Introduction

This book explores what Europeans in the twentieth century understood by individual freedom and how they endeavored to achieve it. Some pursued it as part of a broader political or cultural agenda; others carved out personal spaces or secured their independence in less ambitious ways. Whichever course they took, their quest encountered a range of obstacles and restrictions. Armed forces subjected them to military discipline or foreign occupation; dictatorships constrained their opinions and movements; and, even in peacetime democracies, bureaucratic systems and economic inequalities, moral norms and gender hierarchies placed limits on what they were at liberty to do. Many of them (and many Africans and Asians living under European rule) aspired to be free from such constraints, and their quest exerted a strong influence on the history of the continent from the years before World War I to those in the aftermath of the Cold War. Although efforts to achieve individual freedom could be stifled and steered, they could not, ultimately, be halted.

Historicizing this quest provides an alternative to two classic narratives about modernity: that of the individual's tragic decline owing to bureaucratic organization, the dominance of technology, and the rule of the "mass," and that of the individual's irresistible rise to the detriment of established moral norms and social bonds.[1] Twentieth-century Europeans attributed a variety of meanings to individual freedom, some of which gained and some of which diminished in importance. They came at the concept from different perspectives and under conditions that were often

[1] I owe this manner of structuring a complex body of social thought to Markus Schroer, *Das Individuum der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000), which cites Max Weber and Max Horkheimer/Theodor W. Adorno as representatives of the narrative of tragic decline and Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons as representatives of that of irresistible rise. One might add that the more recent works of Richard Sennett and Zygmunt Bauman combine elements of both narratives by highlighting the rise of privacy, consumerism, and flexibility and the parallel decline of authentic individuality.

unfavorable but did not prevent them from thinking and acting. To take these meanings, perspectives, and conditions into account questions the very notion of "the individual" and jars with teleological narratives of rise or decline. Instead, it suggests a cultural, social, and political history of how freedom was understood and pursued in adverse contexts. The quest for individual freedom occurred in fits and starts rather than as a linear development, entailing small shifts alongside drastic ruptures. The efforts of Europeans from all walks of life mattered for this history, but so did the various political currents that endeavored to steer it this way or that. In the twentieth century, individual freedom was no longer predominantly associated with liberalism. Sober social democrats, exuberant leftists, and even devoted Communists professed a desire to enhance it – and the same goes for conservative defenders of self-reliance and even Nazi advocates of liberation from legal constraints and ethical boundaries.

Such a perspective provides a vantage point for criticizing the few historians and historically interested sociologists who have addressed freedom and individuality.[2] For all their merits, these authors have neither traced these themes through the twentieth century with its total wars, dictatorships, and colonial empires nor combined cultural, social, and political approaches.[3] Annelien de Dijn offers a genealogy of "modern liberty," as defined against state interference, within an impressively wide-ranging intellectual history of freedom from antiquity to the present day. But I take issue with her contention that this concept dominated the debate on freedom from nineteenth-century liberalism through Cold War anti-Communism to present-day neoliberalism.[4] Even granting De Dijn's focus on political thought there could be alternative readings of the twentieth century, ones attentive to the paradoxical sides of Nazism and

[2] I have made similar points, albeit with regard to different aspects of individuality and specifically urban contexts, in *Individuality and Modernity in Berlin: Self and Society from Weimar to the Wall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); "Cities of Choice: Elective Affinities and the Transformation of Western European Urbanity from the Mid-1950s to the Early 1980s," *Contemporary European History*, 24 (2015), 577–96; "Urban Individuality and Urban Governance in Twentieth-Century Europe," in Simon Gunn and Tom Hulme (eds.), *Powers of the City: New Approaches to Governance and Rule in Urban Europe since 1500* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 235–53.

[3] Tyler Stovall's *White Freedom: The Racial History of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021) is an important corrective in highlighting freedom's colonial dimensions and extreme-right appropriations. Chapters 5 and 6 on the twentieth century offer principally a political history of race in conjunction with collective freedom, in contrast to the approach pursued in the present book.

[4] Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), chs. 5 and 6. This said, I concur with De Dijn's inclusion of the socialist ambition to free working-class people from capitalist oppression.

Communism, to colonialism and decolonization, and to the influence of the New Left. To include cultural, social, and political in addition to intellectual history casts all the more doubt on the assumption that there ever was a single version of modern liberty.

