

## SELF: THE LIMITS OF AUTONOMY

GERALD IZENBERG

Department of History, Washington University in St. Louis

E-mail: [gnizenbe@wustl.edu](mailto:gnizenbe@wustl.edu)

---

If one is looking for the authoritative work on the history of the modern Western concept of “self,” the place to go is Jerrold Seigel’s *The Idea of the Self*. It is a wide-ranging, deeply insightful account of Western thinking about the nature of selfhood in Britain, France, and Germany since Descartes, framed by a powerfully argued thesis about the right way to conceptualize it. But that project was driven by what in the retrospect of Seigel’s whole body of work can be seen as an even more comprehensive historical program, one both methodological and substantive. One of Seigel’s basic historiographical convictions, more implicit than systematically argued, is that individual subjectivity matters for historical explanation. His broader substantive interest is in the meaning of the Western notion of “modernity,” above all in its implications and consequences for our contemporary self-understanding. Methodological conviction and substantive interest are tightly interwoven. As Seigel sees it, the process of European modernization was guided by, and in turn further developed, a historically locatable, complex, and internally conflicted version of universal selfhood—the autonomous bourgeois self. His corpus is an extended and evolving exploration of this process and its result, which he finds most clearly documented in European thought and culture from the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth.

Seigel’s position on the importance of the individual for historical explanation might seem old-fashioned but for the fact that it neither precludes nor comes at the expense of social and cultural explanation. Quite the contrary: Seigel’s “self” is unavoidably shaped by social forces, since, as *The Idea of the Self* explicitly argued, one of its basic characteristics is sociality. But by the same token social forces only operate as historical determinants when internalized by individuals to become personal motives. No individual motive, no social action. Or, as Seigel put it in *Modernity and Bourgeois Life*, a work devoted not to individuals but to the rise of concrete networks such as railroads and postal services which made possible long-distance communication in commerce, politics and culture,

Networks extend, amplify, and invigorate human activity, but they are not in themselves the source of the subjective agency that sets this activity in motion; that source lies in

human desire, will, and reason. Whether it be a market, a state, a profession, a large corporation, the Republic of Letters, NBC, or the Internet, networks of means only exist in practice through the actions of the individuals who animate them. (*MBL*, 26)

If the aim of “getting the self right” is important to Seigel in part for methodological reasons, his substantive agenda meant that the project is necessarily concretely historical in its methods. Even his most theoretical work on the self is historically inspired and conceived. He hit on the conceptual framework for *The Idea of the Self* as a response to the challenge posed by the version of selfhood—more accurately, anti-selfhood—that seemed to dominate European (and much American) thought in the second half of the twentieth century through post-structuralism. In Seigel’s view, not only is post-structuralism wrong about the nature of selfhood; its errors inevitably radically distort our understanding of both the modernization process and the actual experiences of modern individuals. The counterposition he stakes out, however, was already implicit in his previous psychological–biographical studies of the emblematic modern figures Karl Marx and Marcel Duchamp.

#### MARX, BOHEMIA, AND DUCHAMP: THE BOURGEOIS SELF AND AUTONOMY’S LIMITS

While *Marx’s Fate: The Shape of a Life*, does not lay out a general theory of the self, it does rely on elements of Erik Erikson’s developmental scheme, above all the notion that personality is rooted in early experience and that mature identity is structured by identifications with parents. Crucially for Seigel, however, parents are not (just) the biological figures of the classical Freudian family romance but embodiments of cultural norms. When these are internally conflicted, we internalize their conflicts with our identifications, and creating an identity demands their resolution. In the wake of the French Revolution, these conflicts were about the nature of the individual and his relation to society.

Heinrich Marx, a modern enlightened bourgeois, was torn between practicality and idealism, careerism and morality, egoism and the need to sacrifice for the common good. He relentlessly imposed these value conflicts on his son, belaboring him with admonitions that he was too extreme in both directions, and leaving him with an apparently irresolvable moral–psychological contradiction. Karl found both the philosophical expression of these conflicts and their ostensible resolution in Hegelian philosophy, to which he “converted” with the ardor of a believer. Hegel’s dialectic envisioned the ultimate reconciliation of ethical universality, or “wholeness,” and individual freedom in the modern Prussian state, whose institutional structures supposedly fused legal equality as the expression of the common good with the practical individual freedom of the market. Soon, however, Karl came to believe that Hegel’s was a sham

reconciliation, a deceptive idealization that contradicted social reality. The Prussian bureaucracy was not a neutral representative of the whole but a particular class dominating in its own interest. Nor could democratizing the state overcome the contradiction between freedom and universality because in modern capitalist society self-interest was structurally in conflict with the common good. This was a psychological as well as a political problem; in a capitalist democracy the individual was internally divided against himself, as self-interested actor and universal citizen. Only by reinterpreting the dilemma as a false opposition created by the contradictions of bourgeois society and by abolishing that society could Karl overcome it and thus also meet Heinrich Marx's contradictory demands on him.

