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FORUM: *THE IDEA OF THE SELF*

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The Idea of the Self is a book which really made me think. Within the history of selfhood that it sets forth (and within which it is inscribed), this is precisely what a book about the self should do. For, as Seigel explains, reflectivity—our ability as selves to think critically about our own positions—is a constitutive, and pre-eminent, aspect or dimension of our selfhood. His work raises important questions about the normative implications of the ways in which we think about selfhood and how we attempt to write its history. As someone whose work has both addressed and been influenced by thinkers (such as Emile Durkheim, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida) that Seigel argues have an unsatisfying and overly abstract account of selfhood, these are provocative questions indeed. *The Idea of the Self* has, as a result, forced me to interrogate the normative assumptions that underlie my own research and writing.

As he explains in his Introduction, Seigel's methodological approach to the selves that make up his history is informed by a three-dimensional account of selfhood—the bodily, social, and reflective axes along which it is (and, in his view, should be) drawn. For Seigel, this "multi-dimensionality" is the only "genuine mode of selfhood" and, as a result, any understanding which reduces the self to a single facet is ultimately "abstract and one-sided" (p. 31). While he highlights the interconnection between the different aspects of selfhood, Seigel also insists on the need to understand them as distinct. To do otherwise, in his view, carries the risk either of reifying the self as capable of "total autonomy" or, alternatively, of annihilating it altogether by reducing it to a position of pure heteronomy. Seigel advocates, instead, a relation of "positive coexistence or mutual support" between "reflectivity" and the bodily and social dimensions of selfhood (p. 10). Always attentive to social and cultural contexts such as nationality, religion, and class (and less frequently gender, race, and sexuality), he is interested, as well, in how thinkers "transcend their historicity," by taking distance from bodily and social determination, and hence speak to more "universal" themes (p. 34). Certain thinkers, as different as John Locke and Sigmund Freud, are, in his view, exemplary in their ability to articulate the three dimensions, while always guarding an important place for reflectivity. More problematic are those who, in

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Seigel's view "deem consciousness to be so fully constituted by social and cultural relations" that reflectivity "los[es] its independence" (p. 21). From the outset he explains that Emile Durkheim and Michel Foucault number amongst such figures. I seek here to examine more closely Seigel's account of their thought as "one-dimensional".

It is difficult to argue against Seigel's model of the self's moderate autonomy. The question of subjective agency as well as its limitation is, in many ways, a "universal" concern for historians. In my own work on the history of gender and sexuality I seek to understand both the enabling and exclusionary effects of normative constructions of selfhood. More specifically I am interested in how contextually situated ideas about selves are at once powerful and yet also insecure. In doing so I draw on insights from thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida, with whom (at least some) historians of gender and sexuality, among other things, have been critically engaged. As might be expected, upon reading *The Idea of the Self* I began to wonder: does my work, in drawing on these insights, rehearse the all-self/no-self paradox that Seigel identifies as the double-bind of "one-dimensional" accounts of the self? Or does it instead help to put their work in critical and historical perspective, in ways that are analogous to, but also different from, Seigel's own project?

In the discussion that follows I will address how Seigel's work speaks to issues raised by my own reading of Durkheim and Foucault. Given our different points of departure these parallels seem to me significant. In comparing our perspectives I hope to raise some larger questions both about how we understand normative visions of selfhood and how those visions inform the critical histories that we can and do write. How, I ask, does the perspective of someone who works on the idea of gendered and sexed selves reframe some of the concerns articulated by Seigel—both about the relationship between the bodily, reflective, and social dimensions of selfhood and about our ability to reflect critically on those dimensions? Do histories that highlight how selves are socially constituted and regulated necessarily result in a reduction of the self to non-existence and hence evacuate all possibility of agency or even moderate autonomy? To what extent is this the case for the authors that he figures to be "one-dimensional"?

Seigel's account of Durkheim locates him within the context of the closely connected educational and political cultures of the French Third Republic. As a beneficiary and product of that regime's meritocratic system of elite educational institutions, Durkheim was a stalwart supporter and indeed promoter of French republican values, including a commitment to individual rights. He nonetheless expressed considerable concern about the potential excesses to which untrammeled individualism, and individual desire, in particular, might lead, including that of the "social pathology" with which his name is most often associated, namely suicide. According to Seigel, Durkheim managed to

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resolve this underlying tension only by eliminating the possibility of genuine self-determination, by paradoxically configuring the self's independence to be a function of "external" moral and social values. Durkheim, amongst other figures, thus represented, as he states, "personal autonomy as . . . a gift that only external power could bestow" (p. 507). In other words, for Seigel, Durkheim's purportedly autonomous self was not autonomous at all, precisely because it was always socially determined.