In contrast to De Dijn's story of liberal continuity in modern times, political historian Mark Mazower and sociologist Peter Wagner both offer accounts of individuality's decline and revival in the twentieth century, albeit with different emphases. In his prominent survey of Europe's era as a "dark continent," Mazower argues that individual freedom was sidelined by collectivistic ideologies and regimes from the 1920s to the 1940s and then resurfaced in the guise of privacy and consumption during the postwar age of affluence.[5] In his influential sociological interpretation of modernity, Wagner similarly stresses that the liberal notion of individual autonomy was marginalized in a period dominated by the principle of large-scale organization, before being rediscovered in the wake of the 1968 revolt.[6]

While both accounts are preferable to narratives of the individual's rise or decline, they are still insufficiently complex. Both authors underrate ordinary Europeans' efforts to claim individual freedom in the face of adverse political and social contexts, and the attempts of various political movements and regimes to appropriate the notion for their own purposes. As a result, they do not do justice to the twentieth century before the 1950s (Mazower) or 1968 (Wagner). In fairness, their accounts could not yet incorporate the numerous social, cultural, and gender histories of specific countries, groups, and periods that have appeared in the last twenty-five years. In exploring how the quest for individual freedom played out in adverse contexts, I endeavor to synthesize these recent additions to the literature from a fresh thematic angle.

[5] Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), x–xi, 306–13. Some authors have recently integrated the theme of individualism into the history of, respectively, Britain and the Netherlands in the late twentieth century. See Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, and Natalie Thomlinson, "Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s," *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), 268–304; Jouke Turpijn and John Jansen van Galen, *Wij en het ik-tijdperk* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2022).

[6] Peter Wagner, *A Sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline* (London: Routledge, 1994). Andreas Reckwitz, *Das hybride Subjekt: Eine Theorie der Subjektkulturen von der bürgerlichen Moderne zur Postmoderne* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2006), similarly foregrounds the conformist "white-collar subject" of United States–led "organized modernity" when discussing the period from the 1920s to the 1960s. While I find this emphasis one-sided, I do concur with Reckwitz's inclusion of the "transgressive subject" as promoted by early twentieth-century avant-garde movements.

No theorist of individual freedom who could provide the conceptual framework for its twentieth-century history yet exists. It is worth pausing to ask why that is. Many influential thinkers of the left have taken their critique of bourgeois liberalism, capitalist mass culture, Cold War anti-Communism, and, most recently, neoliberalism so far as to cast doubt on the very notion of individuality. Thanks to this powerful intellectual legacy, few present-day scholars would unproblematically assume the existence of an autonomous individual who can be either free or oppressed. But left thinkers have been too dismissive of the concept as it has played out in modern times to be able to explain its continued attraction; hence, they often simply deplore that so few people can see through the all-enveloping "pseudoindividuality" and "aura of freedom of choice."[7] Much like De Dijn with her critique of "modern liberty," their negative fixation on (neo)liberalism leads them to underestimate the different contexts, meanings, and experiences that this book aims to analyze historically.

Even the most sophisticated version of this critique, developed by French philosopher Michel Foucault in the 1970s and 1980s, suffers from a similar problem. In breaking apart grand narratives of progress or decline, Foucault ultimately proposed another grand narrative by arguing that the very notion of the individual was a product of disciplinary power. His sympathy was with struggles against "everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself, and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way." Consequently, Foucault called for "new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries." Such an alternative lay in bodily and intellectual "practices of freedom" inspired by the "ethics revolving around the care of the self," which he located in ancient Greece.[8] Transgressing the established boundaries of the ego as advocated by Foucault has doubtless been an important strand in the contemporary

[7] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectics of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002; first published 1947), 125; David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London: Verso, 2012), 14. For a theory of "social freedom" as the foundation of legal and moral freedom that draws on the traditions of Hegelianism and the Frankfurt School, see Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity, 2014).

