

Thinking About the Self

An Interview with Jerrold Seigel

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It has been said since the 1970s that the “death of the subject” is an irrevocable given of any modern conception of the self. Jerrold Seigel shows how to go beyond this simplistic approach: with a multi-dimensional vision of the self, taking into account its bodily, social and reflexive nature, he demonstrates that the self has been at the core of Western philosophy and historical experience from Locke to Derrida.

Jerrold Seigel is the Williams J. Kenan, Jr., emeritus professor of history at New York University. His research concerns the themes of social and cultural theory, the history of selfhood and subjectivity and relations between art and society. He is notably known for his published work on the life of Marx, French bohemianism in the 19th century, post-structuralist thought, and Marcel Duchamp.

He is the author of *Marx's Fate: The Shape of a Life* (Princeton University Press, 1978); *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (Viking, 1986); *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp: Desire, Liberation and the Self in Modern Culture* (University of California Press, 1995) and lastly of *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2005).

1. Is the subject dead?

La Vie des Idées: Your book proposes an ambitious analysis of how the self has been thought and experienced in Europe since the 17th century. It seems that one of the main reasons for your undertaking this major intellectual work was your dissatisfaction with 1970s and 1980s postmodernist accounts of the “death of the subject”. Why did you feel it necessary to challenge those views?

Jerrold Seigel: To answer that question, let me first say something about who I am. I come to my work as an American liberal: that doesn't mean the same thing as to be a European Liberal, and certainly not a neo-liberal. I take “American liberal” to mean someone who thinks that we still have a great deal to do to realize the promise of justice and equality that began to develop in Western societies from the 18th century onwards, but who also believes that in order to do that we have to retain certain ideas and commitments that developed then, and in particular the conviction that social improvement is inseparable from preserving the rights and dignity of individuals, and the sense that they possess a certain degree of autonomy. When I first began to read Michel Foucault in the 1970s, I was troubled from the start by what I saw, and still see, as his underlying attempt to show that many of the institutions and ways of thinking that Western thinkers and societies had furthered on behalf of both individual and social liberation were actually vehicles for introducing new forms of subjection, more pervasive and insidious than Old Regime ones.

Thought-provoking and original as these ideas were, they seemed to me wrong-headed, and so did the view of the self that went along with them. This was the notion that in modernity the self came to be constructed inside frames of domination, creating a process that Foucault, with Althusser, called “assujettissement” – a difficult word to translate into English – in which the sense of liberation from old forms of oppression becomes itself an instrument for realising the deeper kind of domination modern ideas and institutions brought. By combining this kind of thinking with motifs taken from Nietzsche and certain avant-garde artistic figures, Foucault put forward two opposed views about the self at the same time, one that made it appear as deeply subjected to exterior domination, while the other portrayed it as on the point of some radical kind of utopian liberation. Trying to understand what made it

possible to construct and hold such views, and how they influenced ideas about the history of the self became some of my chief motives

La Vie des Idées: What was the role of Derrida's thinking on the self in your own reflection?

Jerrold Seigel: Of course Derrida's thinking is based on quite different premises than Foucault's, and his writings have a very different tone, but fundamentally it seems to me to go in the same direction. I know this is not a view that is widely shared in France, and that many French critics think that we Americans are somehow responsible for the idea that there exists a general phenomenon called post-structuralism that includes both of them. They are right of course to insist on the differences between them, but Derrida's project from the beginning also was intended to show that the claims of autonomy that had developed in the western tradition from Rousseau on down were false claims, and that as a consequence the selves which we thought of as having some degree of autonomy were actually deluded in thinking they could acquire either epistemological or moral clarity through discursive reason. To show these things was a chief motive for Derrida's developing a notion of the "death of the subject," and the theory of language that supports it. This theory seems to me worse than questionable. As I try to show in my book, if the things Derrida says about language were true, we couldn't have any languages! But we *do* have them, and people *do* speak to each other and are able to describe the world and criticize their understanding of it through language. These seem to me to be strong reasons for thinking that selves and subjects need to be approached in quite a different way.

