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Forum

Donald J. Herzog
University of Michigan Law School, dherzog@umich.edu

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Forum

On Dror Wahrman's *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven:Yale University Press, 2004).

Winner of the 2004–2005 Louis Gottschalk Prize of the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies.

DON HERZOG, Department of Political Science, *University of Michigan*

Psst: here's my secret wry suspicion. Political theorists are allergic to facts. They feel entitled to firm beliefs—about state-building, modernization, the rise of the bourgeoisie, you name it—because they've read some fancy theory books. So a lot of theory reads like a conceptual shell game, with various intoxicating abstractions shuffled about. I'm enough of a vulgar pragmatist to think that theory isn't what you get when you leave out the facts. So I found Wahrman's *Making of the Modern Self* sheer joy, from start to finish. The bottom line first: this is a must-read across the humanities and humanistic social sciences, not something solely of interest to cultural historians of Britain's long eighteenth century. Wahrman's thesis—that an "*ancien régime* of identity" abruptly collapsed in the face of the American Revolution—is juicy enough to make any political theorist smack her lips. But it's underwritten with a sensational and fascinating array of nitty-gritty facts. (Mischievously, Wahrman sometimes promises, or threatens? the reader that he has plenty more evidence up his sleeve, but confesses, or boasts? that he didn't think the reader patient enough to endure hearing about it.) And Wahrman shuttles between big picture and tiny detail with consummate confidence. He may be a "historian," and I may be a "theorist," but I wish more theorists did what he does. Indeed he presents himself, fairly, as carrying through a project Charles Taylor sketched in his magisterial *Sources of the Self* but didn't even attempt to deliver.

Here I want briefly to catalogue some queries the argument provokes. One: Wahrman looks at the American Revolution as if he's sitting in London. Try reversing the vantage point and suppose you're in Boston. Then you're in just the same quandary Wahrman thinks the Brits were in. How can you describe this conflict? And won't attempts to do so terribly strain existing identity concepts? But then why does Britain's *ancien régime* suddenly collapse, but, as Wahrman concedes, America's apparently motors right along for another generation or so? This suggests the analysis is deeply and doubly contingent. The American Revolution didn't have to happen (Bernard Bailyn used to insist in undergraduate lecture that it was "a tragic accident")—and it didn't have to shatter the *ancien régime*. Wahrman says that the Revolution was the trigger that finally allowed long-smoldering deeper stresses to be made manifest. But more might be said in probing the contingencies on offer—and it might be said less metaphorically. If the *ancien régime* was somehow brittle, just waiting to crumble, was it any more so than any other social formation? Why?

Two: Following rough and ready linguistic convention, Wahrman glosses *identity* as meaning not only the alleged uniqueness that makes you who you are and different from everyone else, but the salient sociological categories that place you in different groups (straight white Evangelical American male, say). He glosses *self* as "characterized by psychological depth, or interiority" (p. xi). But then his book's title looks to be a bit of false advertising. Nothing he says begins to suggest that such depth became newly available as people adopted new views of identity in the aftermath of the Revolution. (For the trenchant suggestion that those poor dim medievals had rich inner lives of their own, see William Ian Miller, "Deep Inner Lives, Individualism, and People of Honour," *History of Political Thought* [1995].) Sure, there are complicated connections between people's concepts, especially their self-understandings, and their actual experiences. For all its Byzantine riches, though, Wahrman's book doesn't tell us how to think about changes in, or the rise of, the self.

Three: Happily, Wahrman doesn't imagine he has to take sides in The Great Bankrupt Competition—I mean that between "social" and "intellectual" history, or between "material" and "ideal" "forces." In his pages, actual people at masquerades and cross-dressed women on stage cheerfully rub shoulders with arguments about race and racism and anxieties about posturing maidservants. But his understandings of self and identity alike remain rather too stubbornly on the "ideal" side of that bankrupt distinction. It would be nice to hear more about how actual social practices changed. Then too, a closely connected point, it would be nice to hear more about how his analysis does and doesn't connect up with more social-structural accounts of self and identity. Take for instance Maine's old riff about the move from status to contract.

Or take for instance the thought that after the Reformation, the view that society is a unified hierarchy comes under fire and is replaced by the view that it's a differentiated collection of institutions, with reasonably sharp jurisdictional boundaries, not unity on religion or morals or politics, the key to maintaining social order. That view is already sketched in Locke's hilariously counterfactual-for-its-day claim that church and commonwealth are "perfectly distinct and infinitely different from each other." (Tell it to Convocation; or the bishops sitting in the House of Lords; or those dutifully administering poor relief on the parish system; or nonjurors, Catholics, and Jews suffering various legal disabilities.) It is later worked up, differently, by the likes of Simmel and Luhmann.

But—here's the crux—this view becomes real social practice, not just an idle theorist's fantasy, not only a cultural representation. Markets, for instance, increasingly become spaces where people just don't care what your religious identity or party affiliation might be: what matters is your cash and credit, the quality and price of the wares you're vending, no more. And then as a matter of fact grounded in the pedestrian rhythms of daily life, not hifalutin or lofalutin theory, your social experience and so your "self" changes: you move from role to role as you move from one institution to another, and you face the notorious challenge of figuring out what if anything unifies the various "costumes" you're now wearing. For nowhere, as Marx will lament, are you "fully human": in no social setting do you exhibit all your facets. No wonder, then, that the self comes to have hidden depths.

It is a singular merit, not a failing, of this wonderfully rich book that it provokes such further questions. I return to my bottom line. Buy it. Read it. Assign it. Nag your friends and colleagues. Buttonhole people on the street. Pass it on.