



Individualism and Collectivism: Reconciling the Values of Freedom & Equality

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Abstract

Individualism and collectivism are two competing philosophical and social movements that have divided the world for centuries. Their origins can be traced back to ancient times. They are founded on different interpretations of the value and place of freedom and equality in society. While their rivalry is ancient, it is also evolving and taking on ever new forms. Their evolution reflects a progression of global society from physical to vital-social and increasing mental levels and forms of consciousness. The clash of values takes many forms in different cultures and settings, but they all arise from the inability to reconcile apparently contradictory values and view them as complementary aspects of a greater truth. Today the unreconciled conflict is exemplified by the growing rivalry between the pluto-democratic capitalism in America and state capitalism in China, but the fissures run within countries and cultures as well as between them. This article traces the development of individualism in the West and positive and negative characteristics associated with its more extreme manifestations in order to understand both the strengths that perpetuate it and the weaknesses that continuously erode its stability. It points to the emergence of a reconciling formula based on a shift from individualism to mature individuality and the prevailing struggle within democratic societies in recent times.

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The age-old rivalry continues today between two sacred universal values—freedom and equality. For ages, the rivalry played itself out on different sides of the planet between cultures with little knowledge and contact with one another and in various forms, permutations and combinations as if humanity were experimenting with all possibilities before finally arriving at a proper balance or synthesis—a complete unifying formula but a richly diversified world culture.

In earlier times, the rivalry presented itself as combat between conformity to tradition versus openness to change, as the contrast between intellectual Athens and militant Sparta, the

Hellenic power of thought and aesthetics and the Roman power of ethics, law and social organization, the dogma of church and the creativity of Renaissance Italy, the proclamations of religious scripture and the enlightenment of experimental science, the stability of monarchy and the convulsions of revolution, the conventions of static feudalism and the expansive dynamism of mercantilism, the massive power of empire and the convulsions of nascent nationalism, and during the latter half of the 20th century as the global rivalry between communist authoritarianism and capitalist social democracy.

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With the end of the Cold War, it appeared that the rivalry had finally been brought to a definitive conclusion. Some scholars prematurely proclaimed the final victory of the freedom of capitalist plutocracy combined with the liberating democratic power of the Internet over the power of state socialism. It now appears the announcement was premature and the victory was short-lived. Three decades later, the world confronts a new incarnation of the age-old combat, but in more complex forms which are more difficult to clearly distinguish and define. It expresses as the assertion of state capitalism combining freedom and authority with unparalleled adeptness and results, mobilizing the dynamic energies of capitalism entrepreneurship with the central authority and power of the state. The dividing lines have lost their clarity, the opposing values mix in unexpected ways. While authoritarian communism leans toward capitalistic freedoms, democracy edges towards the intolerance of opposing dogmas. The divisions between the adversaries are no longer defined as a geographic spread between East and West or even between nations and cultures. The center stage of the struggle between values is now within nations and among their own people.

The unresolved debate today still poses the same dilemma—an inability to reconcile two universal principles—the liberating energy and creativity of individual freedom and the pursuit of social justice founded on equality and fairness. The more extreme incarnations of the conflict demonstrate the inherent weaknesses of a formula based on a partial truth. For, the truth transcends individual values and resides in a reconciliation and harmony of innumerable aspects of reality. So long as we seek to proclaim a sole victor, we assure ourselves of another defeat. The solution lies in recognizing that what appear as contradictions are complementary dimensions of a greater truth. Freedom and equality, the individual and the collective, form indivisible components of a greater whole seeking to emerge. And even in combination, they do not represent the whole truth. The French Revolution went beyond them, proclaiming a triune truth—liberty, equality, and fraternity. No society has yet really even attempted in practice that still greater reconciliation.

This essay explores one side of the equation from the perspective of its acknowledged virtues and blatant limitations. It focuses on the creative power of freedom and its inherent tendency to self-destruct when pursued as a sole end in itself without regard for other truths. It holds that the key to resolving the apparent contradiction lies in our conception of individual freedom. It makes an important distinction between two concepts—individualism and individuality.

1. The Rise of Individualism in the West

Human cultures vary over a wide range between individualistic and collectivistic. Since the birth of mind in ancient Greece, Western cultures have tended towards individualism in thought and action, while Asian societies from Mesopotamia and India to the Far East have leaned toward increasing degrees of collectivism. The individualistic streak in Western cultures was evident in the democratic assemblies of ancient Athens and the spirit of free enquiry exemplified by Plato, Socrates and Aristotle. It expressed during the Roman Empire as the predilection toward republican forms of governance and aversion to the monarchical tendencies displayed by Julius Caesar. It re-emerged powerfully at the end of the Middle Ages in Renaissance Italy and the early Enlightenment, the birth of modern science, the Protestant Revolution, French Revolution and the prolific entrepreneurial innovations of the Industrial Revolution that preceded the rise to prevalence of modern democracies and capitalism in the West.