La Vie des Idées: By its subject and in its incredibly wide scholarship on the question of the self, your book seems to provide a response to Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* (1989). On what points do you disagree with Taylor's interpretation of the rise of modernity and individualism?

Jerrold Seigel: Before I directly answer that question I ought to say that I am in many ways a great admirer of Charles Taylor. I think he's a wonderfully intelligent and wide-ranging writer. I have learned an enormous amount from many of his essays. That being said, I found his book *Sources of the Self* very troubling. First of all, it's a book which tries to discuss so

many figures that it often deals with them in fleeting ways that don't allow for a rounded sense of their positions. But more important, Taylor is moved by certain ideological and religious commitments that give him deep nostalgia for a kind of Aristotelian vision of the universe, such that the world provides a stable framework of meaning for the people who live within it. I take the motivating argument of his book *Sources of the Self* to be that once this Aristotelian universe started to collapse in the 17th century, the self could no longer find "moral sources" that would nourish its development. The post-Aristotelian world as Taylor sees it was and is one with only two alternatives: either individuals accept that they live inside a purely mechanistic order that excludes autonomy, or else they have to imagine a condition of radical independence somehow created by their own completely free subjectivity.

I certainly agree with Taylor that this is a very unwelcome opposition – I don't want to live inside it either – but I don't agree with him at all that such an opposition structures modern thinking about the self. One can begin from his treatment of Locke, who for him – as for me – is a capital figure in this history. Taylor believes that Locke's notion of the self is what he calls "punctual", or "disengaged"; by the former I take it that he means "reduced to a single point", and by the latter "withdrawn into its own inner universe". I find no support for such a view of Locke in the *Essay on Human Understanding*. Strangely, Taylor's account of Locke deals very little with the chapter on personal identity in that book, although it provides Locke's only sustained attempt to think about the self. In my view what Locke gives there is a much more flexible and open way of thinking about the self, one that provides a very different starting point for the modern history of self-awareness than Taylor allows. On that basis I think we need to see the later stages of that history differently too.

La Vie des Idées: In your point of view, what are the shortcomings of classical approaches locating the advent of the individual in Descartes and Leibniz's rationalist philosophies?

Jerrold Seigel: I certainly do not mean to lessen the importance of Descartes in intellectual history generally or in the history of thinking about the self; the problem with the way he has been dealt with is that too many people are content to work out a general theory of the self – or of the subject – in Descartes simply from the single moment of the *cogito*. When Descartes says *cogito ergo sum*, he is, in the eyes of Heidegger and those who accept his view, dividing

the world between human beings with their active consciousness on one side and a merely objective and passive outside world on the other. For Heidegger, this dichotomy stands at the root of many of the worst things in modern life, including the technological domination of nature, with all of its problematic consequences.

This seems to me highly unfair to Descartes and wrong in important ways. In my book I try to argue that the moment at which Descartes came to the *cogito* was one prepared by a very special situation in his own career: the moment when his inordinately ambitious project of grasping the structure of the universe and the place of all objects in it on the basis of deduction from a few premises was collapsing. The decision to start his thinking from the *cogito* was not one he had in mind earlier, but came to him at that moment. Instead of demonstrating the certainty available through rigid deduction by accounting for such things as the location of all the stars in the heavens, he shifted the basis of certainty from the end point to the starting point, the moment of overcoming doubt. This led him to give the central place he did to the subject of consciousness. But it does not follow that he drew the kinds of conclusions from doing so that critics like Heidegger assert. This ought to be clear from the ways he speaks about the active and vital nature of the body and the world in other places in his writings. All this is hidden if we simply try to deduce all his views on the basis of the *cogito*.