The problem with Marx's solution, as Seigel points out, was that it suffered from the same flaw Karl had argued against Hegel: it remained in the end purely "philosophical"—that is, notional—rather than real. It was not simply that Marx could never concretely describe the communist society of the future. In the face of the collapse of his hopes for its imminent realization after 1848, his insistent realism made him give up whatever temptations to utopianism lingered in his prerevolutionary encomiums to communism as the only solution to humanity's problems. It was precisely the supposedly hardheaded economic analysis of capitalism which superseded them, and on which his influence and fame came to rest, which ultimately foundered on a philosophical idealism that assumed what had to be empirically proved.

Marx labored for decades to show that the tendency of the rate of profit to fall guaranteed the collapse of capitalism. But, as Seigel tellingly argues, unlike both followers and opponents who engaged in detailed if ultimately inconclusive calculations about prices and profits in order to argue when—or whether—that might happen, Marx himself did not bother to undertake such calculations (*MF*, 356). Though he did try, unsuccessfully, to transform the theory of value in *Capital* into an empirical theory of prices, in the end it was on the *philosophical* premises of value theory that he relied for his absolute certainty about the future. For Marx the transformation of values into prices was theoretically superfluous, if tactically important, because it served only to obscure what he saw as the real basis of social change. The "irrationality" of prices—their masking of the truth that profit was the surplus value of labor expropriated by the capitalist—was nothing but the "inverted" reflection of the fundamental characteristics of capitalism as a stage in the history of human industry: the increasing productivity of labor and the inert accumulation of productive capacity in the hands of capitalists. It was the *moral* contradiction between productive labor and unproductive ownership, not the predictability of prices and profits, on which Marx ultimately relied for his complete assurance about the inevitability of communist revolution. In the end he came down on the idealist, not the realist, side of his inner contradiction.

Seigel modestly claims his analysis as an explanation only of the course of Marx's life, climaxing in his failure to complete and publish the volumes of *Capital* that would clinch his predictions for bourgeois economists. But it is much more than that. In light of the influence of Marx's analysis on the socialist movement in Europe, which relied so heavily on its scientific credibility, both his empirical failure and his philosophical certainty help elucidate international socialism's subsequent tortured labors to explain and counter history's repeated failures to live up to Marx's expectations. More important for Seigel himself, however, is that Marx's work provides a window into the divided self of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie. Marx became a "Marxist" because he was the most consistent kind of bourgeois, wanting to live up to the bourgeoisie's own highest ideals of autonomy, rationality, equality, and moral and social responsibility, but finding it impossible to do so on the socioeconomic premises of bourgeois life. Seigel's biographical and psychological approach yields profound insights into the social and moral contradictions of Marx's era because these were mediated to him through his intimate family circumstances and internalized as personal conflicts. Those in turn determined the moral and social problems he felt the need to solve, the intellectual resources he would find helpful in doing so, and the ways he would read them. These determinations are not sufficient to explain the brilliant structure he built from them, but they do help in understanding its goal and its flaws. In this sense the "shape" of Marx's life is also an image of the bourgeois self of his era.

Marxism "was not a realm outside bourgeois life but the expression of a conflict that arose at its very heart." Seigel did not in fact write that sentence about Marxism, though he might well have. He wrote it about Bohemianism (*BP*, 10), and it reveals both the thematic and the interpretive unity of his work and its enormous range. *Bohemian Paris*, subtitled *Culture, Politics and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life*, explores a literary-cultural counterpart to Marxism, the movement, if so inchoate a phenomenon can be so named, which set itself in writing and lifestyle against the egoism, materialism, and uptightness of bourgeois life. As Seigel shows, however, Bohemian contrarianism was only half the story. His searching analysis of the putative "other" of the bourgeoisie, which was nominated for a National Book Award in literary and cultural criticism, added a new and deeper dimension to his image of the bourgeois self.

For Henri Murger, its most famous chronicler, dramatizer, and exemplar, Bohemia was "the self-conscious prolongation of an aroused state of passion and excitement" (*BP*, 50), the physical as well as psychological space where sexuality, self-expression, and the creative imagination could flourish free from the pressures of the market and the constraints of moral respectability. Bohemians paraded their commitment to art and poverty in public repudiation of their own social origins. At the same time they contradictorily pursued fame, fortune, and

social acceptance by the very people they scorned. Some Bohemians, if not the larger number of pretenders and hangers-on, labored diligently at their artistic pursuits, motivated by the belief they shared with businessmen, professionals, and shopkeepers that the wealth and respectability they also sought could only be won by hard work.

