

Rugged Truth: Individualism in Chicago's Prominent Newspapers throughout the 1920-1930s

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Addressing the Problem

The nature of discourse surrounding the United States' dominant individualistic culture reveals differences in historical truth. These differences are demonstrated within the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Defender*, which present contrasting depictions of conservative and progressive discourse throughout a previous cultural trauma, the Great Depression. Progressive and marginalized historical narratives reveal a myth of individualism that functions on power. Those with power propel the myth of individualism through manipulative silences, which "are those that deliberately conceal relevant information from the reader/listener" (Huckin 348). In this essay, I will explore the manipulative silences in print media from the Great Depression.

The Great Depression highlighted failures of the individualist, capitalist system, but our current cultural trauma reveals just the same. Topics, such as individualism, capitalism, and marginalization have become part of the discourse surrounding COVID-19. COVID-19 reveals the implications of the United States' dominant individualist narrative, especially "persons identifying as Black or Hispanic and younger workers" (Congressional Research Service 2), through unemployment, healthcare insecurity, unequal educational opportunity, racist policing structures, among others. COVID-19 and the Depression highlight similar failures of the system, which prompts doubts about the validity of this system—much less its historical accuracy and power relations within the socio-economic state.

Critical Discourse Analysis and Personal Approach

Because power is created and maintained by language, we need tools that enable us to critically analyze that language. Critical discourse analysis affords "at root, a highly systematic, thorough approach to critical reading (and listening), and critical reading almost inevitably leads to questioning the status quo and often leads to questions about power and inequality" (Johnstone 29). In terms of the status quo, print media represents and influences political, social, and economic thought. The two newspaper companies that I examine in this article provide different perspectives on these thoughts, as they have different intended audiences and cultural backgrounds. However, the geographic location of publishing remains the same. Through critical discourse analysis, it is possible to depict the relationship between conservative and progressive narratives as they pertain to individualism and whether they are affected by marginalization and power.

As with most humanities and social science research, it is challenging to separate bias and background knowledge from the analysis. Considering current research about the implications of individualism as it pertains to the dominant capitalist culture of the United States, my own opinion on individualism is negative. With growing scientific research and commentary, it has been discovered that individualism increases competition and social mobility, which has proven to increase rates of social anxiety. These increases result in a decrease in satisfaction and quantity of interpersonal relationships, which leads to other mental illnesses (Ogihara; Uchida). We can expect this decrease when relationships are characterized by competition and status, as opposed to friendship or family support. I will not analyze contemporary scientific advancements to remove a large piece of this bias.

Nonetheless, my bias is inevitably revealed. Humanities and social science researchers “have come to be (1) critical of the possibility of producing a single, coherent, scientifically valid description, and (2) critical of the status quo and concerned to have their work used in changing things for the better” (Johnstone 28). Thus, my critical goal is to intervene on the side of those with less power by critiquing the traditional narrative surrounding individualism.

Manipulative Silences

By intervening on the side of those with less power, the analysis of manipulative silences affords the critique and display of power relations. It indicates an intention behind concealing the truth and the maintenance of said power dynamics. Due to its manipulative and developing nature, this is a tough topic; as Thomas Huckin notes, “manipulative silence is the least linguistically constrained and therefore [the] most difficult type of silence to identify and analyze” (Huckin 348). However, since manipulative silences cannot depend on semantics, “the discourse analyst has fewer formal cues to work with and must compensate with more attention to sociopolitical, cultural and rhetorical factors” (Huckin 353). With this understanding, I am going to look at two historical narratives on individualism to depict what manipulative silences look like. After an analysis of print media, it should be clearer how to identify manipulative silences and their recognizable features.

The first narrative is sourced from the *Chicago Defender* in the 1920s and the 1930s. With its progressive stance, the *Defender* consistently highlighted the disadvantages and historical, manipulative silences of individualist norms that harmed marginalized people in Chicago and the Southern region. Conversely, the *Chicago Tribune* represents a traditional take on the potential benefits of individualism, such as “higher long-run growth than countries with a more collectivist culture,” freedom, and economic prosperity (Gorodnichenko and Roland 1). Consequently, the narratives in historical newspapers will be used to examine how the past has shaped the socio-economic

state. These historical narratives highlight that individualism's continuation depends on the manipulated silences of the marginalized.

