
CONSISTENCY AND DISCONTINUITY: MY SEIGELIAN LIFE CYCLE (OR, GROWING UP WITH JERRY)

THOMAS W. LAQUEUR

Department of History, University of California, Berkeley

E-mail: tlaqueur@berkeley.edu

Marx's Fate begins with a quote from W. B. Yeats, who says that he “often has had the fancy that there is some one Myth for every man, which, if we but knew it, would make us understand all he did and thought.” There is no one Myth for anyone, including Jerry Seigel, but there is, I think, in his work an “inner sameness and continuity,” as Erik Erikson would put it, which is matched, once we reflect on the matter, by a “continuity of [his] meaning for others.”¹

The Jerry Seigel of the late 1960s was of two minds about whether there was “an inner sameness” in his own case. His understanding of Marx’s life had been, he says, shaped by his having undergone an “evolution that seems to combine consistency and discontinuity in [his] own life” (*MF*, 9). Those of us who knew him then or came to his early work later will have no quarrel with the second of these claims. A great chasm seems to separate the scholarly interest—the scholarly libidinal energies might be more precise—of the not-yet-tenured Princeton assistant professor in his late twenties and the Kenan Professor of History, emeritus, at New York University five decades later.² On the one side stands the young man who, in a famous 1966 *Past and Present* article, went *mano a mano* with Hans Baron, one of the great German elders in the rarefied world of Renaissance studies in a quarrel over the origins and status of civic humanism in fifteenth-century Florence. On the other, the distinguished scholar who, five decades later, writes about the pain and regret, the struggles and disorientation of five men living “between cultures” (Richard Burton, T. E. Lawrence, Louis

¹ Erik Erikson, “Growth and Crisis of the Healthy Personality,” in *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York, 1980; first published 1959), 94.

² To be precise on the dating, Seigel became an instructor at Princeton in 1962. The senior faculty voted affirmatively sometime during the 1966–7 academic year, while he was on leave in Italy, making him an associate professor with tenure in 1967.

Massignon, Chinua Achebe and Orhan Pamuk), for whom sexuality and more specifically gender identity—“the specific manner in which given forms of life conceive, signify and regulate sexual difference”—“constituted a major thread in the inter-cultural identities each sought to knit together” (*BC*, 10).

Seigel’s subject matter and scholarly tone back in 1966 was the measured language of philological *Wissenschaft*: “our analysis will show that the chronology generally accepted before Professor Baron wrote is correct, and that these treatises [by Leonardo Bruni] therefore were not directly affected by the [Florentine] political crisis of 1402.”³ Seigel, in this piece, was more interested in continuity than he was in change; Baron was the one who takes the position that external forces lead to emotional and intellectual crisis which will be reflected in the work and lives of thinkers.

Bruni, Seigel argues, is more like Petrarch than not and the motor of change is not the sociological category of civil society born of an existential external threat, but the evolutionary dynamics over generations of an occupational group, the humanists. What mattered for Bruni and humanists was not civic participation but a revival of classical oratory and eloquence. And finally, if forced to choose between the history of ideas and the history of society, the Seigel of the 1960s was more sympathetic, or perhaps protective of, the former. The danger is as great “to suppose that a given social or political change must shape the thought of any particular group of writers as it is to deny that it may do so.”⁴ At risk in reductionism is the autonomy of ideas.

Then—privately sometime in the late 1960s, and publicly in the 1970s—came what seems like the great discontinuity. The focus of Seigel’s interests rumbled forward four centuries along the great fault lines of historical time and moved both outward to social and political contexts and inward to the psyches of his subjects. The evidence for an intellectual rupture is there in the titles and subtitles of his books: the way *Marx’s Fate* defined the “shape of a life”; the role of “culture, politics and the boundaries of bourgeois life” in the making of a fantastic *Bohemian Paris*; the insight that “desire, liberation and the self” provided into the *Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp*; the interaction of “thought and experience” in his magisterial history of the self; and the recognition that *Modernity and Bourgeois Life* must be located simultaneously at the level of “society, politics, and culture.”

