

History of the concept of the Individual and Individuality in Western Society

by Augusto Forti

Vice President, International Institute for Opera and Poetry

Fellow, World Academy of Art and Science

Retired Professor of Geophysics

Abstract:

We are the child of our land and the concept of individuality has been shaped by the history of our culture.

In this exercise there are two preliminary remarks I would like to make:

First, despite the geographical distance, sometimes, there are great similarities in the definition of “individuality” among cultures, for example, between the Indian and the European ones.

Second, in our globalized world, we have to look for those elements, in the puzzle that compose “the concept of individuality” which are common.

In my paper I’ll try to sketch the history of “individuality” in Europe.

In the ancient Greek and Roman world as well as in the rest of Europe, till the middle-ages which were dominated by the ideal of “aristocracy”, the status of recognized individual applied only to very few.

At the end of the middle-ages, the concept of the “individual” started to emerge. But it took a long time to become a formalized universal and accepted concept. We can say that this took origin at a time that goes back to a period between the late 1200s and 1400.

Transition from the civilization of the middle ages to the civilization of the Renaissance played a role in creating individuality. The actors were science, technology, the bourgeoisie ... and mainly, the “individual”.

There are two preliminary remarks I would like to make regarding the subject of Individuality: First, despite the geographical distance, there are great similarities in the definition of “individuality” among cultures, for example, between India and Europe.

Second, in our globalized society we have to look for those common elements in the puzzle that constitute “the concept of individuality”.

If we try to provide a reasonably shared definition of an “individual” as we conceive it today, we could say that:

The individual is a free human being with his own values and is “protected” by the “universal declaration of human rights” as adopted by the United Nations, applied by many but not all the U.N. member states.

Authoritarian regimes do not recognize the rights of the individual, particularly if the individual brings with him his or her values which are different from those imposed by the authoritarian power.

I will not make a list of these countries “pro bono pacis”; but, as you know, it would be a long list.

I’ll now try to sketch the history of individuality in Europe.

Not so long ago, the church was imposing the dogma of the “holy writings” and was ready to condemn or simply burn those men and women who had different ideas. There was no space for the recognition of individuality as in the case of Giordano Bruno and many others who were burned alive. It was the same story at that time, for the protestant world.

In the ancient Greek and Roman world, dominated by the ideal of “aristocracy”, the status of a recognized individual applied only to a few: philosophers, tyrants, priests, emperors, augurs and a few others. It was a society of privileged individuals, where few had all the rights and many had none at all. This type of society dominated Europe at least ‘till the transition from the Middle-Ages to the Renaissance’.

At the end of the Middle-Ages, the concept of ‘individual’ began to emerge. But it took a long time to become a formalized universal concept. We can say that it had its origin during the period between 1200 and 1400.

This was a time of transition between the end of the middle-ages and the onset of the renaissance.

An old equilibrium was breaking up.

This type of status, in thermodynamics as well as in society, tends to create turmoil and novelties with the tendency towards a new status, as Prigogine showed.¹

The concept of the individual could not but appear in a period of dramatic transition.

It was the end of a phase that lasted nearly 2 millennia, if we consider the fundamental contribution of the Greeks to culture.

The European of the XV century found himself surrounded by the ruins of his/her old certitudes. The earth was no longer the center of the universe. Where was God? Christopher Columbus discovered another world with strange animals and human beings, so different from those described in the holy Bible and those we had known for centuries. All this took place around the time that the Black Death occurred between 1300 and 1400 AD, which drastically reduced the entire European population.

The Europeans, to escape country brigands and harassment by landlords, assembled in towns protected by walls: the “communes”.

The “individual”, the concept of “individuality”, emerged in fact during these troubled times, with the rise of the “commune”, a revolutionary new social aggregation, and with the birth of a new social class: the bourgeoisie.

There are many reasons to support this idea.

The disregard for practical and manual activities and the aristocratic attitude that went back to the mental habit of the Greek and Roman society (where, for example, Euclid refused to consider any practical application for his mathematical theories) were coming to an end.

At the end of the XIII century, many philosophers and thinkers began to recognize the importance of the “artes mechanicae”, craft activities, and manual labour. Roger Bacon (1214-1292), a Frenchman, supported in his writings the “artes mechanicae”, experimental activities and experimental research, was critical about the traditional attitude of the church, and was particularly against the Aristotelian Thomas Aquinas. Bacon said about Aquinas: “How can this person without knowing optics, mathematics and alchemy, without knowing “le arti minori” how can he know “le arti maggiori” (philosophy, theology etc.)?”

Now in a transition period so important for our history, focus was on human beings, the world around us, the earth, and on a series of activities that in previous times were disregarded.

Even the church, with thinkers like Bacon or the school of Chartres shifted their attention from the sky, to see the life on earth around with its simple manual activities in a new light.

In the past, nobody would have dared to praise the technical progress and instruments, like Bacon and Petrus Peregrinus of Maricourt did.

Bacon says of Peregrinus: “He is shameful to ignore what is known to the ignorant, he is an expert in the arts of those that are working metals and minerals of any type, and he always gave attention to the enchantments of the old ladies and those of the witches”.

Bacon was an alchemist and an outstanding mathematician, and represents an important turning point in the attitude of the Church. Bacon, the technician and inventor of all sorts of ideal machines, was the one who was able to predict with intuition the technological destiny of men.

