

Hard to accurately define and conceptualize, individuality is a topic of much debate, particularly among historians as they discuss to when the theory was brought about in human culture. To identify individuality in human history, parameters regarding the definition of the word must be set; the modern concept of individuality is the ability to offer and share different opinions and innovations, specifically critical and adverse ones, so that the public distinguishes a person from the rest of a group. Public opinion ties greatly into the modern concept of individuality, take the movie *Good Night and Good Luck* for example. Based off of the American Red Scare during the Cold War, Robert Downey Jr. plays an American communist trying to hide anything that could individualize him from the rest of the public. Because he is unable to publicly share his true self, the rest of the world sees him as another cookie-cutter American, thus the concept of individuality is nonexistent until his opinions that differentiate him from the rest are revealed.

Looking back upon human history with a clear-cut concept of individuality having been formed, two noticeable movements fostered a particularly beneficial climate for the ideology of self: the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. Both are necessary movements for individualism, as the Renaissance defines the economic, social, and artistic parameters, while the Reformation delves into the religious shift towards Individualism. The modern concept of individuality was created during the Renaissance and Protestant Reformation because of the expansion and development of Capitalism, as well as the changing religious views of the people and church.

The Renaissance was the byproduct of failed and collapsed systems Manorialism and Feudalism. Immediately after their collapse, a huge influx of labor and capital from the previously agrarian tenants flooded the market, leading to innovation and invention. One invention was of extreme importance to the success of the Renaissance and Individualism as a whole: Gutenberg's printing press. Now with increasingly faster access to knowledge and opinions, people across all social classes began to collect from different sources and form varying opinions. One miller, specifically, showed the influence of the printing press through his rather eccentric and unique religious beliefs. Menocchio used books such as *Fioretta della Bibbia* and *Decameron* to formulate his own opinions on how the world was created. In many senses of the word, Menocchio was considered a first-time scientist, drawing information from different readable sources to come to new conclusions, something that was nearly impossible without the printing press.¹

Additionally, as the European market economy began to shift from agrarian to mercantile, Individualism began to flourish under the concept of joint stock.² Now individuals can distinguish themselves by creating and investing in corporations with different goals, unlike Feudalism, where there were typically only three classes: farmers, lords/vassals, and priests. Beginning in 1407 with the creation of The Bank of St. George in Genoa, Italy, Mercantilism took off in the form of trade guilds and stock companies. England, in particular, began regulating the incorporation of companies with foreign trade, encouraging individuals to form businesses or to buy stock in them.³ The first joint stock company was the British

Russia Company chartered in 1553, having been created based on Italian business models during the height of the Renaissance.⁴

As the economy propelled Individualism, its true success was pushed to new heights in the transition from strictly Renaissance growth to expansion in the Protestant Reformation. Scholars like Petrarch brought Capitalistic qualities from the market to the church. Founder of the ideology *Studia Humanitas*, Petrarch wanted to encourage competition in education with the church's *Scholasticism*. People interested in Petrarch's teachings began hiring private tutors as opposed to being educated by the church, inadvertently bringing free market competition to the religious sector.

The Protestant Reformation continued the Renaissance's agenda when it began liberating capital under the church's control. Specifically in England, capital released from the church was organized and distributed, allowing individuals to have more control over assets and spreading out the church's power versus having it concentrated between the Pope and high priests.⁵ With the Catholic Church having less of an influence and Gutenberg's printing press taking off, monks like Martin Luther began introducing new Christian concepts, namely Protestantism. Protestantism's focus was based on the individual connection between a person and God, essentially eliminating the middlemen priests and cutting the church's power as a whole. Like Petrarch's *Studia Humanitas*, its focus was on people, not the pompous ceremonies of the Catholic Church. Individualism flourished under the Protestant Reformation because the Catholic Church's power was significantly

challenged—resulting in the introduction of various Christian practices and the denunciation of the uniformity of Catholic practice at the time.

As the concept and identification of Individualism throughout history is a topic for debate, the logical connection about the Renaissance is that the era is considered to be the rebirth of Greek and Roman culture in Europe. Thus, logical progression takes one to the assumption that the Greeks and Romans developed Individualism first and that the Renaissance simply resurfaced the ideology. This assumption, however, upon further analysis, proves to be lacking in both evidence and argument with the concept of modern individuality applied.

Specifically Roman culture, while it did offer many of the qualities one uses to define the term “Capitalism”, lacked one significant attribute: the concept of joint stock corporations.⁶ Because the Romans prized the farmer-soldier ideal, Mercantilism did not become nearly as influential under Roman rule as it did in the Renaissance. According to Peter Temin of Princeton University, Capitalism is defined as having three important aspects: financial intermediation, internal and external sources, and public capital markets. Rome had only two of the three, lacking in the latter.⁷ Therefore Rome did not have the Capitalism that was introduced in the Renaissance; Romans still idealized the agrarian aspect of their society, therefore making it impossible to shift to Mercantilism through an influx of previously agrarian tenants. Since it has been determined that Rome lacked Capitalism, the modern concept of individuality cannot be applied to Roman culture because the culture prized uniformity under the farmer-soldier concept, rather than encouraging the expansion of diverse ideals, particularly in social classes.

Bibliography

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- ³*Ibid.*, 97-98.
- ⁴*Ibid.*, 99.
- ⁵*Ibid.*
- ⁶Temin, Peter. *The Roman Market Economy*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.): 103.
- ⁷*Ibid.*, 163.