About Leibniz, I do think him less modern than has sometimes been claimed. Because he makes individual monads be the universal vehicle for thinking about everything in the world, he can appear to be a progenitor of modern individualism. This is the view that, for instance, Alain Renaut takes in his book *L'Ere de l'individu*. But it seems to me that Leibniz's kind of individualism is very un-modern, if only because these monads are from the beginning parts of a universe which already has its definitive shape in the "pre-established harmony", which can never be altered. Such a world-picture is miles away from, say, Adam Smith, who believes that when individuals act they disrupt existing relations, and then somehow, their interactions, bring new equilibria into existence. I think we understand Leibniz's historical position much better if we see him as an expression of the particular kind of German environment in which he lived, where a kind of "pre-established harmony" was thought to exist between individual components of the Holy Roman Empire. I don't believe it makes sense to take Leibniz's monads as a starting point of modern individualism.

2. Rethinking the self from a “multi-dimensional” perspective

La Vie des Idées: Your book sets forth a framework of analysis opposing “one-dimensional” conceptions of the self to “multi-dimensional” ones. How did you come to this framework? To what extent does it help to provide a better understanding of how the self has been handled with in Western thought?

Jerrold Seigel: First of all, I came to it over a very long period, almost by accident and after a lot of travail and difficulty. I certainly didn't have it in mind at the start. In fact, I set out to do something quite different. This bit of personal history sustains my conviction that the framework developed largely out of lot of reading and thinking about thinkers and their views. It was really only when I came up with this framework that I felt I could write this book: I had given it up more than once before. To what extent it helps to provide a better understanding of how the self has been handled is a question that many other people may of course answer differently from me, but one of the reasons why I have a fair amount of confidence in it is that, once I began to use it as a framework, I found a direct, if sometimes only implicit, concern about relations between what I call the three dimensions of the self active in many thinkers.

The dimensions, as you know, are first the body, second social and cultural relations, and third reflection or as I call it “reflectivity.” The opposition between “one-dimensional” and “multi-dimensional” conceptions derives from the prior identification of the three dimensions. In my view it provides a way to understand how the kinds of views that troubled me in thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida arise, and how they differ from other kinds of approaches to the question. Put very briefly, there are two species of one-dimensional selves. One locates the self along the single dimension of reflectivity. This can seem to open the way to pure autonomy, but from the time of Kant and Fichte it was accompanied by an opposed recognition that such a self can have no purchase on the world of objective material relations that its own reflection engenders. The second absorbs the reflective dimension into one of the others (usually the relational one), giving an image of a self with little way to escape from the external conditions that form it. Developing a self along these lines, however, requires a determined effort of reflection that locates the thinking on which it is based outside the boundaries of its own theory of selfhood, so that the “repressed” dimension of reflection

returns in a form unconnected to the others, and thus not limited by them. By contrast multidimensional selves are at once shaped and bounded by material and social relations and possessed of a limited degree of autonomy by virtue of the self-reflection they retain at the same time.

La Vie des Idées: Your book distinguishes some kinds of “national patterns” of thinking about the self. To what extent do British, French and German experiences of the self differ from each other? How do these various conceptions relate to the political, social and religious structures in which the authors you are interested in were acting?

Jerrold Seigel: The national patterns I try to identify seem to me to arise from the different relations between the three dimensions that particular historical and cultural situations encourage. I don't think one should push such distinctions too far: it's important to recognize that ideas travel easily from one place to another, and that people in one place borrow heavily from those elsewhere, sometimes in order to make up for the defects that they find in ways of thinking that are closer to them. But I do think that there is a connexion between these national patterns, and the political and social structures to which you refer (I won't try to talk about the religious ones here).

One starting point is the difference recent historians have noticed between the degrees to which people in Britain, compared to those in France and Germany, were able to engage in spontaneous and effective kinds of social activity. John Brewer and Eckhart Hellmuth, in a book of essays comparing political experiences in the 18th century, observe that many kinds of institutions that arose from individual actions in England required the intervention of state and government authorities in Germany (the same thing is true to a considerable extent in France). This contrast worked together with the obvious political differences to sustain the English belief that they lived in a “free” country, which in the context of my book means one where participating in public forms of interaction, both social and political, could nourish their personal development, their selfhood, in ways that seemed less available elsewhere. Both David Hume and Adam Smith developed ideas about the self that were in harmony with this sense, seeing individuals as able to nurture themselves by way of spontaneous forms of interaction with others.