The culture of individualism is associated with many positive attributes. It nourishes a spirit of self-confidence and self-reliance, independent thinking, an urge to question, inquire, innovate and create self-chosen value systems, the sense of adventure and love of challenges, non-conformity, the love of freedom and independence, the insistence on equality, respect for human rights, etc. Taken to an extreme, it results in a lack of concern for community welfare and neighbourhood spirit, exaggerated emphasis on individual rights rather than social responsibility, excessive competitiveness and extreme forms of possessiveness, egoism, selfish individualism, too much stress on the right to self-defence leading to violence, lack of communal cooperation and social harmony due to the animosity and conflict arising from the clash of divergent viewpoints.

The individualistic spirit of self-reliance gave rise to the right of each person to interpret the Holy Scriptures, question religious doctrine and directly relate to God without the intermediacy of Church during the Protestant Reformation and thereafter the emergence of the protestant work ethic which spurred the economic rise of the West. It provided the impetus for massive migrations of impoverished landless and persecuted minorities to the new world in search of freedom to create better lives for themselves—an attitude now widely prevalent among aspiring masses around the world, but previously more exceptional than commonplace.

In comparison with the insularity and cultural self-absorption prevalent for centuries in the East, the individualistic cultures of the Western world have always been adventurous explorers and ambitious conquerors. When the Ottomans blocked the Silk Road for European trade with Asia in the 15th century, European nations began a quest which led to the Age of Discovery and European Colonialism. Overcoming the superstitious fears that had barred navigation down the west coast of Africa and across the Atlantic, they discovered the New World and established permanent sea routes to the Orient.

The value of self-reliance gave immigrants the confidence to brave adventure, settle in the lawless wildernesses of America bereft of protection from man or beast within the safety of settled communities. With no police force to depend on, both men and women had to

rely on their own courage and resourcefulness for personal safety, and often take the law into their own hands. The right to self-defence gave rise to the gun-culture in America as an extreme form of physical self-reliance on personal arms rather than community defences for protection.

From the 16th century onwards impoverished peasants and working class Europeans started aspiring for a new life in the New World. Leaving one's native country to settle in virtually unknown places calls for courage, a spirit of adventure, a willingness to confront unanticipated challenges, and a rugged fighting spirit. Pioneers had to face hostile Indians, defend their crops from marauding wild animals and those bent on stealing their harvests and property. The New World was settled by men with such an adventurous spirit. Then there came the task of winning freedom from their European mother countries from which they had migrated. Western literature is replete with adventurous individuals who loved to embrace challenges. R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are typical examples. The challenges of surviving on a deserted island are the dreams of many Western teenagers.

With the emergence of rule of law backed by police and courts for the administration of justice, one might have expected the preoccupation with personal self-defence to become obsolete. But the entrenched habit borne of individual insecurity and insufficient investment in social institutions persists, especially in less populated and less educated parts of the country, where the culture persists of training youth at an early age to defend themselves for self-reliance. Such training equips youth with the confidence to decide on their own careers, learn skills of their own choice, seek out jobs for their livelihood, and to search for and choose their own marriage partners. It motivates adults to work hard and save for their future, mindful that they will be responsible for their own security after retirement and often solely dependent on their personal savings and social insurance.

The insecurities of both youth and age are a source of energy and motivation for the individual to learn, develop and assume responsibility. But they are also a source of competitiveness, anxiety and tension which deprive many of the security resulting from lifelong cooperative and harmonious relationships. High rates of divorce, drug addiction, crime and imprisonment are the flip side consequence of societies which fail to arrive at an effective balance between the freedom of the individual and allegiance to the collective.

The spirit of self-reliance fosters many other healthy attitudes. One such found in marked measure among Americans is the attitude that nothing is impossible and no problem is beyond solution by resolute human effort. People in collectivist societies such as India are far more likely to blame the government, karma or their horoscope for their misfortunes, persistent poverty, ill health and failure to accomplish. Whereas self-reliant individuals believe that prosperity is their birth-right and the story of rags to riches is applicable to anyone who truly aspires to rise. This belief that nothing is impossible spurred Americans to land a man on the Moon at a time when such a feat was still regarded as science fiction.

