

# Individualism Verses Communism

Clarence Carson - February 1, 1963

*Individualists were in a majority at the outset of the conflict, of course. At the beginning of the twentieth century they held positions of power and influence.*



There is no difficulty today in getting assent to the proposition that something untoward has happened to individualism in America. It is a commonplace saying that conformity has been raised to the position of a prime virtue and that the individual is being sacrificed to the group. There has been a spate of books since World War II devoted to expounding this thesis. William H. Whyte, in *The Organization Man*, contends that even the most powerful spokesman of individualism, the corporation man, is using the language of individualism to “stave off the thought that he himself is in a collective as pervading as any ever dreamed of by the reformers, the intellectuals, and the utopian visionaries he so regularly warns against.” David Riesman and colleagues, in *The Lonely Crowd*, detail the loss of independence by Americans and ascribe it to a change in the American character from “inner direction” to “other direction.” Erich Kahler, in a recent work, declares: “Today we are witnessing and are deeply involved in a huge process of human transformation. This transformation seems to tend toward some formation beyond the individual. However, it manifests itself in diverse processes of disruption or invalidation of the individual.”

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The literature proclaiming the existence and analyzing the phenomena of conformity is bountiful. It runs the gamut from novels to popular treatises to psychological explorations to sociological monographs, from *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* to *The Exurbanites* to *The Hidden Persuaders* to

A Nation of Sheep. Reports come in that college students are passive, that young men seek secure positions in giant corporations, that home buyers seek domicile in suburbia with its row upon row of uniform houses, that men prefer public relief to migration in search of new jobs.

The ease of manipulating Americans en masse is apparent to any perceptive observer. For several decades now Americans have been prone to mass crazes from Mah Jong to hula hoops, to hero worship from Charles A. Lindbergh to Elvis Presley, to popular songs, to matinee idols, and to all sorts of fads. National propaganda has apparently been able, in the last twenty years, to get us to hate the Germans and Italians, despise the Russians, love the Finns, loathe the Japanese, embrace the Russians, ignore the Finns, admire the Germans, Italians, and Japanese, and suspect the Russians, in that order.

As I said, there is much agreement that individualism has declined precipitately in America. But at this point consensus ends sharply. There must be almost as many explanations of the phenomena as there are accounts of it. Some will offer such standard explanations as industrialization, urbanization, the end of the frontier, and the population increase. Others attach the change to such developments as advertising, propaganda, the mass media of communication, the progressive methods of education, the growth of the corporation, the spread of unionism, the enactment of near universal suffrage, or the strained international situation. As usual, we strain at gnats and swallow camels. The above developments doubtless have had a debilitating effect on the practice of individualism in America. But whether they are taken separately or considered in concert, they are symptoms of the ailment, not the efficient cause. They are the means by which individualism has been overturned, not the end which has wrought the change.

## **Confusing Terminology**

The main reason why we have not recognized the sources of the change from individualism in America is that they have not been defined in terms of individualism. Many of those who have worked to undermine the premises of individualism and to institute non-individualistic practices have done so in the name of the individual. They have been able to do this because, in part, they were the proponents of and were able to operate within a context of relativism, irrationalism, and disemboweled romanticism. They could use vague language and did not find it necessary to define their ends clearly. In consequence, they have been able to hack away most of the framework of individualism with only a minimum of coherent objections from the defenders of it.

The task which I propose to undertake here is to define both individualism and that which has undermined it in such a way that they can be identified. This is only a first step toward understanding what has happened to individualism historically, but it is a necessary step. The definitions will both be abstracted from the actual historical development of the ideas in America.