This chapter analyzes conceptions of individualism from the middle of the nineteenth century to the interwar period by specifying the contexts in which these conceptions functioned. The Spencerians were concerned with the individual in relation to the State; Arnoldians with individuals in relation to national character; and Freud and Adorno in relation to war and massification. Major secondary critics like Colin Campbell and Ian Watt were concerned, later, with the Protestant ethic under increasing consumerism and its effects on individual subjectivity. With primary sources from Spencerian Individualists, through Arnoldian culturalists, to Freudian philosophical anthropologists, it would be distorting to systematize the speculative orgy. Rather, in approaching these distinctly scrappy sociological, psychological, and physiological (or instinctual) thought-experiments on the scope and limits of individualism, my aim is to establish the extra-individual units of analysis in which the individual was always conceived in relation to others, whether coteries, classes, nations, the market, or the State. Having clarified distinctive contexts for the conceptual development of individualism in this chapter, remaining chapters will discuss in more detail the specific social environments in which the individual evolved.

1.1 Spencer and the Individualists, or the individual and the state

Essential to the story told in The Wealth of Nations (1776) was its many ironies that yoked Hobbesian self-interested rationality and the altruism of the civic humanists into a theory of social Progress: the irony that selfish individuals could make an altruistic society; that the pursuit of
profit could be an ethical failing in an individual but lead to the wealth of all; that saving could be good for the individual but bad for society; that the individual was the basis for social understanding. In the course of the nineteenth century, this ironized theory of social Progress was enhanced by theories of individual development across the spectrum of knowledge. Individuation provided many “little narratives” of perfection that contributed to general flourishing, including but by no means limited to political economy’s division of labor, Darwin’s origins of different species and Tree of Life, and the increasingly democratic polyphony of the novel, its increasing perspectivalism and differentiated streams of consciousness.

In Smith the division of labor was the source of differences between people: “When [the philosopher and the street porter] came into the world, and for the first six or eight years of their existence, they were, perhaps, very much alike, and neither their parents nor playfellows could perceive any remarkable difference. About that age, or soon after, they come to be employed in very different occupations. The difference of talents comes then to be taken notice of, and widens by degrees, till at last the vanity of the philosopher is willing to acknowledge scarce any resemblance.” Smith believes that the distinctive “trucking” disposition, made possible by human language, gives rise to human differences: “without the disposition to truck, barter, and exchange… all must have had the same duties to perform, and the same work to do, and there could have been no such difference of employment as could alone give occasion to great difference of talent” (16). Although non-human animals evolve according to different “geniuses,” they lack the capacity for a language that allows them to trade or truck with one another and therefore are doomed to repeat the same low-level tasks in perpetuity: “The strength of the mastiff is not in the least supported either by the swiftness of the greyhound, or by the sagacity of the spaniel, or by the docility of the shepherd’s dog. The effects of those different geniuses and talents, for want of the power or disposition to barter and exchange, cannot be brought into a common stock, and do not in the least contribute to the better accommodation and conveniency of the species” (16). Thus individuation through the division of labor in Smith allows for interdependence and productivity where there would have been just continuous undifferentiated effort for all without it. This cooperative individuation through trade constituted the Progress of the wealth of nations.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the Smithian or political economic account of Progress as deriving from the division of labor and