My own understanding of Durkheim's sociological project is, in many ways, analogous to that set forth by Seigel.[1] I quite agree that, while committed to "individual rights," Durkheim was particularly troubled by the potential excesses of individual desire—the egoism and anomie whose pathological social effects were, in his view, so clearly indicated by contemporary statistics on suicide. He sought, in turn, to reconcile the individual with a normative social, hence moral, order. In order to do so he insisted that men's capacity for both autonomy and happiness was conditioned, rather than reduced, by the social or moral norms that contained and regulated them. I would suggest, however, that in Durkheim's account social "regulation" was not equivalent to determination. As he made clear in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, a work that was explicitly concerned with the "regulation" of the new discipline of sociology, social rules were ideally not rigid but, in his words, "only moderately intense".[2] This "flexibility" was precisely what allowed social norms to undergo necessary criticism and change (at the same time as it constituted criminality as socially "normal").

In order to understand what Durkheim meant by regulation it is also important to point out that he was not an ascetic.[3] He thus did not seek the suppression of men's desires, but rather a moderation, which ultimately assured that they could lead a happy and productive existence. In his effort to recast Kant's categorical imperative, Durkheim insisted that the moral limit, which contained men's desires, was not just obligatory but also "desirable". This "desirability" explained how and why individuals ultimately (should) embrace moral and social norms, why those norms, quite literally, should be "loved" (*mérite d'être aimée*).[4] External coercion or "discipline" was only part of the story—affect and reflection had their part to play as well. As he urged in his lectures on *Moral Education*, "we freely

1 See my *Sexing the Citizen: Masculinity and Morality in France, 1870–1920* (Cornell University Press, 2006).

2 Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, tr. W.D. Halls (Free Press, 1982), 101

3 For, as he insisted in his lectures on *Moral Education*, "If we judge that it is indispensable that natural inclinations be held within certain limits, it is not because we see them as bad, it is not that we deny them the right to be satisfied; on the contrary, it is because otherwise they could never be really satisfied". Emile Durkheim, *L'Education morale* (PUF, 1963), 44. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

4 Ibid., 47

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accept this limitation because it is natural and good, without it being any less real. Only, because our consent is enlightened, it ceases to be a humiliation and a servitude".[5]

In seeking to reconcile the individual with the social order, Durkheim deconstructed a presumptive opposition between subjective autonomy and social dependence, refusing to see liberty and regulation as hopelessly irreconcilable.[6] Seigel's analysis of Durkheim nonetheless asks whether this deconstruction of the opposition between autonomy and dependence ultimately annihilates autonomy altogether. What place, Seigel wonders, is left for agency and self-determination if that agency is only ever a socially derived effect?

I would suggest that Durkheim did have a model of agency, one that was notably structured by assumptions about men and women's sexual difference. His thought thus provides an example of how social regulation and subjective agency may be mutually constitutive and how the possibilities of and for autonomy are differently constituted for selves of different kinds. This can be seen, for example, in his understanding of conjugal marriage and its social urgency—especially, it should be noted, for men. Marriage provided, in his view, a necessary social regulation of men's (and not women's) sexual desire; this regulation, in turn, was a source of men's agency and happiness.[7] As he at one point explained, "marriage, by imposing a rule on the passions, gives man a moral basis [*assiette morale*] which enhances his force of resistance".[8] Marriage thus helped man to avoid devirilizing self-loss—the "exasperation" and "fatigue" that would, in his view, invariably result from his endless search for new objects of desire, an endless

5 Ibid., 99. See also, Durkheim, *Rules*, 143–4.

6 In order to do so he sought to illustrate how social life was not just a source of limitation but also a font of pleasure and happiness. He stressed, as well, the mutually dependent relationship between society and the individual. He thus writes, in the *Rules*, "Undoubtedly no collective entity can be produced if there are no individual consciousnesses" (129). And in *Les Formes élémentaires*: "The characteristic attributes of human nature come to us from society. But, on the other hand, society only exists and only lives in and by individuals". Their relationship was, in other words, one of mutual dependence (496–7). Emile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie réligieuse* (PUF, 1973), 496–7.