[8] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Enquiry*, 8 (1982), 777–95, 781, 785; "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 1997), 281–301, 283, 285. My understanding of Foucault's work has been informed by Schroer, *Individuum*, 81–123; Johanna Oksala, *Foucault on Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

history of freedom. But more mainstream versions of individuality were not chiefly "imposed on us" by any disciplinary power. They were defined, sought, and partly realized in an active process that proved so difficult to control that Foucault's view of "the state as a modern matrix of individualization" ought to be questioned.[9]

Given the one-sidedness of the left critique of individuality in its different guises, it is more fruitful to take cues from other authors while also reflecting on their limitations. Georg Simmel, one of the most important early sociologists, included a persuasive theoretical analysis of individual freedom in his *Philosophy of Money*, first published in 1900. In Simmel's view, capitalism unfolded logically and peacefully, liberating people from personal dependencies but, by the same token, making them dependent on multiple impersonal relations. In parallel, the cultural emphasis on individual freedom and independence became stronger. Simmel could not anticipate the subsequent impact of total war, government intervention, and political ideologies. Still, his overarching argument resonates with important twentieth-century debates, and several of his theoretical insights are useful for the present attempt at historicization: the attention to the subjective side of "what we regard as freedom" alongside objective factors; the emphasis on "degrees of freedom" in contrast to a stark dichotomy between free and unfree; the argument that individual freedom is "not a pure inner condition of an isolated subject, but a phenomenon of correlation" that needs the presence of others to be meaningful; and the observation that freedom presents itself "as irregularity, unpredictability, and asymmetry."[10]

Whereas Simmel's reflections are too distant from twentieth-century developments to be fully applicable in this book, Isaiah Berlin's are too embroiled in them. This prominent intellectual historian and political thinker made a distinction between negative and positive liberty. His clear sympathies were for the "negative" version, which he understood as freedom *from* interference by others, chiefly the state. By contrast, he feared that "positive" liberty *to* be one's own master left open the possibility of coercion. After all, could ideologues not contend that individuals

[9] Foucault, "Subject and Power," 783.

[10] Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, 2nd ed., ed. David Frisby, trans. Tom Bottomore and Frisby (London: Routledge, 1990), 283, 284, 299, 338, 429, 430, 456, 526. I have also benefited from the more recent contextualizations of individuality by French sociologists François de Singly, Bernard Lahire, and François Tarragoni. See, with detailed references and a focus on cities, Moritz Föllmer, "The Sociology of Individuality and the History of Urban Society," *Urban History*, 47 (2020), 311–26.

were enslaved in a social or spiritual sense and therefore needed to be liberated against their own express wishes?[11] Lecturing and writing in the 1950s, Berlin was a leading proponent of Western liberalism. Subsequent authors have placed his views into their Cold War context and questioned his distinction between negative and positive liberty, arguing that freedom *from* and freedom *to* are inseparable.[12] Still, to define and claim freedom *against* something was of paramount importance in twentieth-century Europe, provided that we widen the perspective beyond Berlin's emphasis on ideological engulfment and state power to include military and factory discipline, moral pressures under different regimes, and social, racial, or gender hierarchies.[13]

In striving to free themselves *from* various constraints, Europeans simultaneously aspired to the freedom *to* make their own choices, act of their own volition, and arrive at their own conclusions – in areas ranging from work to sexuality. Ultimately, they aimed for control over their lives, which renders the boundaries to related concepts such as autonomy and agency fluid.[14] The duality of "negative" and "positive" sides can be captured by approaching individual freedom as a matter of claims.[15] This also puts the emphasis on the difference between desire and reality in contrast to freedom as a stable condition. Claims can be realized or disappointed, but in either

[11] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," reprinted in David Miller (ed.), *Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33–57.

[12] Ian Shapiro and Alicia Steinmetz, "Negative Liberty and the Cold War," in Joshua L. Cherniss and Steven B. Smith (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Isaiah Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 192–211; Gerald C. MacCallum, Jr., "Negative and Positive Freedom," *Philosophical Review*, 76 (1967), 312–34.

[13] The importance of such barriers, which are often interiorized and thus affect the sense of self, for the pursuit of freedom has been brought out by feminist theorists. See, for instance, Nancy J. Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). Interestingly, Hirschmann does not so much reject Berlin's famous distinction as critically engage with it.

[14] For philosophical treatments of commonalities between freedom and, respectively, autonomy and agency, see Beate Rössler, *Autonomy: An Essay on the Life Well-Lived*, trans. James C. Wagner (Cambridge: Polity, 2021), esp. ch. 1; Philip Pettit, *A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001). My approach entails the occasional use of "agency" but differs from how historians have tended to employ the concept, namely, as a universal human quality whose relationship to structural change is somewhat unclear. See, with further references, Anna Yu. Krylova et al., "The Agency Dilemma: A Forum," *American Historical Review*, 128 (2023), 883–937.