In France, by contrast, many people saw the public world with the state at its centre as tyrannical and corrupt, and social relations as subject to the “*cascade de mépris*” that operated in the Old Regime. Rousseau’s withdrawal into isolation, Diderot’s sense in many of his writings that a strong self was one able to keep outside influences from impinging on it, Benjamin Constant’s images of social relations, especially between men and women, as characterized by domination and subjection, and the strategies he devised to deal with this, all reflect this sense in some way. Germany was a different case because there was no central authority: the one central political unit that claimed control over the country, the Holy Roman Empire, had no real control, and functioned in Mack Walker’s terms as an “incubator of localism”. Experiencing such independence encouraged people to believe in their autonomy, but it was one that depended on a kind of structural fit between individuals and the world outside them that was theorized in philosophical idealism (beginning with Leibniz, by the way). These are the kinds of relations between the social and the political situations of different countries, and the views about the self that they encouraged, that I try to establish in my book.

La Vie des Idées: You have a fascinating chapter on how French attitudes towards the self in the 19th century oscillated between the need for the state to bring external moral values to the selves and the bohemian appeal of the *culte du moi*. What role did the state and social institutions play in shaping ideas of the self in modern France?

Jerrold Seigel: I’ll try to answer this in a concrete way. I was struck when I began to read Victor Cousin – who of course was a very powerful figure in French philosophy and education in the early 19th century – by how on the one hand he believed that for people to have independent selves they had to develop their capacity of reflection (he’s quite specific about the importance of reflection and the creation of an independent self). But at the same time, he believed strongly that this capacity for reflection had to be developed under the aegis of the state, that is, inside the official educational system, set up with the self-conscious purpose of overcoming the deep conflicts between different social and political groups that were left over from the Revolution. He says, at a certain point, that the “effect of the Revolution” is everywhere, and his justification for believing that state authority is necessary to guide people in the development of their capacity for reflection is connected with that presence. When I read Victor Cousin on this kind of self-formation, I was struck by its close

correspondence to what Michel Foucault calls “assujettissement”, that is the construction of subjectivity in contexts of authoritarian relationships.

As I said at the start, I don't believe that Foucault's notion provides a very good general description of the development of thinking about the self, or the experience of “selfhood” in the modern West. But it's quite striking that what Cousin proposes for France is just what Foucault's historical theory emphasizes. Moreover, one can recognize continuities with earlier French thinkers, for instance with Helvetius, who like others in the 18th century believed that the basis of human nature was self-love, and that if you were going to make people moral you had to find a way to transform self-love into some kind of social affection. Hume and Smith thought so too, but they believed that this transformation could be relied on to take place spontaneously, through the interactions of individuals with each other. Helvetius instead maintained that it had to take place within the education provided by government – much as did Cousin, sixty years later.

Still later Durkheim too believed that there was something very dangerous about selves left to themselves and that to be liberated from their otherwise unlimited and confusing desires they needed an officially-sanctioned moral education that would inculcate a sense of responsibility to society. The persistence and strength of such views in France, tied up with a state that itself vacillated in people's minds between being a source of oppression and of radical liberation, helped to provoke a sharply opposed sense that autonomy required total independence from political and social authority. The *culte du moi* that Barrès proposed from the right had a counterpart in the literary anarchists of the left.

La Vie des Idées: The 20th century seems to be dominated by one-dimensional conceptions of the self. Heidegger's *Dasein* appears to you as an illustration of the extreme polarization between the loss of the self and its overwhelming exaltation. Do you think these conceptions of the individual and the self may be one explanation for the 20th century violent history? Or should we, on the contrary, understand these conceptions as consequences and products of this troubled history?