More specifically, the tension between the inner life of imagination and desire and their relation to the social and cultural order area became central. The “inner resemblance to the creatures of his youthful imagination [the Epicureans about

³ Jerrold Seigel, “‘Civic Humanism’ or Ciceronian Rhetoric? The Culture of Petrarch and Bruni,” *Past and Present*, 34 (1966), 3–48, at 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.

which Marx had written his doctoral thesis] would grow stronger,” Seigel writes in *Marx's Fate* (MF, 7). Published eight years later, *Bohemian Paris* is all about the boundaries of this city of the imagination and of its inhabitants' and visitors' endless crossing “between reality and fantasy” (BP, 3), between one social milieu and its phantasmatic doppelgänger. We might read *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp* as a sort of dress rehearsal for his magnum opus on the self that follows the same themes—desire, liberation—over more than two centuries of scores of thinkers. The source of human activity, he observes near the beginning of his history of bourgeois life, “lies in human desire, will and reason” (MBL, 28). A half-century after his battles with Baron, Seigel would write about how “fashioning gender identities” and attitudes towards sexuality drawn from many different places would make it possible to inhabit and forge identities in spaces between cultures.

What happened? In one sense, nothing—or, rather, not much beyond a change in rhetoric, which may be the wrong thing to say about a man who wrote a whole book on the subject. The story is one of continuity. It is striking from the perspective both of the 1970s and later as well to see how centrally the word “passion,” for example, figures in *Rhetoric and Philosophy in Renaissance Humanism: The Union of Eloquence and Wisdom Petrarch to Valla*. Because we moderns are ill at ease with rhetoric we are unable, Seigel writes, to “involve [ourselves] closely enough in the humanists' *passion*” for eloquence (RP, viii, emphasis added). “The humanists found in their *passion* for rhetoric a basic intellectual identity, a style of thinking which shaped and colored their view of man's mental and moral life” (RP, viii, emphasis added). “The necessities of human nature” (RP, 22), the passions, were at the core of Petrarch's struggles to make moral progress.

His use of “passions” signals something deeper. The debate about the relative value of eloquence and wisdom in the fifteenth century is for Seigel about more than a question in the history of humanism—although it is that, too. It is also about how people in the past have striven to lead morally serious lives within the constraints of circumstance. The first as well as all of Seigel's subsequent books have been about the self-fashioning of the ethical subject, initially in the relatively circumscribed world of Renaissance humanism and the small states of Italy, then in that great, ill-defined but inescapable field “modernity” in Europe and the world beyond. There is a thread of intellectual “inner sameness” that runs through a half-century of scholarship.

But of course something did happen to Seigel. We graduate students in the late 1960s knew that something was afoot, although we were not privy to what. By the fall of 1970, when Jerry began to help me through two years of chronic thesis angst, he was—or seemed to be—on the other side of his own identity crisis, if such it was. With the obliviousness of youth to the inner lives of their elders, his shift

from Bruni to Marx, from the early fifteenth century to the nineteenth, struck me at the time largely as a sign that there was still psychic life and the possibility of change after thirty. Difficult to figure, but brave. Now, almost fifty years later, I still cannot speak to the process that took Jerry from Bruni and Petrarch to Marx and Duchamp, but I think of it as a process that brought together a new interest in identity and the self, on the one hand, and society and culture, on the other.

The first of these, as Seigel says in his introduction to Marx, was born from his engagement in psychology and particularly the developmental psychology of Erik Erikson. He had invited Erikson to Princeton in 1968 having come to know him in Italy when they were both there in 1966–7. The connection was originally through Jayn Rosenfeld, Jerry's wife of one year's standing, whose mother was activities director at the Riggs Center where Erikson did much of his work. He was nervous to meet the great man, who proved, in life as in his work, kind and generous.

Erikson is not much remembered today, but he was important in historical studies in the late 1960s for two reasons. He made the case in both his psychoanalytically informed studies of development and in his biographies of Gandhi and Luther that we become who we are through a dialectical process that can extend well into adolescence and beyond and is punctuated in some cases by crisis, an acute realignment of both our inner and our outer lives. The key difference between Erikson's formulation and earlier psychoanalytic views was that psychogenesis is both a lengthier process than it had been thought to be and one in which the psyche's conflicted wishes and desires are imbricated in specific historical moments. And the key concept that Seigel took from Erikson was identity: "the accrued confidence that one's ability to maintain inner sameness and continuity (one's ego in the psychological sense) is matched by the sameness and continuity of one's meaning for others."⁵

Neither Erikson nor Seigel would be as rash as Margaret Mead when she gave voice to her teacher Ruth Benedict's view that "human cultures [are] 'personality writ large.'" (Benedict had observed in *Pattern of Culture*, for which Mead wrote a new preface, that "a culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action.")⁶ But individual identity in all of Seigel's work since the early 1970s is understood as historically grounded in something broadly called "modernity," or "modern culture," the space "between cultures," or "bourgeois life."

Erikson is, of course, only one part of the explanation for this turn outward. Seigel's wary engagement with Marx and living through political dangers and

⁵ Erikson, "Growth and Crisis of the Healthy Personality," 94.