Perhaps more germane to Seigel's overall project, however, is his observation that their cherished, ostensibly rebellious, values of independence, creativity, purity, and art also came directly out of the bourgeois ethos. Bohemianism represented a logical extension of the bourgeois ideal of autonomy, freed from the anxieties of lawlessness which terrified the middle class and drove it to set up internal moral restraints and rigid conventions of propriety as replacements for the external authoritarianism of Old Regime hierarchies. Even the Bohemian worship of art had roots in the bourgeoisie, which tried to legitimize its claims to be the new social elite by taking over patronage of the arts from the aristocracy. That is why Bohemianism not only horrified but fascinated the respectable bourgeoisie: while through much of the century bourgeois artistic taste was defined by classicist aesthetics, Bohemian expressiveness was its repressed underside. Bourgeois horror, on the other hand, was not wholly misplaced. At its extremes Bohemian rebelliousness seemed to validate bourgeois anxieties about unrestrained autonomy, which often descended into unproductive idleness, self-indulgence, poverty, vagrancy, and criminality. That is also why for some the Bohemian way of life could only be temporary, what Erik Erikson, as Seigel notes, called the moratorium of adolescence on the way to consolidating a more integrated adult self through a return to the settled bourgeois way of life they had left behind. Here, as in his discussion of the way Marx appropriated Hegel, Seigel deploys developmental-biographical explanation, in this case to interpret the apparent unseriousness of youth flirting with and then abandoning Bohemianism as rather a sequence of serious responses to personal/ideological conflicts about what the self should be.

Of those who flirted with Bohemianism it was Baudelaire whose anti-bourgeois stance let him sound the negative potential of the autonomous self most fully and frighteningly. As he wrote in *My Heart Laid Bare*, "There exist in every man at every moment two simultaneous postulations, one toward God, the other toward Satan." But Seigel was less interested in Baudelaire's poetic explorations of evil than in what it took for the self to embark on them, epitomized in another citation from Baudelaire: "On the vaporization and the centralization of Self: Everything is there" (*BP*, 114). Baudelaire, Seigel argued, depicted the artist as a "virtuoso of self-diffusion," able by decentering and fragmenting himself to enter into all possible modes of human experience. That is why the artist was so central to Baudelaire's concept of modernity. "Vaporization" was the ultimate, and paradoxical, implication of the bourgeois ideal of autonomy,

bound by neither moral limitation nor strictures of decency, indeed by none of the boundaries that define what we normally think of as a “self.”

But vaporization could only be the first step in a process of creation—or living autonomously. The artist had to pull a unified self out of his fragmented experiences to create the unified structure that constituted a work. This was the essence of Baudelaire’s “dandyism,” his insistence that art—and character—was, precisely, artificial, not natural, the creation of a conscious agent, and his point of rupture with Bohemianism. Passion was the enemy of art because it took the artist outside himself, where aesthetic creation, the work of form, necessarily took place. “To screw,” Seigel quoted Baudelaire, “is to desire to enter into another person, and the artist never goes outside of himself” (*BP*, 117).

Seigel hints at the conflicted personal sexuality that underlay Baudelaire’s repudiation of passion as the opposite of “pure beauty,” but his focus is on Baudelaire as exemplar, on the inner conflict at the heart of bourgeois selfhood revealed through Baudelaire’s uniquely intense self-awareness. Art could not be merely the unshaped effusion of individual subjectivity, the outpouring of sensation and feeling. On the other hand, in the modern world subjective experience was art’s inevitable, its only authentic, raw material. For the self to be radically consistent with the ideal of modern autonomy, “The visionary possibilities of every form of intoxication, alcohol, drugs, sexuality, politics, had to be cultivated despite the dangers to personal integrity they posed and the inescapable loss of control they brought in their wake” (*BP*, 123). Complete loss of control was, of course, the liminal case, which is why it was most safely approached not in life—though the Bohemians came close, or tried, or said they did—but in art. And while Bohemian rebelliousness could express itself in the nineteenth century as political radicalism, its preoccupation with the boundless expansion of personal experience more plausibly led to attempts such as those of the poet Rimbaud to arrive at ultimate truth by what he called “the total disordering of the senses.” In effect, this meant shutting off all communication with the outer world, with its conventional and inauthentic social roles, to pursue a purer, higher truth through an inward path. Bohemianism and symbolism thus seemed to end up in a narcissistic cul-de-sac aptly defined by the *fin de siècle* novelist Maurice Barrès in the title of his trilogy, *La culte du moi* (The Cult of the Self). It was ultimately telling for the necessities of viable selfhood as Seigel sees it that Rimbaud stopped writing about the possibilities of personal disorder in his early twenties to pursue a life of commercial trading. Without the resources—and limitations—of the external world, material and social, autonomy is an empty concept, since in their absence the self has nothing to work on or with.

