

The Medial (Re-)Construction of the Autonomous Individual

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– Abstract –

In our common sense view of things, we may conceive of the individual and his or her individuality as standing in opposition to society. Moreover, as DURKHEIM has put it, one could interpret the emergence of modern individualism as a force that decreases social integration. Thus, if we approach the issue of modern individualism in this way, we immediately encounter a weighty theoretical problem. Stressing the social estrangement of the modern individual on the one hand while on the other exposing problems faced by social integration, we must confront the complex relationship between individual and society. Evidently, the problem at hand is twofold. For one thing, we must ask how the modern individual is located within or in opposition to society and how his or her personality is shaped. For another, we must ask how modern societies integrate their individual members and how they present themselves as unities.

However, we don't want to discuss this dialectic relationship and its symbolic representations in a general sense. Instead, we intend to discuss it with reference to a cluster of empirical case studies: In the course of our research on modern individuality and individualism, we have encountered quite a number of manuals, self-improvement literature, advertisements, television programmes and workshops proclaiming and idealising a strong-minded, smart and energetic individual. An early historical example of such a splendid individual we identified in the symbolic figure of the so-called English Gentleman. As manuals of the eighteenth century stress, a Gentleman must be »a man of himself«. At this, he should not only be a solid member of society. As a »man of himself«, he must prove his worth through willpower and autonomous commitment in everyday life. And doing so — this is the astonishing thing — he himself becomes a visible symbol of social order. In our day, we can identify a conspicuous renewal and modification of this voluntaristic individualism. In saying this, we must consider that his media of (re-)construction are quite different. We have found modifications of this type of individualism in German and US-American self-improvement literature concerned with the individual's body as well as with his or her social image and vocational success. Furthermore, we have found modifications in a wide range of television programmes and workshops on style, on self-management and on personality. Finally, we found this type of individualism most prominently promoted in a public advertising campaign bearing the remarkable title of *You are Germany*.

As different as these media of (re-)construction are, their common purpose is to encourage, to assist and to patronize the individual's self-assertion within social life. Again, the individual is told to demonstrate willpower and to stand the test of autonomy. Furthermore, at least in the campaign *You are Germany*, the autonomous individual once again become a symbol for social order.

In our presentation we would like to proceed in the following manner. *First*, we will construe the medial concept of the strong-minded, smart and energetic modern individual as a response to common risks of individual marginality in modern society. *Secondly*, we will illustrate how the concept of such an autonomous individual has become an essential part of a new collective symbolism in German society. In doing so, we will look at the *You are Germany* campaign and try to trace this astonishing symbolic link between the individual's autonomy and a society's unity. We would like to argue that the collective symbolism of the autonomous individual ›harmonizes‹ the contradiction of individualization and social integration by linking concepts of individual autonomy with social unity and prosperity.

However, this harmony is flavored with a bitter moralism. If willpower truly clear the way to personal self-assertion, that appears to suggest that an individual's marginality indicates a lack of personal volition, industry and discipline. Isn't the individual's marginality his or her own fault? Isn't it simply the result of an absence of will and discipline? And if the individual's self-assertion is in fact an irreplaceable source of social continuity, doesn't that mean that an individual's marginality is to be conceived as an offence against society? And isn't that just the kind of argument one needs when one wants to restructure existing social welfare systems? Thus an individualism initiated as a means of overcoming marginality and employed as an essential part of collective symbolization in the end becomes a justification for social marginality.