

In the light of examples, examine the claim that ‘individualism’ is a western ideology.

To understand if individualism is a distinctly western ideology this essay will trace the various histories of the word back to its roots in Enlightenment thought. It will then look to non-western societies and the use of ethnography to see if the dialectic of individualism as opposed to collectivism is useful and to what extent a certain non-western society displays characteristics of individualism. Finally it will look at more long term conceptions of the individual and see if characteristics of individualism can be traced back further than western thought.

Firstly a definition of western. This is surprisingly hard to come by considering its wide usage in anthropological discourse. The fact this term has been taken for granted has been noted by theorists such as David Graeber. For the purpose of this essay it will mean modern western European, American.

Steven Lukes traces the various histories and usages of the word individualism. He traces it historically in French, German, American and English thought. This next section is going to use Lukes' work to compare the French and German usages to determine if we can talk of one 'individualism'. The French coined the usage of the actual word individualism (or *individualisme*) as a way of describing a response to the French revolution and the thought of the Enlightenment (which glorified the individual) in 18th century thought. It had varying uses both positive and negative. However, in France it was mainly the negative usage that had the most prevalence. It was perceived as a negative concept because it was seen as a threat to social order, the state and religious dominance because it atomized people and placed them and their interests as paramount to that of society. It was a recipe for social disaster. However, the positive justifications of individualism came from Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, Locke and Rousseau who refused to go back to a source of authority "higher than individual conscience" 1971:48.

The German usage however, moved on from the French 18th century usage into what Simmel called the "new individualism". He contrasted it with the negative French individualism which he saw as quantitative by describing the German version as qualitative. The characteristics of German individualism have its origins in Romantic thought, they were more positive and based on valuing uniqueness, individuality and a celebration of difference. This later in turn developed into a more total view of the natural world which incorporated the state.

“The state and society were no longer regarded as rational constructions, the result of contractual arrangements between individuals in the manner of the Enlightenment; they were ‘super-personal creative forces, which build from time to time out of the material of particular individuals, a spiritual Whole, and on the basis of that Whole proceed from time to time to create the particular political and social institutions which embody and incarcerate its significance’

Lukes 1971:57.

Thus it has been shown that German individualism allows for a *“collective organism that unifies heterogeneous elements”* 1971:57 meaning a unity of individual and society and celebrates the uniqueness of each individual and promotes self-fulfilment. Where has French individualism could not even conceive of the idea of this unification of individual parts and saw individualism as a threat to society and a source of individual isolation. Therefore, we cannot talk of western individualism as one ideology of individualism, it must be understood that there are completely contrasting and opposite conceptions of the word emerging from two countries within the western world, France and Germany and hence, perhaps it is better to talk of plural western individualisms.

What the two conceptions of the term individualism do have in common though is a separation of individuals from the social world as individual actors and beings.

This next part of the essay is going to focus on non-western societies. It will firstly, using ethnographies, attempt to see if individualism is found in non-western societies. It will secondly try to determine if the spread of western culture and capitalism has led to a spread in individualism.

Individualism is often described in opposition to collectivism (Etienne Cabet in Lukes). With individualism associated with the west and western ways of thinking and perceiving the world and collectivism being associated with the ‘rest’ of the world. This collectivism is also associated with the pre-modern western world. This is why individualism is considered such a unique phenomenon as it represents a break from what has been known historically throughout the world. To understand what individualism is being constructed in opposition to, a definition of collectivism is essential here. If, for Lukes, individualism is a loss of collective morals, identity and a loss of unity then Geert Hofstede’s understanding of collectivist culture are the opposite and are characterised by loyalty to the group, group decisions being more important than individual ones, interdependence and personal identity based on the persons relation to others

within the group/position within the group. This dichotomy runs the risk of conceptualising the 'rest' of having no conception of an individual self. I will now look at ethnographies to determine whether, ideas associated with individualism can be found in what are classified as non-western societies. To do this the work of Godfrey Lienhardt will be used in his discussion on African representations of the self. He describes a Yoruba folk tale about a tortoise in which inner abilities can be shown to be greater than the visible outer self.

"the Yoruba are not only supposed to have an idea of a hidden, private self – here and inner activity, you will have noted – but to understand that it may ultimately be more important than the outer activity" 1985:143

Thus demonstrating that through the analysis of African folk tales and ethnography, that the concept of the self in African culture can be shown to be placed above the importance of the group. This does not deny that fact that when asked an African may define himself in relation to his position in the group and his place in a genealogical tree (Bastide in Lienhardt) which is where the support for the collectivist argument comes from. However, this shows that notions of individualism (self over group) are found in collectivist cultures and that the distinction is not as clear cut as it has been shown. Therefore, while it cannot be said that the culture of the Yoruba is distinctly based upon individualism, it has been shown that in Yoruba culture it would not be unheard of for someone to place their own inner self above the group in importance.

The final part of this essay will briefly try to trace the individualism in western societies to before its roots in the Enlightenment as a specific political doctrine of Enlightenment thought to see if what could be described as individualism existed before its labelling as such. Alan MacFarlane points out that while individualism is considered a modern doctrine (this fitting in with much discourse of what exactly western means) elements of it are shown in English history as far back as feudal times and the 1200s despite the fact these times are primarily portrayed as collectivist societies. This is further evidence for the case that it is unhelpful to label societies as based on individualism or collectivism as there are here again elements of individualism shown in societies that have been portrayed historically collectivist.

This essay has shown, through the work of Lukes, that it cannot be said that there is one type of individualism, there are many, this was demonstrated using the contrasting examples of French and German individualism. Therefore, it may be more appropriate to speak of western individualisms. It has also shown that through Lienhardt's analysis of West African Yoruba folk

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tales that these conceptions of individualism have been found in distinctly non-Western cultures. This is not to say that individualism is the dominant ideology in this West African culture but it challenges the dichotomy of individualistic and collectivistic culture between the west and the rest to suggest that it could be more a sliding scale of individualistic and collectivistic tendencies rather than a black and white picture of either or. Further evidence for this is displayed in Alan MacFarlane's work, which has traced attitudes associated with individualism back to what is commonly portrayed as collectivist feudal England. This could be a point for further research, to determine to what extent so called western societies display characteristics of collectivism, research could focus on families and in particular extended-families. Other sites for further research could see if globalisation and the spread of western culture and capitalism has impacted upon non-western societies that are traditionally described as collectivist societies.

Bibliography

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