The Shifting Experience of Self: A Bibliographic Essay

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I can imagine a world—in which persons with highly developed inner worlds became the exception rather than the rule we used to think them to be.

—Evelyn Fox Keller [1]

One of the most remarkable features of contemporary life is the many radical ways in which selfhood is being newly envisioned, represented, and experienced. Wander into the cultural studies section of a bookstore, and you might get the impression that subjectivity, an inner life, and the very capacity for self-knowledge have largely disappeared, if they ever existed at all. This literature projects an image of the self as fragmented and discontinuous assemblages of experiences. Subjectivity—self-experience through time—has been replaced by "subject-positions," social categories and their storylines that are largely externally determined. The "inner" lacks any stable substance and is merely an extension of external roles that are instrumental and performative, endlessly negotiated within a fluid and mediated cultural milieu. Over in the psychology section, you'll find surprisingly similar conclusions, albeit expressed in a scientific idiom. Social psychology, for example, is now heavily influenced by what psychologist John Kihlstrom calls the "automaticity juggernaut." In this view, everyday thought, feeling, and action is in large measure, if not wholly, controlled by reflex-like processes that operate outside conscious awareness or voluntary control.[2] We know very little about what we are doing, why we do it, or how we feel about it. Much the same picture emerges as you move to the shelf on evolutionary psychology and cognitive neuroscience, or over to popular titles on genetics and psychiatry.

The flattening out of subjectivity—the notion that persons do not possess much depth of private interior space—across these fields of study is symptomatic of a larger cultural movement that is animated by both ideas and everyday realities.[3] The most obvious theoretical development involves the many influential efforts to displace the substantial self or psyche at the heart of modern philosophy and modern individualism. Some, for example, drawing on poststructuralist theories of language and representation, have attacked modern subjectivity as an ideological fiction. They argue that personhood is a product of talk. The self is a conceptual repertoire that is elicited and/or produced in conversations and other kinds of social interaction and possesses no essential properties and powers. An early expositor of this position, French philosopher Michel Foucault, once famously wrote, "Man is an invention of recent date" and a figure that quite possibly would "be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."[4] This theoretical exercise, for a time carried out under the rubric of postmodernism, lives on in some parts of the academy, though now often expressed in less radical forms. However, the normative attack on selfhood should not be confused with and allowed to obscure important descriptive studies of the changing locus of subjectivity and its consequences. A flatter, more "exteriorized" or disbursed subjectivity is not just an abstract image from social theory but an experience from everyday life. That experience is also an important reason why the "dispelling of inwardness," to borrow novelist Marilynne Robinson's phrase, has gained such a grip on the human sciences and on our collective imagination.[5]

The Hedgehog Review

The Hedgehog Review: Spring 2011

(Volume 13 | Issue 1)

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The shifting locus of subjectivity, from inside to outside the self, has followed in the wake of a radical intensification and extension of social and technological changes that have been underway for a century. According to the historian Warren Susman, the rise of a consumption-oriented economy in the early twentieth century inaugurated a decisive transformation. The production-oriented economy of the nineteenth century emphasized a solid, consistent "character"—an inner, deeply socialized self—that was moral, honest, and hard-working. But with the rise of a consumer society and bureaucratic organizations, this ethic was increasingly displaced by a new stress on "personality"—a moldable, outer self—that was socially adept, was interesting to be around, and expressed its individuality. [6] A similar distinction is drawn by David Riesman in his classic analysis of the transformation of self from an "inner-directed" to "other-directed" orientation in *The Lonely Crowd*. For Riesman, inner direction resulted from the internalization of a rigid morality of self-control. While adaptive for maintaining social order in the era of industrial expansion, this rugged individualism lost coherence amidst consumerism and in the bureaucratically organized and people-oriented forms of work that took hold in the first half of the twentieth century. This new environment placed a strong premium on a radar-like sensibility oriented to the external expectations of other people and the fleeting needs of the moment. Riesman saw this other-directed sensibility shaping and being shaped by new patterns of childrearing, an emphasis on peer groups, and the "flow of mass communications," which increasingly mediated "relations with the outer world and with oneself" (21–2).

In the contemporary period, changes in subjectivity are also linked to fundamental shifts in the economy, the restructuring of work and family, and the spread of new media and electronic technologies. While certainly not affecting everyone equally, these changes have resulted in a far more fluid and unpredictable social environment, a pervasive consumerist ethic, and an everyday life dominated by representational technologies, from television to computers to cell phones. In this environment of flux and simulation, socialization and subjectivity are largely severed from integrated, role-based social relations and relocated to an outer world of objects, images, and networked others. Notions of a unitary self directed by an inner sense of purpose and a continuous life narrative have eroded, as have the relatively stable boundaries of the self based on distinctions between the inner and the outer, pubic and private, the individual and society.

Many different labels have been offered to capture the new experience of self. Mutable self, protean self, postmodern self, relational self, reflexive self, minimal self, and mediated self are just a few that come to mind from a list that is long and getting longer. None has stuck and been adopted widely, in part because of differences in how new forms of subjectivity are evaluated. For some they represent new possibilities of freedom, for others a breakdown from modernist standards. Yet despite different interpretations, there is considerable overlap in assessments of how the experience of self and consciousness has changed. As contrasted with modern experience, the new subjectivity is characterized as having less interior depth, as more flexible and fragmented, and as located less in the individual or immediate community and more in disbursed networks of relations.

- Riesman, David, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character.* 1950. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969.

- Susman, Warren I. *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Pantheon, 1984.