It was because both the resources of radical individuality and its limitations fascinated him that Seigel was drawn to the subject of his second major biographical work, Marcel Duchamp. In works like the “readymades,” which

made him notorious, but above all in his masterpiece, *The Large Glass*, Duchamp took the idea of art as the expression of the individual's deepest interiority to its extreme, challenging comprehensibility and risking solipsism with its apparently impenetrable mysteries.

*The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp* is an extraordinary work, above all for the virtuosity of Seigel's interpretations of both single works of art and Duchamp's overall aesthetic project. Seigel's elegant deciphering of the symbolic intricacies of *The Large Glass*, whose title *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* has mystified critics and viewers as it contains not the slightest visual hint of bride, bachelors, or stripping, is itself a work of art. But aesthetic interpretation is not Seigel's main purpose. He wants to understand the significance of Duchamp's mysteriousness itself in relation to the problems of modern individuality. Duchamp's style represents the climax of the conflict over the limits of individual autonomy that Seigel described in *Bohemian Paris*.

Unlike even his Cubist *Nude Descending a Staircase*, Seigel argued, Duchamp's *Large Glass* no longer inhabits a "transitional space" between artist and viewer where objects have enough recognizable features to be part of a shared world. Instead Duchamp "fashioned symbols and appropriate objects to fit the architecture of an already-structured private universe," defined in ideas before being rendered in images. Duchamp's art was thus a deliberate effort at unalloyed freedom, which required that the inner play of fantasy meet the world of material things wholly on fantasy's terms (*PW*, 238). Furthermore, Seigel argues in his most original claim, this was the real purpose even of Duchamp's readymades, precisely because they were familiar objects in the anti-aesthetic world of utility. Their purpose was less to shock and scandalize by proclaiming the arbitrariness of privileging only some things as "art" than to show that even the most common things (in both senses of the word) could become "magical objects" in a wholly private world of meaning. Taken out of their normal context, objects lost their familiarity and solidity, not just for the viewer but for the artist himself, providing him with "a defense against any formed and stable identity" (*PW*, 118). The total privatization of the objectively public through the readymades was a defiant declaration of the artist's independence from the external, including the social, world. Duchamp's art threatened to strip the self of sociability itself, of the capacity to communicate with others.

It is useful at this point to set Seigel's Duchamp beside his Marx in order to gauge the breadth of his exploration of the issues of modern selfhood. Put somewhat schematically, his analysis of Marx was concerned with the public (social-theoretical) consequences of Marx's inner conflict between the ideals of autonomy as self-interest and ethical concern for the common good and their respective philosophical expressions; Duchamp's work reveals the private (artistic) consequences of driving the ideal of autonomy itself to its uttermost

limits, freed from all constraint by external reality or inner inhibition. Of course, by their very nature, public and private consequences could not be absolutely separated in their lives and works. The conflicts between Marx's empirical and philosophical ideals not only led to blockage in his work but also deformed Marx's personal relationships with family and friends. Duchamp's drive for absolute personal autonomy raised the philosophical and practical question of the compatibility of radical individual freedom with sociability itself. And just as Rimbaud had given up poetic solipsism for the world of commerce, Duchamp gave up esoteric painting (if not thinking about it) for the world of chess.

In the course of interpreting Duchamp, Seigel brought up ideas that had been broached by Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Seigel's confrontation with post-structuralism and its implications for selfhood was inevitable: it was at the peak of its influence by the 1980s and 1990s. He had previously grappled with it in essays on Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and Foucault; his choice of Duchamp for a longer study was in part prompted by his belief, supported by contemporary criticism, that Duchamp anticipated post-structuralist views and attitudes, and thus served as the bridge from Bohemianism to postmodernism. Directly and through Duchamp, Seigel took issue with deconstruction as a method of interpretation and with the "discourse" view of authorship and creativity. Both critiques bore directly on Seigel's understanding of selfhood.

