Isabelle Villarreal

HIST-150

The Start of Individualism

The concept of individualism is argued to have many starting points in history, it could have begun in the Renaissance or even before the Middle Ages. It has been seen with Joan of Arc in the 1400s where she set herself apart from the Church by following a spirit that guided her or with Menocchio, whose ideas on religion were so vast he became known as the creator of his own heresy. Yet, although it can be traced back to the times of antiquity, individualism is the creation of the nineteenth century, with the term 'individualism' being used three times in France to define the rights of the individual. Individualism, in this sense, was and is based on the assumption that each individual is the best judge of their own interests and the choices made contributes to the development of their personally and the welfare of the society.[1]

However, the concept of individualism was not originally welcomed by those of the nineteenth century. The conservatives of the time saw it as a possible threat to the stability of social and political order, with it being identified with 'anarchy' and 'egotism' for some. Even the romanticists of the time were not fond of the concept, feeling 'individuality' was what should be upheld instead. They even went on to say that individualism was the most horrible of all evils because it meant the loss of individuality in modern France.[2] Individualism did have some supporters though, with those being found among the socialists and the liberals of the

---

[1]Mohd. Akhtar Khan. "Individualism: Creation and Evolution." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 1 (January 1987): 126–32., 126
[2] Ibid., 126-127

time. These socialist and liberals used individualism to advocate for changes to be made to amendments to try and achieve better social cohesion. Despite those who accepted individualism, many could not get around the hard bias the French had already interpreted. This association of individualism with an individual posing to be a threat to the stability of social and political order can be tied back to when Joan of Arc and Menocchio acted out against the usual ways that were expected during their times. While the concept of 'individualism' was really brought about in the nineteenth century, the cases of Joan and Menocchio could tie to the reasons it was so poorly accepted in France. In the case of Joan and Menocchio, both their lives were ended due to them not conforming with the Church and going with they believed. Joan followed a spirit that had been guiding her since she was 13, and as a result, the King of France was brought back to power and she led the French to victory over the English at Orléans.[3] In Menocchio's case, his ideas and viewpoints on religion expressed that he saw baptism as unnecessary and that the God and angels were essentially created from matter.[4] Their ideas and way of life may have led to the general negative acceptance of individualism in the nineteenth century, since the two individuals had gone against the social and political order of their time. Joan refused to wear the clothes of women and never revealed what the spirits told her and Menocchio claimed the ideas he spoke of were his, despite the many books found to contain the same information. Their way of life was the beginning of something that general society was not ready to expand on. Through the nineteenth century in France, the negative

---

[3] Régine Pernoud. *Joan of Arc by Herself and Her Witnesses*. Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1994.

[4] , Carlo Ginzburg. *The Cheese and the Worms the Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2013. It should be noted that I had to return my books Tuesday, so I am not able to reference page numbers. This information comes from notes I took while reading and during class. This applies to both Joan of Arc and Menocchio.

connotations associated with individualism would follow until the transition into America,

where a new form would start to emerge.

The idea of individualism in the nineteenth century started to take a turn when it

traveled from Europe to America, there it saw a different approach to what individualism

meant. Individualism in America is argued to have begun with the American Revolution in the

eyes of S.M Lipset, who believed it shaped Americans dominant value system.[5] However, it is

also argued that individualism was not present in America during the revolutionary era, and

was in fact presentism had caused the modern definition of individualism to be confused with

that in the American revolution era. In America, the meaning of 'individualism' changed from

being a term "characterizing a society dominated by selfish interests to one denoting the ideals

of a free individual seeking the opportunities for the development of his personality."[6]

Individualism and the value-content changed completely in America, it was tied to being a

progressive movement and that both free institutions and enlightened self-interest rested on

the vigor of American Individualism. Whereas in Europe, thinkers used it in a pejorative sense,

the American mind saw it as a symbol of immense conceptual significance, they believed that

there was a natural order at the international level and one within society. Americans related

individualism in the philosophy of natural rights, in the ideal of democracy and in the theory of

limited government and in the concept to internationalism.[7] Individualism in the Americas grew

to have multiple meanings however, with the user picking the definition that best suited them,

---

[5] Edward Grabb, Douglas Baer, and James Curtis. "The Origins of American Individualism: Reconsidering the Historical Evidence." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 24, no. 4 (1999): 511–33., 511
[6] Mohd. Akhtar Khan. "Individualism: Creation and Evolution." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 1 (January 1987): 126–32., 127
[7] Ibid., 128

some relating it have more moral and religious significance while another saw it as the root of social development. Others saw it as something that incarnated the progressive forces of modern history, but it also acquired a harsher meaning for a social Darwinist, who wanted a competitive society where the individual was free to unfold his potentialities. This version of individualism led to the theory of private enterprise and *laissez-faire,* "postulating equality of opportunity with the assertion that private accumulation would lead to public welfare."[8]

The creation of individualism in the nineteenth century was also seen in England, where it too was not tied to having a positive meaning and was used in a pejorative sense. This changed when it was advocated to encase the ideals of freedom and it was asserted that individualism "produced the most powerful effects upon the life and action of others." The term eventually evolved to being used by a whole spectrum of English liberals, from the most extreme *laissez-faire* to those asking for extensive state intervention. [9] Individualism implied a fundamental principle of human nature and an essential factor for the wellbeing of the society and was used to signify induvial freedom and equality, which could be secured under the reign of social control. In England, individualism grew to be something that the general welfare could benefit from if each individual was left free to pursue his own happiness in his own way, either alone or with others.[10]

Individualism, while it grew to have many definitions and versions, still housed the same concept each place it impacted. To be an individual meant pursuing one's own success, which

---

[8] Mohd. Akhtar Khan. "Individualism: Creation and Evolution." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 1 (January 1987): 126–32., 128
[9] Ibid., 129
[10] Ibid., 129

then in turn would impact the society that person lived in, either benefiting it or creating

competition. Individualism helped bring about change in different societies after its official start

in the nineteenth century.