Jerrold Seigel: If I have to choose between your two alternatives I'll chose the second one. Although I'm a historian who has often concentrated on thinking and culture, I am not an

idealist. I don't believe that ideas determine very much about large scale historical events, such as the rise of 20th century totalitarian movements, or especially violence. What I do think is that the kinds of conflicts within society and politics that led to the triumph of national-socialism in Germany were ones that at the same time pushed people like Heidegger to think about the self in the ways that they did. This is not simply a matter of a reflection of social and political movements in individuals. In my view social and political conditions are never directly and simply reflected in individuals. To describe their relations in this way is to engage in what I call "un-mediated contextualism." It is individuals who mediate between contexts and the actions that develop within them, and by giving a certain interpretation or direction to those contexts they become in some degree independent creators of the perspectives that they put forward. Surely this is true of Heidegger. The attraction many twentieth-century thinkers felt for one-dimensional conceptions had deep roots in the destabilizing political conflicts of the nineteenth century, but obviously different people reacted differently to those conflicts.

3. Is the self a universal or a particular experience?

La Vie des Idées: Some of the reviewers of your book (Judith Surkis and Johnson Kent Wright for instance) deemed that you did not pay sufficient attention to the gender question. How do you view this idea that thoughts and experiences of the self must have been shaped by gender considerations?

Jerrold Seigel: I think it's both right and wrong. I certainly think many theories of the self exhibit notions and impulses that can be related to the fact that most people able to have careers as thinkers have been male, and to that degree I think that views of the self were shaped by gender considerations. But I do give some attention to gender in my book. For instance, in discussing Adam Smith I suggest that on one level he saw a necessity for the self to be at once masculine and feminine. The reason was that what gives people the motivation to develop the "male" quality of self-command, for him at the centre of moral possibility, was the "female" quality of sympathy and openness to others. To become too "male," too self-controlling, means to close off the very source of the power to regulate one's own feelings and actions that the moral self requires. I also suggest that Benjamin Constant's very troubled and tense view of male-female relations had much to do with the deep conflicts that appear in

his thinking, just as in his life. And I consider the different circumstances that led Mill to believe that there was no difference between men and women in their ability to develop autonomy.

That said, I suppose the question this calls to mind is the following: is there some kind of particularly feminine way of having a self? And to that question too there have to be two answers. My first answer is no, because women's selves, like men's, have to be constructed out of bodily nature, cultural and social relations with people around them, and the human capacity for reflection. From this point of view, female selves and male selves are really very much alike. On the other hand, it's also the case that women's bodies impose different experiences on them than men's, and that they have had to accept a dominated social position through most of history, allowing for much less autonomy than men; certainly those circumstances had an impact on female experiences of selfhood. I should say that I was myself disappointed that I was not able to find some female figure about whom I could write at sufficient length, and analytically enough, to have such a person in my book. But I think both that this absence is largely explained by the very phenomenon of the marginalization and oppression of women that feminist historians have been very good at making us understand, and that feminists are wrong who think that we should take a fundamentally different approach to women's selves than to men's.

La Vie des Idées: What would be the differences between Western experiences of the self and other historical experiences? In other words, is the self a product of Western modernity or a universal experience?

Jerrold Seigel: So far as I know, Western culture is unique both in the degree of attention it has given to the self and in the way it has made the self a vehicle for approaching other important questions about the nature of society and history. I think the richness of the western discourse about the self has to do with the spontaneous transformations of society and life that began to emerge in the West in the early modern period (largely as a consequence of the internal political and religious conflicts there), which both led the West to have a deeply disrupted and conflicted history and provided much ground for meditation on the relation between self and society. But I certainly don't think that it's only westerners who have selves, or awareness of themselves as selves. Large numbers of societies and cultures have sought to

develop ideological grounds for denying individual independence, in order to assert the primacy of community, and within the community that of the authorities that control them. That they have sought to do so seems to me evidence for an implicit awareness of independent selfhood. I think that there is a kind of romantic notion in the West that non-Western peoples who privilege community over individuality are free of some of the defects that plague Western countries, isolation for instance and oppressive relations of authority. Much of this seems to me fairly obviously false.