Deconstruction attacks the belief that texts have stable meanings that can be unambiguously stated. The spirit of deconstruction, Seigel agreed, resembles Duchamp's spirit at many points, since he too aimed at destabilizing the supposedly objective meanings of things. But that did not mean that deconstruction was the most appropriate way to interpret Duchamp himself. Deconstruction precludes the possibility of assigning a definite, unequivocal set of purposes to the man or meanings to his work. That, however, was precisely what Seigel was doing. "I admit that I believe," he wrote, in what amounted to a personal philosophical manifesto,

that language can and often does describe the world outside itself and us clearly and stably enough for our purposes . . . and that human beings are indeed "beings," possessed of enough stability to invest their diverse and changing activities with meanings that are sufficiently coherent and interesting to say what they are . . . There seems to me little reason to believe that the verb "to be," or the commonsense notion that human beings inhabit a world stable enough to be named by our ordinary words and concepts, are as oppressive as Duchamp and Derrida believe them to be, or that subverting language can offer liberation of the sort they claim. (*PW*, 161)

Seigel argued the substantiality of selfhood on somewhat different grounds against Michel Foucault. Foucault's argument that it didn't matter "who is speaking" a given text was only the most famous expression of the post-structuralist



effort to “dissolve the self and turn subjectivity into a medium through which some external power—language, history, the cosmic will, or the unconscious—speaks its supposedly universal language” (*PW*, 250). The denial of the reality of subjectivity and individual agency was factually wrong, Seigel held, though politically explicable. Foucault’s aim was liberatory: attributing works to the idiosyncratic subjectivity of one person was, in his view, society’s way of defending itself against fiction’s subversive potential to challenge received ways of thinking. But, Seigel argued, liberating the world from rigid social conventions by imagining it as a place where imagination flows freely without individual imaginers and audiences to receive and judge their imaginings was a “mad” form of utopia, no less so than its bourgeois opposite of fixed, limited, objectively normative meanings. Duchamp’s work, he concluded, remains vital and worth preserving only if one also recognizes its one-sidedness; autonomy and openness, yes, but within limits set by the reality of otherness and the need to communicate. Seigel’s final judgment of Duchamp was also a manifesto about the nature of the only truly viable selfhood as engaged with a world of meanings shareable with others.

#### DEFENDING THE SELF: THE THEORETICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF AUTONOMY

It was his reaction against postmodernist ways of thinking about the self that provoked Seigel’s venture into theorizing it himself. I have written at some length about *The Idea of the Self* elsewhere in this journal,<sup>1</sup> and won’t repeat what I said there. Here, I want to emphasize aspects of his concept of self that stand out more clearly in the context of his overall project.

While a good deal of the interest of the book lies in the rich, often original, sometimes provocative interpretations of individual thinkers, my focus here is on the general picture of the self that Seigel offers and, more particularly, on the historical concerns that determined his angle of vision. His central theoretical claim is that the basis of selfhood in Western culture has been sought primarily along three dimensions: the bodily—that is, our corporeal existence with its needs and urges—the relational, or the connections to and involvements with others that shape our values and collective identities; and the reflective, which enable us to separate ourselves from bodily and social determinants in order to think about and act on them—ordering them, realizing them, and, when desirable and possible, changing them. Theories of the self go wrong by isolating one of the three dimensions and wholly identifying the self with it instead of taking

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerald Izenberg, “The Self in Question: On Jerrold Seigel’s *Idea of the Self*,” *Modern Intellectual History* 2/3 (2005), 387–408.

a multidimensional view. But what lies behind this particular way of framing selfhood as such is Seigel's criticism of post-structuralism for identifying the autonomy of the self with pure reflection. "*Where the self's freedom or autonomy is at issue*" (my italics), Seigel wrote—and this stipulation is crucial for an understanding of his overall project—it is the reflective dimension that is most likely to be defined as essential to selfhood, because only reflectivity seems to guarantee an unconditional kind of liberty by its ability to distance us from all our determinations (*IS*, 10). By Seigel's own analysis, "one-dimensional" views of the self might more appropriately be characterized as dialectically bipolar, because they overvalue either the freedom of reflectivity or the constraints of physical and social existence at the expense of their opposites. In fact Seigel's most trenchant critique of post-structuralism is that it contradictorily overvalues both simultaneously, positing a total determinism from which nonetheless the self can be wholly liberated by the unconditioned freedom of reflection. From this critique Seigel generalizes a formulation that he applies retroactively to past writers and prospectively to all thinking about the self: "Where the self is envisioned either in a way that conceives its most basic or genuine form as generated by reflection alone, or that pictures reflectivity as essentially subjected to one or both of the other dimensions, the self faces the polar possibilities of total autonomy or thoroughgoing constraint" (*IS*, 11). Since each of these possibilities in fact produces its negation, the proper question for the self was how to determine and how to achieve the right balance between freedom and coercion. Seigel's anatomy of the self is in these terms a venture in historical social theory.