The remarkable power of self-reliance was revealed in World War II after virtually all of mainland Europe had fallen under the control of Nazi military power and Britain stood

alone as the last bastion of freedom. When no other leader had the confidence or faith in the resolve of the British people, the Tory cabinet reluctantly put Winston Churchill in charge. Without consultations, hesitation or even asking people for resolve, he went on public radio and broadcast his famous speech culminating with the words “We will never surrender!” His speech was not merely intended to deter the Nazis. It was a stirring appeal to the deeply seated faith of the British people, their love for freedom and determined self-reliance. The Nazis expected to complete the conquest of Britain within three months, whereas at the end of that period they withdrew in defeat. It was not merely the courage and conviction of Churchill that won the Battle of Britain. His leadership drew on the strength of the people’s self-reliance which withstood extreme adversity and turned defeat into victory. It was not achieved by the compulsions of an authoritarian military government but by the passionate loyalty of a free people who valued their independence above all else.

That same remarkable power was exhibited in America during the 1930s, which followed immediately after one of the most prosperous and at the same time unequal periods in American history. America was not at war in the 1930s, but it faced the equally oppressive challenge of economic depression and the worst financial crisis in American history. In the three years following the Great Crash of 1929, 6000 American banks had failed and closed. When Franklin D. Roosevelt became President in early 1933, he had to order temporary closure of the banks to stop the panic from bringing down even the strongest financial institutions. A week later he went on public radio to address the American people. FDR appealed to the spirit of self-reliance and self-confidence in the American people. He told them that the crisis was man-made and could be stopped by the people. He called on them to banish fear and panic and draw on the values which had made America the most prosperous nation in the world. He announced the reopening of the banks and urged the American people to redeposit their hard earned savings back into the financial system as a vote of confidence in themselves and the nation. His appeal evoked a positive response in the hearts of many Americans and a vast majority supported his New Deal program. Within a week, the panic subsided and the banking crisis came to an end. FDR later commented that nothing he had learned about economy at Harvard had prepared him to meet this situation. An intangible human value accomplished what three years of monetary and fiscal policy had failed to achieve. That is the value of Values.

2. Evolution of Social Individuality

Individualism values unconventional behaviour and respects life styles that do not conform to what society currently approves. During the first and second World Wars and the Great Depression, extreme individualism was muted in America by the extreme insecurity of war and poverty and the demand for national social cohesion. But the new generation was born in peace and prosperity after WWII that far exceeded what was known by earlier generations. When the so-called Baby Boomer generation reached young adulthood many scoffed at the conformity of their parents and unquestioning acceptance of government policies. The Hippy Movement of the 1960s challenged virtually all established beliefs and customs, from music, art, dress codes, sexual conduct and marriage to faith in all forms of authority. American youth questioned social values relating to the pursuit of money and

comfort, scorned conspicuous consumption, political hypocrisy and police violence. In expressing their rejection of conformist values they renounced formal codes, disparaged marriage, affirmed gay rights, dropped out of colleges in large numbers, retreated into communes and back to nature. Youngsters who took to hippy culture dropped out from college and travelled overseas in unprecedented numbers, started living together without undergoing proper marriage ceremony and even begot children.

They questioned and challenged almost everything. But they also affirmed ideas and values that had been spurned as primitive, superstitious, absurd or heresy by previous generations. They challenged conventional political theories dividing East and West and exposed the hypocrisy of their own leaders for espousing idealism while violating the very ideals they affirmed both at home and abroad. They pointed to the inconsistencies between the cherished values on which America and democracy were purported to be based and the practical realities of life in America. They rejected conventional religions in favour of a highly individualistic exploration of esoteric ideas and doctrines. It led to a mushrooming of meditation centres and yoga schools all over the U.S. and a surging demand for all types of books relating to Eastern spirituality. Without a healthy respect for diversity of views such openness to radically different beliefs and cultural values would not have been possible. They protested racial and gender discrimination, supported the American Civil Rights Movement, founded the environmental movement, protested the war in Vietnam and the nuclear arms race, affirmed the collectivist values of socialism, and embraced foreign ideas, people and cultures more openly than any previous generation.

Yet for all its idealism, the 1960s was essentially a rebellion against all forms of established convention. It exposed and condemned more than it created. It affirmed the value and right of the individual to protest against the rank injustices and hypocrisy of the prevailing system and viewed what was then the world's freest nation as an authoritarian police state and imperialistic aggressor. It sided always with the weak and downtrodden, but had few solutions beyond rejection of the status quo. In opposing the Vietnam War, it never considered the potential consequences of the spread of revolutionary communism throughout Asia until it undermined democracy in a fragile, nascent Indian democracy, which had just been freed after half a millennium of external rule.