Furthermore, the concept of implicature is referred to while discussing truth and intention, specifically that of J.W. Du Bois, which describes "meaning without intention," (Johnstone 235). The discussion of intention and implicature is grounded in the idea of "'sincerity' or 'truth' [being] culturally relative and dependent on local ideologies" (236).

Background

To approach the research question, I pulled from historical knowledge about my hometown and place of undergraduate study. Beyond the present-day, Chicago has a lengthy history of divisions: racial, economic, and political. The *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Defender* present this divide, which remains relevant to the entirety of the United States, as they were and are published nationwide. The notorious *Chicago Tribune* was fiscally conservative, focusing on the economy and politics. Within a decade of its creation, "editor and co-owner Joseph Medill ... turned the paper into one of the leading voices of the new Republican Party" (Wilson). With one liberal editor between its creation and the 20th century, "[d]uring the 1930s and 1940s, McCormick [editor, Medill's grandson] used the Tribune ... to attack the New Deal and promote isolationism and anti-Communism" (Wilson).

In contrast, the *Chicago Defender* is the first African American newspaper to reach an audience of over 100,000 readers (at an estimated half-million), of which two-thirds were outside of Chicago. Ironically, as reported by the *Tribune* in 2019, "transplanted Southerners kept reading the *Defender* because the paper ... reported on matters of interest to Chicago's black community that the *Tribune* and other Chicago papers generally didn't cover" (Editorial Board). Thus, their scope aligned with my critical intention of intervening on the side of those with less power. With a distinct intention to report for marginalized peoples, it serves as evidence of marginalized peoples' history. With their distinct interests, the *Tribune* and the *Defender* are coinciding but present contradictory narratives, hence my interest. For the analysis, the *Defender* was concluded to be the most effective and evidence-rich, despite not being the *Tribune*'s strongest competitor. The *Defender*'s foundation was socially progressive, which led to its confiscation by white extremist groups in the south, including the Ku Klux Klan. This serves as an example of both its influence and silencing. The distribution of the newspaper and its support of the Great Migration Movement led to "at least 110,000 [black people migrating] to Chicago ... between 1916-1918, nearly tripling the city's black population" (PBS). This places the migration before the decades of economic prosperity and the Great Depression.

Research Methods

The timeline of my analysis is from 1920 through 1939, which represents a dominant culture born of capitalist, economic prosperity in the 1920s, known as the “Roaring 20s” or the “Jazz Age,” followed by the greatest economic adversity in United States history, known as the Great Depression. To build an accurate display of evidence, comments were pulled from at least two *Defender* and *Tribune* articles from each decade, with a requirement for the articles to use the word “individualism” or “individualistic.” By searching each newspapers’ archival database with the term “individualism,” I located a vast array of articles about the topic. Thus, in the below “Evidence and Discussion” section, I present and highlight pieces of information about political ideologies and arguments about individualism. Using *manipulative silences* to analyze the discourse, supposed implications of individualism are divided due to conflicting truths. With a critical approach, the essay will explore the historical narrative discussed in the *Defender*, which develops an argument against the *Tribune*. It cannot be proven if the *Defender* intended to develop an argument against the *Tribune* or other prominent Chicago newspapers.

Evidence and Discussion

Evidence from 1930s articles on Individualism

In the discussion below, I will share images from the digital archives to help contextualize my analysis of the ways individualism was discussed in the 1920s and 1930s in both the *Chicago Defender* and the *Chicago Tribune*. According to mentions populated by respective archival databases, it shows both papers had the same number of articles including comments on individualism during the 1920s.

