Struggling over Self and Society: A Cultural-sociological Analysis of Individualism in Modern Society.

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Abstract:

This doctoral thesis takes as its subject one of the oldest and at the same time most ambiguous themes of sociology, namely individualism. The type of social and institutional control that characterizes modern society rests on a general belief in autonomous and equal individuals, which makes individualism into a defining cultural discourse. The interest here lies in individualism as a cultural belief and, more specifically, in how people interpret and use its core notions, i.e. self, freedom and equality. This dissertation explores the variations in cultural manifestations of these notions, both over time and between social classes. It is furthermore explained how these variations in self-conceptions and views on autonomy and equality are connected to social changes (i.e. shifts in bio-politics and economic policy) and how they are constitutive elements in contemporary class conflict.

The dissertation itself consists of three parts: one theoretical and two empirical. The first theoretical part elaborates on the importance of individualism in relation to the process of modernization and proposes a classification of different types of individualism, i.e. subjective, collective, radical and liberal individualism. The second part consists of a diachronic study of long term changes in individualism. This is done on the basis of two historical case studies. One case study involves a thematic content analysis of advice literature on how to obtain professional success from the 1930’s up till today. A second case study includes a quantitative content analysis of pedagogical journals for teachers, starting from the 1880’s. Both studies demonstrate that individualism remains a defining discourse throughout the 20th century but that there does exist strong variations in the way its core notions (e.g. autonomy, self-development, equality) are conceived. The third part entails an analysis of variations in individualism in contemporary society on the basis of data from a survey conducted among a random sample of the Flemish population. The argument is that class formation is a dynamic process, which not only involves economic and cultural boundaries, but also moral ones. In the struggle over class interests, variations in individualism are employed as tools for justification and defense.