Although the anti-establishment movement of the 1960s gradually faded back into the mainstream, many of its core values of tolerance, openness, respect for nature and other cultures permeated into the mainstream and reshaped American culture. Its most valuable contribution was a shift in emphasis from extreme individualism to individuality. The hippies scorned in principle the extreme egoism of selfish accumulation and vain status symbols. They replaced idolatry of the self-made man who overcame adversity to rise to the highest centers of wealth and power with a more refined concept of a person who could think for him or herself, adopt and live by idealistic values, dedicate themselves to the welfare of humanity and not merely their own personal success. A subtle shift began from pursuit of social success to the quest for psychological growth and spiritual self-development. The notion of the physical self-reliant person who could brave adversity, gradually evolved into that of the mentally and emotionally mature individual who could live in harmony with those

different from themselves, who could understand and respect those who were different, and cherish the universal values that transcend cultural distinctions in form and expression.

The greatest contribution of the Hippy revolution was to affirm a type of individual freedom that extolled idealistic individuality founded on universal spiritual values rather than selfish, egoistic individualism. What was borne in the 1960s inspired youth around the world on both sides of the Iron Curtain in pursuit of a universal set of values founded on a shared sense of identity as citizens of the global village called Earth. It extolled a love of nature and respect for the planet. Like the idealism of the French Revolution, it was quickly smothered by more mundane pursuits. Like the values proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, it extolled idealism but failed to provide a realistic framework for achieving it. It took 72 years for the principles set forth in UDHR to be transformed into the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 and affirmed by 193 nations. The idealism of the 1960s still awaits its transformation and universal affirmation.

The historical development of individualism and its partial transition to individuality corresponds to a general evolution of human consciousness from physicality to vitality and mentality. The emphasis on self-reliance and exploration so prominent in early America represents the emergence of individuality at the physical level. Its expression as invention, entrepreneurship and social innovation is an expression of individuality at the vital social level. The capacity and propensity to think differently and dependently mark its development at the mental level.

The recognition of individual rights marks an important stage in the political and social evolution of individuality. The transition from feudalism, aristocracy and monarchical rule by a tiny elite class can be traced back to the Reformation in the West, long before it gained momentum further East. The subordination of the individual to religious authority gradually waned as more and more people exercised religious freedom of choice. Politically, the US rejected English monarchy at the end of 18th century while France threw out royalty at roughly the same time, only to call it back for a last fling a few decades later. By the first quarter of the 20th century most people of Europe had weaned themselves from subordination to monarchical rule. Yet the values of authoritarian collectivism remained far longer in the European colonies established in Asia and Africa. Even today the authority of religious leaders, the upper classes, the elderly, the family, the teacher, the employer, the government official, and the community at large is far more prominent in collectivist nations of the East.

In 1789 the French Revolution adopted its Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, echoing some key elements of the Magna Carta of 1215 and the English Bill of Rights of 1689. Two years later, America added the Bill of Rights as an amendment to the US Constitution. Neither document specifically prohibited or denounced slavery. All four served as the basis for much of the content of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by 48 nations in 1948. None of them granted women the right to vote which was won by the English women in 1918, by American women in 1920 and by the French in 1944. Progress elsewhere in Europe was slower. The last canton in Switzerland to accord women the right to vote did so in mid 1970s.

The right to private property and freedom from taxation without representation were fundamental to the birth of Western democracies, for without them the individual could never be freed from the arbitrary exercise of power of the state. The seizure and collectivization of ownership under communism was deemed by the West as one of the greatest infringements on individual freedom.

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Social rights were harder and slower to come by, yet the inexorable march towards gender equality continues. Women in India won the political right to vote almost two decades before some of their counterparts in Switzerland, but social freedom was more difficult to achieve because it required the consent of society and not merely public law. The social stigma attached to unmarried and divorced Indian women still prevails and the authority of the husband and his family remains paramount in most households.

3. Evolution of Mental Individuality

Mental individuality can be traced back to the elite intellectuals of ancient Athens, but it remained at that time a rare capacity rather than a widely held endowment. Its re-emergence in Renaissance Italy and the Enlightenment can be characterized as the emergence of mental individuality at a much wider level. It has been postulated that the inexplicable popularity of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* over the last four centuries can be attributed to the representation of mental individuality in a common man of action as expressed in “To be or not to be.”

In collectivist cultures conformity is the norm, education is founded on rote learning, and unconventional thinking is discouraged. But in individualistic cultures the value of diversity is revered and originality is encouraged. In such cultures children are taught to understand rather than memorize and accept nothing without questioning. A culture of mental curiosity gave impetus to the revolutionary ideas espoused by such thinkers as Newton, Darwin, and Einstein. Darwin’s theory of evolution challenged the Biblical theory of divine creation still propagated by the Church. This assertion shook the Catholic Church to its very foundations and it took a century or more for Darwin’s theory to gain near universal acceptance in America, where conservative resistance prevails even today. Darwin succeeded not only because he exercised the freedom to challenge established dogma but even more so because he lived in a society which cherished that freedom.