His starting point is not the abstract "self" but the specifically modern Western idea of autonomous individuality, the nature and the limits of individual freedom as conceived in the Enlightenment and by its inheritors, the nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie and its intelligentsia. It was bourgeois individualism and its contradictions that he posited as the driving motivation of Marx's social theory and then as the source of the ambivalent rebelliousness of Bohemianism and the *fin de siècle* avant-garde. In *The Idea of the Self*, how they understood and circumscribed autonomy becomes the measure of the canonical and the lesser thinkers Seigel discusses in England, France, and Germany over the three centuries from the mid-seventeenth century to the mid-twentieth. From the outset he was open about the fact that this measure was in part normative: its standard was the previous "modest visions of personal integration and regulated autonomy" which postmodern thinkers from Nietzsche to Derrida had rejected in favor of the illusion of absolute freedom (*IS*, 5). Though Seigel invoked a number of contemporary psychologists, philosophers, and anthropologists in support of his multidimensional version of the self, it is not too much to say that he wrote his history of the self as a historian of modern freedom and as the

sophisticated heir and partisan of an empiricist and rationalist individualism as much as he did as a detached theorist of the three-dimensional self.

Seigel's individualist starting point determined his methodology. It also helps to explain why he structured the book along national lines, examining British, French, and German ideas of selfhood separately, and why he shows a clear preference for the British.

Methodologically, Seigel defends his engagement with individual thinkers. While he considers them in the light of the social and cultural conditions of their formation, they were each unique and creatively responsible for their own formulations. People do internalize and express conventional beliefs and social norms, he points out, but even these are sustained and have force only as individual intentions. And insofar as individual intention alone is what sustains them, it also entails the possibility of going beyond them. At the same time it is also the case that external conditions, social and cultural, cannot only foster or hinder individuality but necessarily also shape its direction and content—necessarily, because external reality furnishes the material on which consciousness reflects.

In Seigel's view, it was Britain, beginning in the seventeenth century, whose sociopolitical structure and institutions most successfully fostered a nascent ideal of individual autonomy along with a belief in its compatibility with sociability and integration. Eighteenth-century writers like Mandeville, Hume, and Smith, though recognizing conflicts within the self, argued that autonomy and sociability were conditions of one another rather than antagonists. The provocative proof case is Mandeville, who unlike Adam Smith a half-century later labeled material self-interest a "vice" while arguing that it was nonetheless the foundation of public good by fostering production, employment, and prosperity. For Smith, the belief that self-interest was the cause of social prosperity was wholly compatible with the belief that sympathy with others was the foundation of morality, since sympathy was the extension of self-love to others. Furthermore, our need for human society issues in a spontaneous impulse to put ourselves in the place of those around us, and out of this impulse there arises the impetus to govern ourselves instead of relying on external authority. British thinkers, then, portrayed society as on the one hand offering significant resources for nurturing autonomous personal development, while on the other relying on self-control to curb the dangers to others that self-interest presented.

This wasn't just British special pleading. A number of eighteenth-century French thinkers also believed that British commerce and government were freer than their own economy and polity. On the other hand, this was precisely the source of a problem for French thinking about self and society. The more authoritarian and hierarchical structure of the French state and society seemed to demand that the reflective component of the self be shielded from oppressive and untrustworthy powers. Even after the Revolution there was a strong tendency

in French thought to theorize autonomy and coercive society as in permanent tension with one another. Many French writers believed either that individuals had to be shaped in a common mold under the aegis of official power if they were not to be a threat to social stability, or conversely that only those who found ways to dismantle the psychic structures that established social and political life built up inside them could achieve autonomous existence.

The German situation produced yet a third variant of autonomy and its relationship with society. German thought did not identify autonomy with the isolated individual as such. Rather, it projected the features of the autonomous personality onto society, and external reality more broadly, so that the individual enjoyed both freedom and solidarity through identification with it. This “homology” between self and universe could take different forms. A more moderate and restrained version conceived the cultivation of the personality, the famous German *Bildung*, as the individual’s unique path to assuming the particular place society had in mind for him. But a more aspirational version of homology allowed the individual to conceive of identifying his person with the boundlessness, the infinite freedom, of the whole. Such identification transcended the particularity of the society’s temporal and spatial existence to the idea of totality and infinity, so that the individual who identified with it enjoyed absolute freedom. What this form of selfhood suggests about the context that shaped it is that the more authoritarian and traditional German sociopolitical structure did not allow the delimited, concrete forms of individual freedom that flourished in Britain and France, even as German thinkers imbibed with their European counterparts the same ideal of autonomy. Paradoxically they could achieve absolute freedom only by subordinating themselves to an all-powerful external reality.

This somewhat brutal summary does not begin to suggest the depth and subtlety of his analyses of the ways individual thinkers treated the self’s three-dimensionality. In the exemplary case of Adam Smith, Seigel shows how Smith’s account of the process of self-formation closely integrated body, relationship, and reflection. The most fundamental passions, Smith argued, are those that arise from our innate bodily needs. Sympathy, which binds us to others, draws its power from an innate desire to have other people’s sentiments correspond with our own. But sympathy is necessarily also reflective, because it depends on our ability to recognize that others are subjects just as we are. The broader summary, however, also points to the economic and political conditions of Smith’s integration of the three dimensions. Though self-interest may produce sympathy it also inevitably conflicts with it. Yet even at its purest, self-interest benefits others through the coordination of the market economy (and the still-necessary regulatory interventions of a consent-based parliamentary government.) Furthermore, self-interested, commercial relations are relations of interdependence, and not,

like a feudal or manorial system, the dependent relationships of lord and servant. Commerce (and its regulation) fosters both individual autonomy and equality.