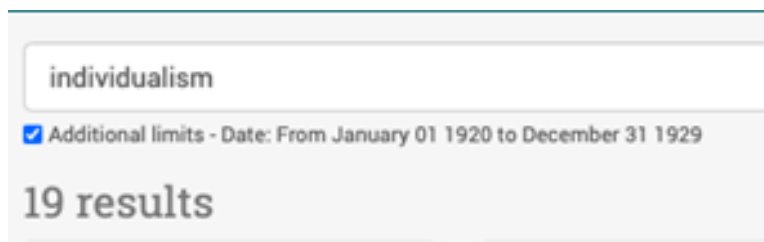


Figure 1: Mentions of “individualism” in the Chicago Defender between 1920-1929

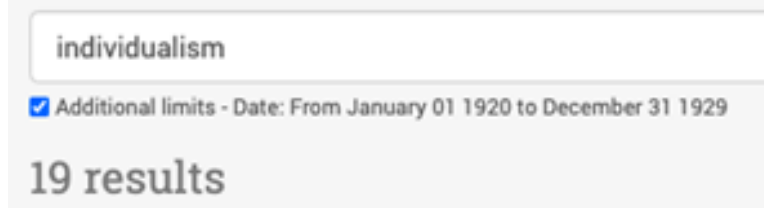


Figure 2: Mentions of “individualism” in the Chicago Tribune between 1920-1929

As for the narratives, in the 1920s *Defender* articles, the discourse revolves around instinct and natural processes. For example, one article reads that “the finest races of

men arise when nature has full control.” Therefore, this article implies that individualism is unnatural. To be individualistic requires humanity to distance itself from its instincts; it is artificial, as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “[c]ontrived or fabricated for a particular purpose, esp. for deception; resulting from artifice; feigned, fictitious” (*Oxford*). As a result of this fabricated system, the authors of the *Defender* articles claim the “doctrine of individualism ... is the greatest deterrent to white racial progress.” The anthropological stance emphasizes the dangers of limiting humanity—a different perspective on freedom.

tory. The authority in anthropology declared that the finest races of men arise when nature has full control.

“White racial deterioration appears to prevail throughout the world today; our policy seems to care for the individual, neglect for the race.”

“This doctrine of individualism, so rampant everywhere, is the greatest deterrent to white racial progress

nature loses control. It appears that the civilized white man is upsetting the divine order of human origin and progress.”

URGES RACIAL INSTEAD OF INDIVIDUAL CARE

Figure 3: Excerpts from Chicago Defender article, 1927

In contrast, the *Tribune* implies that individualism is natural and provides freedom, such that “[e]ven a [12-month-old baby] will fight and howl for its individual toy. No chance to induce such a people to embrace common ownership.” The newspapers have different perceptions of human nature; the *Defender* aims for natural evolution and the *Tribune* aims for development through wealth. *Tribune* journalist Harper Leech write the following:

There is, in my view, only one explanation for the prosperity of America, an explanation which is to be found deep within the breast of the individual American. He understands that wealth comes from production and work, not from acts of parliament and trade union rules. (Leech)

There is, in my view, only one explanation for the prosperity of America, an explanation which is to be found deep down in the breast of the individual American. He understands that wealth comes from production and work, not from acts of parliament and trade union rules.

"The country is individualistic to the core, and every man believes it is 'up to him.' The most characteristic sample point of view. America becomes more and more individualistic, as we become more and more 'collectivist,' and as a natural and inevitable consequence America becomes wealthier as we become poorer."

Figure 4: Excerpt from the Chicago Tribune, 1927

The *Tribune* writes that "[e]ver since the cavaliers landed on the James we have been developing a race of individualists in this republic" and "[t]he country is individualistic to the core, and every man believes it is 'up to him.'" The *Tribune* writer, Leech, demonstrates a clear-cut pathway between individualism and wealth, and collectivism and economic failure, whereas the *Defender* depicts these theories as artificial at best.

appeal. Ever since the cavaliers landed on the James we have been developing a race of individualists in this republic, and we have today the most individualistic race of people on earth. Even a 12 month old baby will fight and howl for its individual toy. No chance to induce such a people to embrace common ownership.

Of course, it is rather tiresome to have a great national government plotting against our national integrity and ideals while soberly protesting that it is

Figure 5: Excerpt from the Chicago Tribune, 1925

Leech's perspective in the *Tribune* attempts to provide validity by depicting Great Britain's perspective, who through a colonial empire represents world power. In Britain's perspective, he notes that "America becomes more individualistic, as we become more 'collectivist,' and as a natural and inevitable consequence America becomes wealthier

as we become poorer.” The validity is sourced by presenting the United States’ individualism as the primary world’s economic role model. This statement manipulates its validity by relying on assumptions but treating the assumptions as principles. Thus, the argument is fallacious. The fallacy contains manipulative silences working to maintain the dominant cultural ideal.

Furthermore, the human nature narrative is not absolved from spiritualism. The *Defender* claims that “[t]he civilized white man is upsetting the divine order of human origin and progress.” Between the lines, the *Defender* implies a difference between the understanding of cultural backgrounds and practice; therefore, pointing to hypocrisy and artificiality. The discussion of intention and implicature is grounded in the idea of “‘sincerity’ or ‘truth’ [being] culturally relative and dependent on local ideologies” (Johnstone 236). The culturally relative ideologies included Creationism. The *Tribune* does not use Creationism as evidence for individualism, which generally aligns with right-leaning politics. Thus, the *Defender* implies there is a misunderstanding of Creationism or manipulative silence (in terms of religion) to best fit the artificial, economic system.

Relevant to the intervention on the side of those with less power, the *Defender* tries to offer a solution to the artificial, economic system, such as “URG[ING] RACIAL INSTEAD OF INDIVIDUAL CARE.” According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘Racial’ may refer to a social meaning: “[a]rising from or relating to ethnicity or difference in race” or a biological meaning: “[o]f, relating to, or characteristic of a race of animals, plants, or other organisms (e.g. a particular strain of a pathogen).” Considering their comments on human nature and equality, it can be assumed the latter definition is implied; thus, the marginalized view emphasizes an ethical system based on utilitarianism. Their narrative directly opposes individualism, so they are part of the counterculture.

Their narrative is strengthened by discussing hypocrisy, specifically that of conservatives and the Republican president, Herbert Hoover. Hoover and individualism stand for “Equality of Opportunity.” However, the *Defender* claims that minorities are excluded from the supposed positive implications of individualism, such as freedom, impartiality, and opportunity, which is now spoken of as systemic racism. They are not equal; equality is defined as “[t]he condition of having equal dignity, rank, or privileges with others; the fact of being on an equal footing” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Thus, the “equality of opportunity” is manipulated to fit the narrative of those in power and becomes a fallacy. The fallacy contains manipulative silences working to maintain the dominant cultural ideal. It deliberately excludes marginalized peoples, concealing the truth behind the phrase, failing to ask equality for whom. The silenced definition in the dominant culture is equal opportunities for white men, thus “public and private concerns in this country [refuse] to hire trained workers because of their color” (*Defender*).

Equality of Opportunity

"The fixed ideal of American individualism is an equality of opportunity. Our individualism embraces

If Mr. Hoover would see that his ideas on individualism and equality of opportunities in the United States are carried out during his administration there will be no public and private concerns in this country refusing to hire our trained workers because of their color. Our youths

Figure 6: Excerpt from the Chicago Defender, 1927

The *Tribune* articles, generally, are prideful in claiming that individualism is rooted in tradition and are therefore the sole principle of the socio-economic state. As the *Tribune* speaks on tradition, wealth, and freedom in the 1920s, the *Defender* presents these benefits as exclusionary for privileged people and deems the practice as anti-human nature. Thus, as a product of the conflicting discourse of the time, the *Defender* articles present as an argument against the fallacies discussed in the *Tribune*. The *Tribune*'s fallacies depend on manipulative silences, which exclude marginalized people.

Evidence from 1930s articles on Individualism

Through my archival research, I learned there was a considerable increase in articles discussing "individualism" in the 1930s from the previous decade. Granted, the *Tribune*'s 2,684 articles mentioning "individualism" in the 1930s includes reprints from other newspapers. With 2,665 more *Tribune* articles discussing individualism in the 1930s, it is implied that the individualist narrative's significance is exaggerated. Through exaggeration, the *Tribune* manipulated the importance of individualism in political, social, and economic discourse. Though this is telling of the intended manipulation, the evidence within the print media reveals how the narrative works.



Figure 7: Number of mentions of "individualism" in the Chicago Defender from 1930-1939

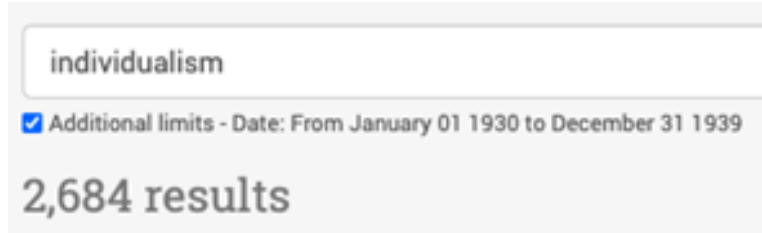


Figure 8: Number of mentions of “individualism” in the Chicago Tribune from 1930-1939

As mentioned above, individualism is presented as a traditional American value that conflicts with the *Defender*. *Tribune* writer Stephen A. Day writes that “foreign philosophy must stop.” In writing this, he recognized how foreign philosophies threatened the dominant culture’s rugged individualism during the cultural trauma of the Great Depression. Print media affords him control over the dominant culture, political, and economic discourse.

In its terms and phraseology. The trend of events today is distinctly away from the sound economic principles upon which America was built. In fact, this nation alone retains any semblance of individualistic philosophy in our political economy.

This drifting into foreign philosophy must stop. This nation was built on solid foundations. Individualism is our American contribution to the world. It is a theory of government in which the free initiative of the citizen is paramount. It is opposed to governmental interference with individual freedom; it vigorously denies the concen-

The fifth amendment to the federal constitution provides: “Nor shall private property be taken for public use without just compensation.” This provision alone, short of an armed revolution, secures the American people against socialism, be-

Figure 9: Excerpt from the Chicago Tribune, 1933

In the 1930s articles, the *Defender* attempts to disclose manipulative silences by exposing historical myths. To break these manipulated silences, they include a segment to rewrite history (bolding for emphasis, not from original article):

When the American revolutionists [rewrite] history, however, they will [dispel] this ‘scared’ and obscuring aura. They will write of the **maximum wage law** of two shillings a day that was introduced but one year after the revolution in ‘76. They will write of the early conspiracy laws that were utilized to **break strikes**: there were many strikes in the golden, democratic days. They will tell of the **bayoneted militia sent against picket lines** in the days of Washington and Jefferson. Searching back long before that merchant struggle for the free market

(which has been called the American revolution), the working class will find its heritage: **struggle and solidarity**: their bones in prisons, their blood soaked deep in the American soil. (qtd. from “An American Tradition”)

By analyzing the discourse in the *Tribune* articles, I found that there is no evidence of a similar depiction of American history from the *Defender*. The source of the intention behind the manipulative silences in dominant history cannot be traced to a single encounter, but it is concluded that the *Tribune*'s articles maintain the dominant cultural narrative. In terms of the bolded phrases, these contradict individual freedom by putting limits on the collective. As a result, “individualism” is born out of violence against collectivist human nature and American roots. This contradicts the *Tribune*'s arguments on human nature and principle, such as “[t]he trend of events today is distinctly away from the sound economic principles upon which America was built” (Day, 1933) and “[e]ven a [12-month-old] baby will fight and howl for its individual toy. No chance to induce such a people to embrace common ownership” (1925). Therefore, the *Tribune* represents that individualism is a conditioned, traditional value for privileged people. The discourse on individualism functions on silences to maintain a narrative, which exempts historical truths about marginalized people, like the working class.

“THE CRY OF UNCLEANNES”

By REV. R. C. KELLER

(Assistant Minister, Pilgrim Baptist Church, Chicago)

Out of the Marcan Record comes this experience of Jesus. It is the beginning of His active ministry, and is indicative of the attitude mankind has taken since the advent of Christianity. We are so imbued with the complex of individualism that any truth which runs counter to our personal ideas, whether they be right or wrong, is regarded as an encroachment upon the domain of our individual liberty, and thus we justify ourselves by relegating it to the junk heap of absurdities.

Figure 10: Article excerpt from the Chicago Defender, Keller 1935

To tie President Hoover back into the discussion, these 1934 statements echo the arguments made in “Equality of Opportunity” (1929) in the *Defender* on President Hoover’s side, which says, “[t]he fixed ideal of American individualism is an equality of opportunity,” and “[individualism] is opposed to government interference of individual freedom” (Day). Individualism is associated with the free market (small business), fairness, and freedom, such that “[i]t is the theory of government in which the free initiative of the citizen is paramount” (Day). However, the *Defender*'s 1920s and 1930s narrative claims that freedom and fairness do not include working-class people nor people of color; for example, “public and private concerns in this country [refuse] to hire trained workers because of their color” (1929) and the passage written by Adler (above).

“ we hear nowadays that the individual is nothing and that the State is all.” Liberty used to be regarded as the chief good. Restraints on it were always narrowly scrutinized. Now we are asked to substitute equality and put up with such leavings of liberty as do not stand in the way of complete equality.

Even a temporarily necessary expansion of Federal functions such as relief to the unemployed tends to enfeeble self-reliance among its recipients, and the example spreads. Mr. Fair and then on relief. In the cities assemblages of persons on relief try to force the Government to give them more. Why not? Everywhere hands

Figure 11: Excerpt from the New York Times, reprinted in the Chicago Tribune, 1934

Due to the conflicting discourse of the time, the *Defender* develops an argument against the dominant historical narrative and benefits of individualism, such as the social, political, and economic ones presented as absolute truth in the *Tribune*. The *Defender* may not intend to directly argue against the *Tribune*; however, the provision of evidence for conflicting histories and experience implies that the *Defender* intended to rework the original historical narrative. The manipulative silences of the United States' history propel an inaccurate historical narrative in the media. Manipulative silence is a tool used by the dominant culture to propagate the necessity and importance of individualism.

Conclusion

By using manipulative silences to analyze discourse, this research intended to understand how the individualist narrative is maintained in the dominant culture. It considered the conflicts in the sociopolitical and cultural discourse during a cultural trauma through an analysis of two newspapers. The *Tribune*'s conflicting narrative with the *Defender* revealed manipulated silences. I conclude with the consideration for how manipulative silence can act as “the one type of silence that is intentionally used for deceptive purposes” (Huckin 368). This manipulation prevented historical accuracy in print media and, therefore, provided a powerful tool for the privileged used against the

marginalized working class. These findings prove the nature of individualism in discourse is dependent on the manipulation of history. The conflicting opinions on individualism result from different historical narratives, but more specifically, the intentional manipulation of historical information from readers.

The issue of different or inaccurate historical truth is a necessary problem to resolve. The *Chicago Defender* highlights the side of history left largely undocumented, silenced, and restricted by historians and those in power. This mirrors the actions of the KKK, who worked to confiscate the *Chicago Defender* in the southern region of the U.S. The history of the marginalized in the United States should be disclosed, not thwarted. The manipulative silence of minority history writes a narrative in favor of white people, such as the ones presented in the *Chicago Tribune*. Writing (or rewriting) an inclusive history works to provide equal opportunity and livelihoods in the United States. Discourse analysts should no longer ignore these silences. They should welcome broad, less systematic approaches to reveal manipulated silences to rewrite an inclusive, accurate historical narrative.

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