Apart from physical challenges of exploration and migration, Europeans responded to mental challenges in the quest for new knowledge on the frontiers of science and in the search for technological innovations to improve production and communication and transportation. Engineers in English coal mines faced the big problem of pumping out the water that was collecting in coal pits. Finally, they came up with the idea of the steam engine which could

pump out the water. It was only one more step to inventing the steam ship, steam locomotive and the countless other machines which launched the First Industrial Revolution at the time when American colonists were drafting their *Declaration of Independence* and Adam Smith was writing *Wealth of Nations*. Less than a century later the Second Industrial Revolution founded on electricity began. And the marriage of science and technology in the 20th century has since given birth to further revolutions in computing and artificial intelligence.

It is only with the spread of education over the last hundred years that mentality has been widely valued as an endowment in general society. Wherever education transcends indoctrination, instruction in abstract theory or mere transfer of information and mental skills, the mind begins to awaken to both its capacity and right to think independently and differently, which is the foundation for mental freedom. Modern education transforms the freedom embodied in physical self-reliance into the mental freedom to inquire, question, debate and dissent. Yet even today intellectuality is frowned on with suspicion in many countries, especially among political leaders. Social conformity in thought predominates even in highly educated countries, as symbolized by the susceptibility to fake news, and it is still prevalent even in science and other fields of academia.

Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes became the epitome of the thinking individual combating evil with the power of scientific thinking combined with acute intuitive perception. Every criminal case that came to him challenged his capacities for detection and pursuit and he thrived on that challenge. He refused to fall prey to false clues, circumstantial evidence and the pressure of popular opinion. He displayed a capacity for original thinking that bordered on genius. He delved deeper into cases to discover deeper motives beneath the superficial clues. In *Silver Blaze* the police arrested a gambler who had been seen in the neighbourhood where a champion race horse suddenly disappeared and the horse's trainer was found murdered. Holmes rejected the conclusions of the police because they overlooked apparently irrelevant facts—a receipt for an expensive woman's dress in the trainer's pocket, the failure of the trainer's dog to bark at the intruder during the night the horse was stolen and the accusation against the gambler rested on the supposition that he had slipped opium into the stable boy's dinner to knock him unconscious. Holmes' capacity to reject convention and public opinion led him to the only conclusion consistent with all the facts. It was the champion horse that killed the trainer with a kick in the head while the trainer was trying to maim the horse's leg so it would lose the race that would enable the trainer to win enough by betting against the favourite to support a mistress in London and repay his accumulated debts.

Humanity has yet to become fully mental. But it is gradually growing both due to the continued spread of education as well as through the remarkable broadening of personal experience characteristic of our times. Exposure to other cultures physically through travel, immigration and emigration further dissolves the rigid cultural barriers that distinguish and divide groups. The exponential growth in inter-cultural electronic communication has vastly accelerated this movement, in ways it will be impossible to fully comprehend until decades after the impact begins to be felt. The unprecedented contact between individuals and cultures is not only breaking down old distinctions but also creating new combinations and forms which will gradually come to permeate the increasingly complex and diverse shared

cultures of the future making it more and more difficult to classify and compare according to conventional stereotypes.

4. From Individualism to Individuality

Individualism extols a partial and largely illusory freedom which effectively liberates each person to pursue his or her own selfish, egoistic ends with only a modicum of social responsibility as required by law and practical necessity. Individuality affirms a higher principle of freedom in which the individual is liberated from the pressures of conventional social conformity to think for him or herself but bound by a higher standard of universal values which dictates action for the benefit of all. Individualism is the freedom of the ego to tyrannize over others for its own aggrandisement. Individuality is the quest of the soul for self-perfection and universal well-being. The former views the person as the sole author of his or her own destiny and therefore the sole rightful beneficiary of the fruits of action. The latter recognizes that the individual and the collective are two inseparable dimensions of one reality and neither can exist without the other. The collective provides the physical protection, practical know-how, knowledge, skills, tools, organization, education and opportunity for the individual to develop and excel. The formed individual provides the vision, aspiration, inspiration, originality, creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship and catalytic impetus for the growth and development of the collective. Both owe their greatest virtues to the contributions of the other. Neither can arrive at fullness and fulfilment without fully recognizing the value of the other. All attempts to compromise them are bound to fail due to the inherent inadequacy in partial truth.

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