7 He thus argued in *Suicide* that because women were "closer to nature," and hence instinctually regulated, they actually needed marriage less than men did. Meanwhile, because men's "spiritualized" desires had been "liberated" from the yoke of the body, they relied on marriage as a form of social regulation. "Society" was hence both the source of men's (sexual) problem and its solution. Emile Durkheim, *Le Suicide* (PUF, 1930), 303–4.

8 He continues, "In assigning his desires a definite and, in principle, invariable object, he is prevented from exasperating himself with ever renewed, ever changing pursuits—which immediately afterwards lose their interest and leave behind only fatigue and disenchantment". Emile Durkheim, "Le Divorce par consentement mutuel (1906), *Textes* 2 (Editions de Minuit, 1975), 188.

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searching that could ultimately lead him to suicide. Thus, in making his case for how social relations were, in fact, a source of greater autonomy, masculinity authorized and guaranteed men's agency. When we compare his account of men to the restricted and restrictive position he allotted to women, it becomes clear how he conceived the albeit socially regulated male self as capable of autonomy. For Durkheim this freedom was real, despite being socially conditioned.

In figuring social regulation as a paradoxical source of both agency and discipline, Durkheim's model of the male self, like that of Victor Cousin before him, resembles Foucault's understanding of "*assujetissement*". That is to say, they both figured subjective autonomy as, at the same time, a form of subjection. My own understanding of this dynamic in Durkheim is, indeed, significantly informed by Foucault—as suggested by my interest in how a specific model of sexuality informed Durkheim's account. Seigel draws a similar connection.[9] For Seigel this tendency is a symptom of their own social and cultural determination—their mutual conditioning in a French academic and educational context which emphasized the moral and social power of the state and state institutions. Is it possible, I wonder, to think about this relationship differently? How might our understanding of it shift if we think about their mutual interest in both social rules (rather than pure social determination) and the contexts in which those norms are tested and even transgressed?

I would, in other words, like to suggest that we might see a connection between Durkheim and Foucault in their mutual, if strongly contrasted, interest in normative regulation as at once powerful, but also flexible, and hence as open to critique and possible transformation—including by their own study and writing. From this perspective their work can be understood as an expression of their own agency as social theorists and critics, rather than as mired in "an inescapable contradiction" (p. 22) because they are based in a denial of the very forms of totalizing social power that they otherwise describe. Seigel's account, by contrast, foregrounds their emphases on social determination. He thus explains that Durkheim depicted people as "wholly and rightfully under the sway of 'social facts' that affected them all in the same way (p. 485)" and that Foucault, especially in his writings from the 1970s, saw the self as "formed wholly through its cultural and social relations, and thus subjected to them at the very juncture where they fostered the illusion of individual autonomy and reflective self-management" (p. 620). These assessments echo Seigel's more general critique, laid out in the Introduction, of "efforts to portray thinking as wholly absorbed into or

9 Jan Goldstein, as Seigel points out, has drawn an analogous parallel between Cousin and Foucault. See her *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850* (Harvard University Press, 2005), 181.

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dominated by some set of social relations" (p. 22). As these citations indicate, the key word is "wholly". Does an understanding of social rules or social intelligibility as constitutive of agency, including the critical agency of reflectivity, mean that that agency is reduced to nonexistence? I have tried to suggest how, for Durkheim, social rules were constitutive of men's agency without being wholly determining. What about for Foucault?

There is no question that, especially in his writing from the 1970s—in both *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, Foucault described how the "subject" is an effect of power, and hence how power had "no absolute outside".[10] And Seigel is, of course, not the first to identify the apparent omnipresence of "power"—the fact that "power is everywhere, and hence also nowhere"—as a particularly problematic aspect of his work.[11] However, if social power is indeed "everywhere" for Foucault, it seems to me that it is neither total nor fully determining. Indeed, what makes Foucault's theory of power so unsettling to a liberal model of individual autonomy is the extent to which he understands subjective agency, including the capacity for self-reflection, to be implicated in relations of power. This is, however, different from saying that agency does not exist. Thus, according to the definition furnished in his famous essay on "The Subject and Power," power is "always a manner of acting on one or several acting subjects, and this as much as they act or are capable of acting". Thus, in his view,

> Power can only be exercised on "free subjects," and in as much as they are "free"—we should understand by that [which is to say, free subjects] individual or collective subjects who have before them a field of possibility, where several actions, several reactions and modes of comportment can be taken. There where determinations are saturated, there is no relation of power.[12]

Like Foucault's invocation of the "possibility" offered by "reverse" discourse in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, this account may appear as hopelessly abstract

10 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One*. tr. Robert Hurley (Vintage, 1978), 95.