[15] The following is loosely based on German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's notion of *Anspruchsindividualität*, which combines claim (*Anspruch*) and individuality. See "Die gesellschaftliche Differenzierung und das Individuum," in Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung 6: Die Soziologie und der Mensch*, 2nd ed. (Wiesbaden, 2005), 121–36, here 128–33, also Uwe Schimank, "Anspruchsindividualismus," in Schimank, *Das zwiespältige Individuum: Zum Person-Gesellschaft-Arrangement der Moderne* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2002), 281–94.

case they engender important effects. My approach can thus account for historical dynamics, especially in a period when Europeans held high expectations while encountering a range of obstacles. Individual freedom lies at the intersection of two broader notions: freedom and individuality. Claims to freedom can also be collective, and indeed have been pursued by political movements in the name of a class or nation. In turn, individualistic claims have frequently been directed at the welfare, medical, or educational systems, reflecting a demand to be catered for rather than left alone. That said, claims to individual freedom constitute a crucial subset, whose guises and repercussions lie at the center of this book.

Claims need to be articulated before being pursued. Close attention should therefore be paid to the often diffuse expressions used by Europeans from all walks of life and different linguistic backgrounds. In using them they drew on the cultural reservoirs they had available, while also coining their own personal definitions. Europeans voiced their claims to individual freedom all the more urgently because they did so in contexts that were, more often than not, adverse. Still, unfavorable structural environments could shift, thus creating new opportunities. In turn, Europeans' claims produced such important social and political effects that they constituted a structural factor in their own right. However idiosyncratic and contradictory, then, these claims amounted to a quest for individual freedom. And, however multifaceted and nonlinear, this quest was highly consequential. It put pressure on democracies, whose politicians and bureaucrats saw themselves confronted with demanding and recalcitrant citizens.[16] But it also caused problems for dictatorships that felt inclined to stifle individual freedom yet could do so only at the price of stagnation.

Of course, this quest built on a long prehistory. Freedom and individuality had already been an important dimension of how Europeans understood their experiences and conceived their ambitions before the Enlightenment. For the present analysis, it is important to stress their paramount place in nineteenth-century liberalism. Liberal thought elevated the freedoms of the person and opinion to the status of inalienable rights.

[16] I am skeptical of accounts that stress how (neo)liberal governmentality stimulates and steers subjects' freedom, thus coaxing them into participating in their own subjection. This smooth picture may capture an important ambition but not the social, cultural, and political dynamics of Europe's twentieth century. Once again, the problem lies in the fixation on liberalism to the detriment of other currents and contexts. See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

It also asserted that freeing Europeans from the constraints imposed by religious and corporate institutions would benefit society and economy. The lawyers, doctors, academics, and businessmen who promoted these views constituted a small minority of the population, but one with enormous traction given their role as drivers of progress. Hence the angry reactions by conservatives, who feared that viewing people as free individuals would undermine moral authority and social cohesion, and the resistance of farmers, artisans, and shopkeepers, who experienced the concomitant logics of the market as a threat to their values and livelihoods. Fierce opposition notwithstanding, the liberal understanding of individual freedom grew in importance – in republics such as Switzerland, France, and the United States, a major influence on Europe, but also in monarchies, whose rulers increasingly felt compelled to make concessions and compromises.

Liberals thus had good reason to be confident, in the knowledge that time was on their side rather than that of the conservatives and popular radicals. Yet they were wary of what would happen if ordinary people acquired the full status of free individuals and became not just economic subjects but citizens with the right to vote. After the shock of the street protests and socialist demands during the Revolution of 1848/49, one German liberal expressed his reservations about democracy and support for monarchy: "After all, we've already had experience of what our proletarians mean by freedom and republic."[17] The problem, from a liberal perspective, was that democratic pressures grew, even though most countries continued to restrict the suffrage on the basis of property and income. Socialists put forward the powerful argument that individual freedom might be all well and good for the bourgeoisie but not for working-class people, who were subject to the dynamics of capitalism with no economic assets, sought-after skills, or social protections. Yet they were not so much rejecting the concept as claiming it for everyone, envisioning a society in which ordinary people could live without oppression and realize their potential. As the *Ten Commandments* issued by the German Central Committee for Workers put it in 1849: "Not as a slave for a *master* shalt thou work, but as a free man for thyself and thy *brother*, who, for his part, works likewise for himself and thee."[18]

By the late nineteenth century, a further tenet of the liberal understanding of individual freedom – namely, the belief that it should be largely reserved for