Sometimes the very practices that societies outside the modern West have used to diminish the independence and separation of individuals from their communities have led to a heightened sensitivity to individual difference. Some interesting evidence on this score is provided by Natalie Zemon Davis in an article about sixteenth-century French peasant communities that is relevant to many other contexts. What she finds is that the “embeddedness” of the self in social relations, which has often been seen as a barrier to people developing a consciousness of themselves as separate individuals, actually had the opposite result. Both women who were expected to play the role of counters in marriage relationships in support of family strategies, and young men told (for similar reasons) to follow the professions of their fathers resisted, at least for a time, appealing to the different choices they were drawn to on the basis of their “nature.” Here the conflict between the relational dimension of the self and the bodily and reflective dimensions generated a clear consciousness of individual self-existence. A number of anthropologists have provided evidence for similar situations in other contexts where it was earlier asserted that no sense of independent selfhood existed or could develop.

La Vie des Idées: Your previous books covered topics ranging from Marx ideology to bohemian culture in 19th century France, or Marcel Duchamp artistic and existential experience. Did you already have in mind the question of the self when writing those books? For how long have you been convinced that the self should be a crucial topic of inquiry for historians?

Jerrold Seigel: In a certain way, all the books you've mentioned are really about selves and their place in history. My book about Marx aimed to discover patterns in his thinking that were tied to similar ones in his personality, so as to link the parts of his life together. It was a

kind of psychological biography of Marx's career, not in Freudian terms but in ones that derived in part from “ego psychology” (especially the work of Erik Erikson) and also from literature. My book on bohemia, as I mentioned before, is also very much about selfhood, because I think what made bohemian life so important in cultural history was that it provided (and in part still provides) a kind of “theatre of the self,” a space for dramatizing inner conflict and ambivalence. A similar interest drove my work on Duchamp, which I have to confess is not very much liked by some of those who most celebrate him. At least part of the reason is that they tend to portray Duchamp as a kind of avatar of modernist aesthetic liberation, by virtue of his having constructed a career out of a series of unconnected and thus unrestrained gestures, something he sometimes said about himself. I argue instead that there are themes in Duchamp's personality and his work that run all the way through his career, tying it together, not unlike the way I approach Marx (or Murger and Baudelaire in my book on bohemia). So, in a certain way, I've always been interested in the self. Not only are individuals the mediators between situations and action, they also provide points of concrete intersection between large-scale forces, such as the economy, social relations, or historical changes, which historians who don't focus on individuals sometimes deal with in terms that remain too abstract. I suppose it was because I already had such ideas in mind that I found myself troubled by the aspects of Foucault and Derrida I mentioned at the start. My encounter with them made my interest in these problems more explicit and theoretical, and generated a desire to study how the self has been experienced and thought about.

La Vie des Idées: Your aim in *The Idea of the Self* was not to expose your own theory of the self. But in the end, you do seem to show some preferences. So what would your chapter on the idea of the self look like if you had to write one?

Jerrold Seigel: I would certainly try to resist writing one, and especially because I think that it's a mistake to think of the self as some kind of “thing”, about which one can have a general theory, or try to understand in the way one understands the argument of a book or the workings of a computer. If I were somehow compelled to write a chapter on my own idea of the self, I would admit that I have come to believe that selves are indeed in some way constructed out of the three dimensions already mentioned: bodily selfhood, social and cultural relations, and reflection. And I would admit too that, as I argue in the book (but in a way philosophers might regard as thin), I think theories that try to absorb one of the

dimensions wholly into some other one make it impossible to understand important things about individual existence. But I would resist going beyond that. I say in my book that when we talk about the self, when we try to understand our own self or other people's selves, what we are really trying to do is to acquire some kind of coherent understanding of how the different determinants of our being are related to each other. That is what I think we mean when we talk about the self, not that it is some "thing", but that it is the attempt we all make to create some coherent relationship between the different components of our existence. There are so many ways of doing this, shaped and coloured by all kinds of individual and social differences, that I think there are good reasons for not trying to draw them all into some single container. Maybe that is why in the end I'm a historian and not a philosopher.

Interview by Nicolas Delalande, transcription by Alexandre Brunet.

Text published by laviedesidees.fr, February 6th, 2009.

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