Seigel does not often foreground these sociopolitical contexts in individual cases but they are at the root of the differences between the three national models of the self. Not simply “background,” economic and social structures shape how the bare idea of autonomy is filled out socially, politically, culturally, and intellectually in each of the models. The models are sufficiently self-contained theoretically in relation to the issue of three-dimensionality to be discussed apart from their contexts; as a result Seigel is able to avoid political reductionism. Nevertheless, the explanatory role of context inevitably links the possibility of his ideally integrated self to a specific kind of society, one that is fundamentally open, tolerant, mobile, economically and politically liberal, and socially egalitarian, and on the way to being more so.

#### FROM TELEOCRACY TO AUTONOMY: BOURGEOIS LIFE, IDENTITY, AND MODERN FREEDOM

Seigel’s next book, *Modernity and Bourgeois Life: Society, Politics, and Culture in England, France, and Germany since 1750* is the least overtly concerned with the idea of self. Yet autonomy is the core of Seigel’s definition of modernity, and his central thesis about how modernity progressed in Western and Central Europe develops a theme adumbrated in his discussion of Adam Smith’s view of self-development. Modernity involves the “passage from a form of life primarily characterized by ordained or teleocratic networks to one in which autonomous ones become increasingly prominent” (*MBL*, 20). The force of the word “ordained” is that in a “teleocracy” values are seen to come from higher authorities and to determine our individual choices and actions. By contrast, in autonomous networks wealth making, politics, and cultural pursuits are ends in themselves, governed only by their intrinsic purposes and instrumental requirements, not by extrinsic moral or religious norms.

Seigel makes an extended case for a theory of modernization based not on the rise of a new class, the bourgeoisie, but on a new way of deriving common goals of human activity that grew out of technologically advanced “networks of means” like roads, railways, and the post developed to facilitate trade, government control, and communication. I’m concerned here, however, not with this thesis but with its bearing on his idea of the self. Most importantly, despite its focus on impersonal networks, these are for Seigel always only instruments of subjective agency; the ultimate source of action is human desire, will, and reason. This is universally true; what *modern* autonomy signifies is the conscious recognition of this fact. And as this self-conscious idea of autonomy spread across Europe

through the nineteenth century, it radically modified every aspect of life, most of all that of the traditional bourgeoisie. It made ambition for personal wealth and upward mobility both plausible and desirable. It promoted demands for ever-wider political representation and participation, and promotion by ability instead of connection; inevitably the logic of autonomy also led to demands for women's equality. At the same time, as a counterweight to its potential for egotism and selfishness, modern autonomy bred a rigid moralism, based now on internal self-control rather than external coercion, which in turn battled with autonomy-inspired demands for freedom of emotional, artistic, and sexual expression. Beyond the book's argument about networks of means, its narrative amounts to filling out what the modern idea, and ideal, of the autonomous self entailed in all its historical concreteness.

Seigel's most recent book, *Between Cultures: Europe and Its Others in Five Exemplary Lives*, extends his critical investigation of the self in two ways. One involves a significant shift in vocabulary emphasis from "self" to "identity." He had written cursorily of identity in *The Idea of the Self* as a term "closely related" to "self," that which gives the self a sense of continuity within ourselves and between what we are for ourselves and for others. In *Between Cultures*, identity in the sense of defining ourselves as something, substantial and positive, as what we *are*, is now central to selfhood and implicitly one of the crucial tasks of reflectivity. At least part of the reason for Seigel's expanded definition and new appreciation of identity lies in the comparative task he set himself, this time not among modernizing cultures within Europe but between European and non-European cultures. The effect, and indeed part of Seigel's purpose, is to relativize, if somewhat ambivalently, the status of the Western bourgeois individualist self as one identity among others, as well as to raise questions about the nature of identity itself.

Three of his five biographies are of Europeans, all of whom were primarily concerned with Arab and Muslim life and belief as the alternative to Christian Europe. This is also the case in reverse with the Muslim Turkish author Orhan Pamuk. For the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, the alternative to Europe is traditional African village life. While the particulars of the Muslim-Christian confrontation are interesting for themselves, a deeper issue concerns the fate of modernization, and deeper still is what the subjects' attempts at intercultural existence reveal about identity, and hence the self.