DEPTHLESS

As Charles Taylor, among many others, has argued, the modern idea of the self is defined by a sense of a deep interior psychological space. [7] Modern people are beings who possess inner depths and inner resources. Think, for instance, of the private and introspective self-work involved in the quintessentially modern activity of keeping a diary. Now, contrast that with the public, performative self-work involved in an activity like keeping up a Facebook page. The latter involves little in the way of inwardness or reflectiveness, and scholars have noted a shift away from "depth" in a wide variety of contexts. In a celebrated 1984 essay, for example, the literary theorist Fredric Jameson argued that theoretical discourses in art, architecture, music, and literary criticism had repudiated "fundamental depth models" of subjectivity, including the "hermeneutic model of the inside and the outside," and the "existential model of authenticity and inauthenticity." In these and other models, "depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces." In the same year, the historian Christopher Lasch described the "minimalist aesthetic" of art and literature that arose in the 1950s and 1960s as a "flight from selfhood," a "turning away from the interior world," and a renouncing of what a novelist Lasch quotes calls the "old myths of 'depth.'" That "flight," Lasch argued, spurred by new economic realities and the fading of a "durable public world," was spreading across American society and giving rise to a "minimal self."

Many scholars have identified the proliferation of new electronic technologies and their saturation of daily life as significant factors in the flattening of subjectivity. Sven Birkerts's classic *The Gutenberg Elegies*, for example, begins with an extended analysis of the "reading self." He argues that the slow reading of serious books is not simply some exercise in broadening the mind or merely a means to the end of acquiring knowledge. Rather, the serious reading process is "an agency of self-making," an effort to "actualize and augment certain inner powers" that express an openness to wisdom and "deepened self-understanding." This "subjective individualism," he argues, is being leveled by the proliferation of electronic communication. Through these technologies, "we have turned from depth," he writes, from subjective self-awareness and imagination, to a shallow and abstract "connectedness." For Birkerts, the negative effects of these new technologies include undermining the so-called "duration experience," fragmenting our sense of time, and reducing our patience for sustained inquiry.

- Birkerts, Sven. *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age.* New York: Faber and Faber, 1994.

- Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." *New Left Review* 146 (July–August 1984): 53–92. Reprinted in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

- Lasch, Christopher. *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*. New York: Norton, 1984.

FLEXIBLE AND FRAGMENTED

Like Riesman in an earlier period, a number of scholars have emphasized changes in economy and work as crucial to undermining the old work ethic and its mode of self-experience through time. For instance, in his study of work in the "new capitalism," *The Corrosion of Character*, sociologist Richard Sennett argues that what was left of the old work ethic, which stressed self-disciplined use of time and delayed gratification, has been rendered obsolete by the practices of the "flexible" corporation. Organizations now prize short-term associations, teamwork, networking, and constant risk-taking. While spurring dynamism in the economy, this new order of ceaseless change also fragments workers' experience of time, erodes those qualities of character that are long-term in nature, like loyalty and commitment, and challenges the ability of people to build or anchor a substantive and sustained sense of self. Far from the old ethic, the new corporate form demands a mobile sensibility—other-directed, superficially cooperative, oriented to the short term, and ready and willing to forget past experience and previous learning as changing circumstances require.

Like Sennett, the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman argues that the radical flexibility and fluidity of globalized economic conditions creates a break with the self-experience of classical modernity and its individualistic, internally meaningful, and rational structure. Bauman too stresses how time has become fragmented as long-term thinking, planning, and acting disappear, along with solid and enduring social structures. Individual lives lose the kinds of sequences that concepts like maturation and career require as those lives become a series of short-term projects and episodes. A "life so fragmented," Bauman argues in one of his several books on these themes, *Liquid Times*, "stimulates 'lateral' rather than 'vertical' orientations" (3). What is demanded now is flexibility, "a readiness to change tactics and style at short notice, to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret—and to pursue opportunities according to their current availability, rather than following one's own established preferences" (4).

A similar flexibility has been noted by scholars of the media and online experience. In *Mediated*, Thomas de Zengotita explores many features of daily life to show how our ubiquitous representational technologies have created a "society of surfaces" that is having unprecedented consequences on self and socialization. Our world, he argues, now comes to us thoroughly mediated, predigested and packaged in images, and addressed to us as an endless flow of flattering, experiential options. Negotiating the flow requires a "certain kind of very flexible self-awareness that depends on habitual reflexivity about emotions and relationships" and is a lot like method acting. Children come earlier and earlier to this elaborate and ironic self-consciousness, which is incompatible with the "stillness of depth" but is quite adaptive for maintaining a life of perpetual motion—"living in the moment," keeping options open, improvising social performances from a tool kit of adaptable postures.

In her well-known ethnographic studies, such as *Life on the Screen*, sociologist Sherry Turkle has found that experience in computer-mediated worlds encourages an experience of the self as fluid and multiple rather than unitary and centered. More strongly, the philosopher Hubert Dreyfus argues, in *On the Internet,* that the life of Net surfing "produces what we would now call a postmodern self—a self that has no defining content or continuity but is open to all possibilities and to constantly taking on new roles" (81). Dreyfus overstates, but the point about online reality is that it permits a type of self-fashioning and experimentation, a "rapid cycling through different identities" in Turkle's words, that is free of the limits normally imposed by face-to-face interaction (179). One can join multiple groups, create multiple aliases, and adopt different persona without any need to reconcile these "identities" in a coherent or consistent unity. For many—not all—this practice of identity-switching undermines the sense of being a single or authentic self.[8]

- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity, 2007.

- Dreyfus, Hubert L. *On the Internet.* New York: Routledge, 2001.

- Sennett, Richard. *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: Norton, 1998.

- Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

- