**Does capitalism lead to individualism and why?**

If by “individualism” we mean respect for and encouragement of individuality, then the answer is **absolutely not**.

You either conform to the expectations and demands of the labor market or your employer - sometimes even down to adopting the opinions of your employer or immediate superiors - and generally keep your head down to avoid “rocking the boat”, or you risk adverse consequences. When an individual is dependent upon a wage, salary, or making money as a prerequisite for satisfying basic material needs, they are in a state of dependency. For professional workers this extends to include access to benefits like health insurance that they cannot afford to lose. Lower-income workers who live paycheck to paycheck are in an even greater state of dependency as they have even less negotiating power with their employers.

Coercion is inherent to the operation of capitalism. As a social system, capitalism is a set of legal and economic constraints and negative incentives designed to induce people to pursue a specific outcome. This much is conceded by the advocates and defenders of capitalism: ask any one of them why they oppose any policy that grants greater autonomy to individual workers and their response will be that it erodes labor discipline and dis-incentivizes work. The very notion of forcing individuals to surrender most of their waking hours to employment or the act of making money as a requisite for access to material necessities is very paternalistic and antithetical to respect for individuality.

Even if we take the most idealistic notion of capitalism, the idea of “free market” liberal capitalism where competitive markets exist to induce businesses to maximize social utility, at best the labor market exists to induce individuals to subordinate their time and energies to socially useful purposes. To put it more succinctly, the individual is subordinate to the collective interest of society in this perfectly competitive capitalist utopia. Whatever the utility of this arrangement it is clearly not a social system geared toward individualism. At best it is geared toward collective interest, and in reality most of the time it is geared toward the interests of businesses and capitalist owners.

Genuine respect for individuality requires equality in terms of the power-relationships between individuals in society. This implies at a minimum equal or free access to basic necessities so that no one person or employer has so much control over one’s livelihood and, by extension, ability to express one’s individuality. In such an environment, having peers disagree with one’s opinions, preferences or interests might result in peer pressure to conform, but that's the extent to which there is any conformity. The lack of hierarchical and dependent relationships means that such pressure is not an existential threat or negative incentive as it is under capitalism where one might be deemed “unemployable”, terminated from work, or where social ostracization can diminish one’s ability to provide for one’s material welfare.

Regardless of whether or not one believes in the necessity of capitalism and its coercive social relations, it is evident that aside from the capitalist class - a tiny segment of the population that doesn’t have to work and has the power to command labor to do its bidding - capitalism suppresses individual expression, creative thinking and promotes uniformity, engendering a culture that places emphasis on survival within the system, and favors literal thinking over critical thinking.