For Richard Burton, explorer, author, and translator of the *Arabian Nights*, involvement with Arab culture expanded his European-fashioned sense of self to show the arbitrary nature of the moral and intellectual limits that cultures impose on their members, thus making possible a certain degree of escape from one's identity. This was especially true for him personally in the realm of erotic experience, so stifled by European bourgeois morality, and more generally in

the way the *Arabian Nights* opened up the liberating possibilities of fantasy. T. E. Lawrence's experience, on the other hand, seemed to show the opposite. One's original identity was sticky, never completely escapable. Lawrence's vaunted adoption of Arab identity was never wholly authentic or complete, either in his own mind or in those of the Arabs who hailed him for his appreciation of their culture. At some moments, his attempt at intercultural existence made him feel as if he were in a void, going mad without the solidity of any identity at all. At other times, he was fully conscious of the manipulative aspect of his adoption of Arab dress and behavior as an agent of British policy. And in the end he rejected Arabism completely, partly because he associated it with primitive, dirty sexuality, which he could never accept in himself.

For Pamuk, it was the encounter with the West that proved liberating; as Seigel put it, "It was the Eastern and Muslim restriction on both individuality and its representation that made his self-insertion into Western culture a necessity in order for him to become the person he sought to be" (*BC*, 208). But that did not mean abandoning his Turkish culture; in a lecture he spoke of himself as having both an Eastern and a Western self (*BC*, 205). He found, as had Lawrence, that intercultural experience could dissolve the objective reality of identity altogether by revealing its fictional aspect; as a novelist he knew the experience of escaping oneself by creating or identifying with fictional characters. But in the end, he too found total escape from identity an existential impossibility, possible only in art and imagination. Pamuk, Seigel writes, concluded that no country and no culture can ever become wholly other than what it is, however much it may absorb from elsewhere to create a hybrid identity.

This was also Chinua Achebe's conclusion. His characters are caught between traditional African village life and the modern Western individualist ethos. While the latter attracts because its freedom and egalitarianism expose the corruption and authoritarianism of the native milieu, village life offers a set of rules that, however restrictive and "unfair," offer predictability and security. Achebe's fictional characters are undone because they abandon the old without being able to fully embrace the new. Only one such character—and Achebe himself, Seigel suggests—manages to live at the crossroads by being able to remain outside both cultures while inhabiting them at the same time. In doing this, they implicitly realize the role that reflection plays not only in distancing oneself from a culture but also in identifying with it. But it is telling, as Seigel concludes, that the characters at the center of Achebe's work, and that of the two other African authors he discusses, all fail to negotiate the intersection of cultures whereas the writers themselves found a vocation and a voice at the same intersection. As Seigel had already noted with Duchamp, what is possible in art is not possible in life. Only for the talented few can the life of the borderless imagination itself be a socially locatable and viable identity.

In Seigel's comparative studies, the modern Western bourgeois self is historically but not normatively relativized. It does not reign universally, but it is powerfully attractive to many who are born into and greatly cherish opposing identities. As he shows, however, such attraction can be challenging, even dangerous, as much because of the "stickiness" of identity as because of the attractions of an original one. The reflection that plays a role in identifying with a culture is the very instrument of transcending it, but as Seigel's entire corpus argues, transcending or distancing oneself from reality can never be a viable final position. Identity is another inescapable dimension of the self, like corporeality and sociality, and reflection can provide only a qualified freedom in relation to it.

As different as Seigel's approach in *Between Lives* is from his previous work, it nonetheless reasserts the two themes that structure everything that preceded it. *Between Lives* reconfirms his belief in the significance of the modern Western bourgeois self as a model of autonomy by showing its appeal to non-Westerners. At the same time, it underlines his argument for the historicity of that model not only by relativizing it through comparison with traditional Muslim and African village cultures, but more importantly by showing how the continuing appeal of those cultures to both Europeans and native members alike reveals what is missing from, or one-sided about, the Western bourgeois self. The appeal of tradition confirms both the continuing temptation of the Western individualist self to aspire to absolute or infinite freedom and its awareness that the only true autonomy is a limited autonomy. The absolute freedom of reflective detachment or the unstructured imagination leads to emptiness or chaos. Autonomy can realize itself only by recognizing the needs of the body, the presence of others, and the reality of identity, and by acting through, on, and with them.

As conclusive as this verdict might seem, however, it may nonetheless be impossible to draw a final balance sheet summarizing Seigel's ultimate view of the self. It has been evolving since *Marx's Fate*, and even as I write this, he is at work on yet another project that could well add to or perhaps alter the picture of the self he has drawn up to now. In light of how much he has already taught us about the self, we can only await any new work with eagerness and the expectation that we have yet more to learn from him on the subject.