[17] Robert von Mohl in 1852, quoted from Wilfried Nippel, *Antike oder moderne Freiheit? Die Begründung der Demokratie in Athen und in der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2008), 279.
[18] Quoted from Thomas Welskopp, *Das Banner der Brüderlichkeit: Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie vom Vormärz bis zum Sozialistengesetz* (Bonn: Dietz, 2000), 569–70.

men – came under pressure. Female bohemians and activists, small in number but widely noticed, challenged the manifold limitations placed on them. "I will and must become free one day," one of these women wrote to a friend. "It is just so deeply ingrained in my nature, this boundless striving, yearning for freedom."[19] While more groups laid claim to individual freedom, doubts arose about its prospects in modern times. By the turn of the century, liberals were losing a good deal of their previous confidence as the drivers of progress. The growth of large-scale organizations, whether private companies, bureaucratic agencies, or political parties, appeared to render the autonomous individual less relevant – a development that was soberly diagnosed by Georg Simmel but deplored by many less analytical authors.

These trends could have resulted in a progressive story of the expanding social and cultural scope of individual freedom, notwithstanding the complaints of middle-class men who saw their position threatened. And indeed, the history of the twentieth century contains many elements of such a story. But claims did not neatly translate into advances. Established moral norms proved persistent. Right-wing versions of individual freedom exerted much attraction. Two world wars brought about unprecedented constraints and pressures, as did several major dictatorships. Large-scale organizations transformed the lives of working-class people and the self-employed as well as middle-class professionals. Colonial rule, increasingly contested as it was, and the influences emanating from the United States both reinforced and challenged European self-understanding. It is from these historical considerations, in addition to critical engagement with theorists such as Georg Simmel and Isaiah Berlin, that the present book derives its approach. It argues that the quest for individual freedom played out, was articulated, and sometimes only emerged in adverse contexts. The narrative, therefore, is one of conflict-ridden expansion entailing frustrations and setbacks alongside gains large and small. The main body of this book is dedicated to substantiating this approach and stimulating further debate. It does not aim to provide an exhaustive or definitive treatment of individual freedom in twentieth-century Europe and hence leaves some significant gaps or treats important topics only briefly.[20]

[19] Franziska Countess von Reventlow in 1890, quoted from Hannes Hintermeier, "Dieses maßlose Sehnen nach Freiheit," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 25, 2022.

[20] The chapter on work does not discuss clerical staff and middle-class professionals. Migration, welfare, Christian democracy, and the Jewish minority are mentioned but do not receive extensive treatment; it is my view that the latter's self-articulations during the Holocaust would need to be explored from other angles than the one adopted here. The chapter structure itself omits entire dimensions, such as freedom in childhood and old age.

The book begins by discussing the impact of major political ruptures and developments, moves on to exploring crucial social and cultural contexts, and ends by asking what made this history European. Chapter 1 is about the two world wars, the ensuing postwar periods, and the Cold War. It explores how military conflict unintentionally created space for female independence, how different societies justified and implemented conscription, and how anti-Fascists and pacifists aspired to a world free from war. Chapter 2 addresses the ambiguities of state expansion. It examines how camp inmates attempted to carve out a niche for themselves, how dictatorships purported to satisfy claims to freedom, and how social democrats pursued their own version of liberty. Chapter 3 turns to the importance of work for European lives. It shows how farmers, shopkeepers, and master artisans staunchly defended their economic independence against capitalism and Communism, how workers tried to make an increasingly regimented shop floor their own, and how women (and, to a lesser extent, men) balanced chores and choices in the domestic sphere.

Chapter 4 is about the limitations imposed by social norms. It analyzes how Europeans increasingly questioned the designation of sexuality as immoral, how they dealt with liberation once it had been achieved, and how some aimed to realize freedom by expanding their ego. Finally, Chapter 5 argues that individual freedom was claimed not only within Europe but also at the boundaries of Europeanness. It describes how the growing predominance of the United States was seen as either favoring or undermining this crucial value, how settlers defended a notion of colonial self-reliance, and how Africans and Asians protested their status as colonized subjects. The Conclusion places the findings and arguments emerging from the chapters into a broader account of historical change, highlighting the tension between mundane and ambitious versions of individual freedom. It also attempts to evaluate which elements of this key twentieth-century quest vanished or receded and which continued to matter in the 1990s. Finally, it offers some brief reflections on the distance that separates the European present from the years after the Cold War.