11 David Couzens Hoy, "Power, Repression, Progress," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (Blackwell, 1988), 136–7. See also Carolyn Dean's discussion in "The Productive Hypothesis: Foucault, Gender, and the History of Sexuality," *History and Theory* 33, 3 (Oct. 1994), 271–96.

12 Michel Foucault, "Le sujet et pouvoir," *Dits et écrits*, Vol. 4 (Gallimard, 1994) 237. The scare quotes around "free subject," are, of course, significant. They might seem to suggest that the freedom to which Foucault refers is, in fact, illusory. At the same time he goes on to insist that a field of possible choices for action are available to these subjects. In this sense they might be understood as citational, as, that is, marking how he seeks to complicate conventional accounts of freedom in the history of political thought.

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despite (and perhaps because of) its insistence on the contingencies involved in any given relation of power. It does, however, highlight his insistence that power, which he distinguishes from violence, is not wholly determining.

A somewhat similar spirit, highlighting an always conditioned and conditional agency, which takes the form of strategy and possibility, is at work in Foucault's critical rereading of Kant in his very late essay "What is Enlightenment?". Critique, as outlined by Foucault, has a relationship with its object that avoids being for or against it, precisely because, in focusing on the question of normative limits, it refuses the position of being either fully inside, or fully outside, a given problematic. Critique, he thus claims, is not a "gesture of rejection". In the essay Foucault does indeed, to mix philosophical metaphors, turn Kant on his head, by, as Seigel points out, imagining critique as a "form of possible transgression".[13] At the same time Foucault insists that this "experimental" historico-critical attitude must "put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take". It thus avoids "projects that claim to be global or radical".[14] For Seigel these two tendencies in the essay rehearse the larger constitutive tension (or contradiction) between the social determination of selves and their possibility for radical transcendence in transgression that haunts Foucault's work as a whole.[15] Seigel's reading of the essay is in many ways convincing—especially in its account of Foucault's somewhat quizzical coupling of Kant and Baudelaire (about which I have often wondered). At the same time, given that Foucault insistently reflects on the question of "the limit," on both the force and possible transformation of normative frameworks in which we as selves operate, he can be seen to problematize, rather than simply repeat or unconsciously "act out," that tension.

I am similarly interested in a historical approach that is not resolutely "for" or "against" but is, rather, a critical engagement—including a critical engagement with the work of thinkers such as Durkheim and Foucault. This sort of engagement includes questioning their historical and epistemological presuppositions—for example their assumptions about the masculinity of the selves that they describe.[16] This is an approach that feminist critics know a

13 Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce qu'est lumières?" *Dits et écrits*, Vol. 4, 574.

14 Ibid., 575.

15 A somewhat different formulation of this underlying tension in Foucault, from a notably opposed perspective, can be found in Béatrice Han, *Foucault's Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, tr. Edward Pile (Stanford University Press, 2002).

16 In addition to my *Sexing the Citizen*, see also Judith Surkis, "No Fun and Games until Someone Loses an Eye: Masculinity and Transgression in Bataille and Foucault," *Diacritics* 26, 2 (1996), 18–30; and Dean, "The Productive Hypothesis".

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lot about, precisely because we are interested in understanding the historical force of social (as well as bodily) constraints—and the two are, importantly, not unrelated—while also maintaining an investment in the possibility of critical agency.[17] This agency is, of course, contingent, in part because the practice of criticism must engage the terms or norms that it seeks to test and transform. It is not, in my view, a mere fiction precisely because it does not presume that social rules are wholly determining. Understood as a "limit-attitude," it is neither inside nor outside, which means that it resists the binarism of "all or nothing," including the all-self/no-self dilemma from which, according to Seigel, purportedly "one-dimensional" accounts of the self suffer. This critical perspective informs the ways in which I have read Durkheim and Foucault as well as Seigel. And it has led me to raise some questions about his account of their models of the self as "wholly" determined. I want to conclude, however, by suggesting that a similar set of critical concerns animate Seigel's own project, which is to say his investment in the "multi-dimensional" self, as a necessary "mix" between autonomy and dependence (p. 10). Thus, while coming from what might appear to be rather different locations, our perspectives have notable elements in common. And this is a testimony to how successfully his book addresses questions that are, for historians, "universal".

17 See, for example, Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (Harvard University Press, 1996).

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