⁶ Margaret Mead, "Preface," in Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York, 2005; first published 1959), xiii; Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 46.

promises in the 1960s were important. And there must also have been personal influences: the historian Carl Schorske and perhaps his colleague Thomas Kuhn, who studied science as a social and institutionally grounded enterprise are another. But whatever the cause, Seigel's turn outward focused his attention on the relationship between the psyche, on the one hand, and, on the other, the world in which it acts and through which we become what we are. The causal arrow, if not reversed, was redirected. Certainly, identity could not, as it was for Benedict, be a synecdoche for society. Nor was it the primary object of study, as it was for Erikson.

Individuals, Seigel writes, live "within their social conditions by constantly making and remaking them, giving substance and life to boundaries and rules" (*MBL*, 28). The relationship of the formation of the self and the formation of the world became the Seigelian subject, and is summed up in a title that might be viewed as emblematic for a life of scholarship: *Marx's fate*—the process of becoming Marx—and Marx's *fate*—the world and its vagaries in and through which his subject became who he was.

Which brings me to my fate and Jerry's place in it. Once upon a time, more than a half-century ago, he was much older than me. He was never my teacher but he was a friend to my generation, from what seemed many years' distance. It was on the occasion of Erikson's visit to Princeton in 1969–70 that we organized a sit-in at the department colloquium, to which, up to that point, graduate students were not invited. He did not mediate the carefully choreographed entry of the rabble and the peaceful exit of the older faculty—that was Sheldon Hackney, then an assistant professor and later president of the University of Pennsylvania—but he was the one who brought the sage of adolescent crisis to campus and was clearly on our side. He and Jayn also came to some of our parties, not exactly as Olympians from another world but as the smart set who were willing to hang out with us.

In 1970–71, Jayn and Jerry were living in London, he working on his Marx book and she, among other things, giving flute lessons. It was through one of her students that I found a place to live there. For reasons that I cannot now reconstruct I thought that Jerry, with whom I had had no formal pedagogical relationship, would be open to my endless whining about the meaninglessness of my thesis project and my lack of any original ideas (even if the project was not so bad), and about the hopelessness of academic life in the fallen political world in which I felt I was living. My thesis adviser, Lawrence Stone, whom I worshipped, had no time for this: "get on with it, for god's sake." Jerry, however, was willing to listen. During the first semester of 1970–71, I took the train down from Manchester to go on therapeutic walks with him; during the second semester, I roomed across the street from the Seigel-Rosenfelds—the husband of my landlady was her flute student. Once we had become neighbors and were both working at the

old British Library, our walks became more frequent. I remember very little of what Jerry said to me back then except—as my friend and fellow grad student William Irvine recently reminded me—I was very taken, and given hope by, Jerry’s remark that he had read more or less the entire corpus of Marx—which is not exactly understudied—and that he had something new to say about it. That was encouraging.

Very slowly, Jerry became older than me by less. We took a vacation to Dartmoor together; our common friends in London had us to lunch and dinner. But there were also setbacks in this process of convergence. One was particularly embarrassing. I still inwardly wince in recounting this episode of unconscionable adolescent solipsism well after such behavior was age-appropriate, if it ever is. In September of 1973, I had to stop in Princeton for my formal thesis defense en route to my new job in Berkeley. I had made no arrangements for this stage of the trip and arrived at Kennedy Airport with my baggage and my newly purchased Hogarth prints in heavy frames. I rang Jerry and asked whether he would pick me up. I cannot reconstruct from a distance of more than fifty years what could possibly have been in my mind that would have allowed me to make such an outrageous request. And I find it even harder to imagine why Jerry would have done anything other than hang up the phone after telling me that I must be kidding. I was being outrageous. He picked me up. I stayed with the Seigels.

I cannot remember all that we have done together and spoken about over the next fifty years: nothing remotely as embarrassing as that phone call from the airport. But our lives slowly became connected in all sorts of ways—through work, through family, through music, through dinners and walks in many places. My wife Carla Hesse was his preceptor while she was at Princeton in the 1980s. Another link. As our common friend Alexander Nehamas writes, it matters less what you do with your friends than that what you do, you do with your friends.⁷ We did lots of stuff over the decades. At some point Jerry stopped being so much older. It no longer feels presumptuous, as if we were of the same generation, to say that we are very different in our historical preoccupations. Jerry wrote about Marx’s fate; I wrote about Marx’s grave. He starts with the self; I start with the body. But if I start with my self, those walks in London’s Kensington Gardens with Jerry at the time when he was still so much older—and wiser—remain central to my becoming who I am, to my fate.

⁷ Alexander Nehamas, *On Friendship* (New York, 2016).