So now, the idea that a large part of the population, and those we would describe today as commoners, had their activities recognized as well as their status as individuals accepted.

It was a great cultural change: also time was secularized, with the bell of the church replaced by the clockwork of enterprise that marked the working hours during the day.

And the “machine” suddenly appeared, another crucial actor and a further step, as we will see, towards the recognition of the individual.

Many hypotheses have been put forth regarding the appearance of the “machine”, a phenomenon which is called mechanization.

For nearly half a millennium, from the end of the Roman Empire, there had been no significant technical innovation and now suddenly “unpromptù” all sort of technical instruments, tools, mechanisms and machines were popping up. Why such a change?

Was it due to the lack of manpower? In Europe, at the end of the Middle-Ages there were practically no slaves left and the Black Death had wiped out a large portion of the European population. This may have resulted in the need and interest to mechanize work.

Simple tools like the gear and others needed to apply the energy of watermills to various production were now in use. The building and diffusion of new machines might have been facilitated also by the progress in metallurgy, which made iron cheap and readily available.

Typical is also the fact that only now appeared the invention and use of the helm, steering mechanism, that would allow, with the new building techniques and with the help of compass and astrolabe, the oceanic crossing.

There is no satisfactory explanation for the appearance of the machine.

As we all know, the history of science and technology as well as the history of our society is not linear but is made by sudden, unforeseen and unpredictable changes. And as Popper says, any historical or deterministic explications will be wrong. And the great historian of science, Alexander Koyre, reminds us that Pisa does not explain Galilei or Syracuse Archimede. Nor London, I would add, Newton.

Inside the commune, the diffusion of the machine with the establishment of small laboratories and workshops was creating a concentration of workers. They associated in corporations and “guilds”: associations of free “individuals” with the same interests and profession.

The corporations had democratic statutes in order to protect the “identity” of the work and the activities of their members.

Also the commune was governed with democratic rules with the participation of citizens represented through the corporations and other associations. A large part of the inhabitants of the “commune” began to be recognized as a socially and politically active part of the community: as “individuals” with their rights and duties. Typical, in this respect is the constitutional text of the municipality of Todi in which is stated that the municipality will be run by common people and craftsmen with popular laws...

This is why we consider the “commune” as a democratic experiment typical of the European society, the culture medium of the “individual”.

In Muslim society the commune disappeared in the “mare magnum” of the Umma, the universal community of the Muslim world. And in China the commune had mainly a rural character.

During the XIV and XV centuries, laboratories began to associate themselves, leading to the creation of small enterprises concentrating on the entire production cycle: raw material, industrial treatment and commercial distribution of the production.

The owner of this first enterprise was the “bourgeois” a new social actor, an “individual ante litteram” in the European panorama as we know him: capitalist and entrepreneur, far from the Byzantine and European merchant of Braudel, and well described by Werner Sombart. The bourgeois was fundamentally individualistic and promoted the protection of his private and intellectual property. Thanks to the development of the press the first patents emerged in Florence in 1421 and in Venice in 1474 and would rapidly spread to other countries.

Sombart in his book *The Bourgeois* gives us a vivid picture of the bourgeois through the person of Leon Battista Alberti.

Industrial activities were expanding all over Europe in a sort of pre- industrial revolution and the bourgeoisie confirmed itself as an increasingly economically powerful social class, the engine of the industrial and social development in Europe. From “homo sapiens to homo faber”. Large masses of peoples who once did not have a specific identity marginalized by the feudal system were now assuming their own identity in the new historical context.

The beginning of individuality was physically protected in England, by Habeas Corpus (in the Magna Charta signed by King John Without Land in 1215, who had guardianship over not only private property but also over the physical integrity of its citizens.)

European society was now rapidly evolving with the raise of the bourgeoisie and tended to become largely composed of recognized “individuals”. Hence the ignition of the great individualistic bourgeois engine from Renaissance times, which thereafter would propel Europe towards the industrial revolution and the well known series of scientific, technological, economical and social successes, (not to forget “les droits de l’homme” after the French revolution).

Jacob Burckhardt, the great historian of the Renaissance, in his book “*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*”, provides us with a first modern definition of the would-be “individual”:

“ During the Middle-Ages the veil covering human souls was a cloth of faith, biases, ignorance and illusions...in so far as the human being was considered only as belonging to a race, a population, a party, a corporation, a family or any other forms of “community”. For the first time, it is Italy that has broken this veil and dictated the “objective” study of the State and other worldly things. Close to this new way of considering reality, it further develops the “subjective” aspect, and man becomes “individual”, spiritual, assuming consciousness of his new status’.”

And I would agree with Burckhardt that, in the Western society, the “individual” is the Renaissance’s child.

It has not been an easy path as we said; we took almost 500 years, with great pain if we remember Giordano Bruno and the many others. Today in Europe, the human being is finally not a number, but an individual.

The Monster ready to cancel again the free identity of the individual is still here and his name can be Big Brother or the various racist and extremist groups active in our democratic society. The monster is also still there inside the theocratic regimes or inside those regimes inspired by the black, red or green fascism.

Primo Levi reminds us in his book, *If this is a man*, the humiliation of no longer being considered an individual, but relegated as a mere number in the Nazi concentration camps.

It is up to us, free men and women, to chase back this monster to an irreversible past.

References :

1. Ilya Prigogine, Isabelle Stengers. *La fin des certitudes*