis of the chapter holds, then one of the consequences is that both speed and individualism are issues which need to be understood as psychical and bodily matters. In the case of individualism, this means it is not just a detached philosophical inquiry as much it also is a lived experience with psychical implications. According to Daniel Shanahan, this has been a consideration that some scholars of individualism have not paid enough attention to, for they have largely set it in rationalist terms alone at the cost of psychological naïveté (1992: 3).

In the work of Elliott and Lemert, however, a more psychical approach to individualism is indeed employed. And accordingly, it has been the contention of this chapter that such a tactic has proved to be extremely insightful. In particular, it has given us new bearings on how deceleration might play a more significant role in understanding individualism for the future – and in so doing a more balanced and robust understanding of individualism’s temporality.

References

New identities, new individualism