

MODERN AND POSTMODERN INDIVIDUALISM

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Abstract

In postmodern societies the individual has always been considered a function of the community, destined to be sacrificed if the community's interest was endangered. But this statement is only partially true. For it to be complete, we must at least explain why it is true: It was believed in these societies that the individual as such, as inceptive reality, does not exist; it is possible to speak of an individual only within a society. This is a main thesis with Burke's Reflections on the French Revolution. It is also true that modern society was the first to speak of the value of the individual as such -- irreducible by society. But this is also a partially true statement, which needs to be complemented by adding that legitimation stemmed from the thesis according to which the individual predates society (defended by Rousseau in The Social Contract); it must be further complemented by adding that the expansion of human freedom in these societies was a consequence of groups' and not individual rights. And as much as individualism succeeded in these societies, it was always in function of a conception in which this was only an intermediate stage to be followed by the refoundation of a better society. Postmodernity seems to be enframed in a paradox, since on one hand it agrees with premodernity in believing that there can be no individual outside of society, but on the other hand suddenly discovering individualism's only methodical possibility: The individual is more valuable than society only when, although unable to exist outside of it, he has the right to abandon society not towards solitude, but towards another society, submitting all possible societies to his own function.

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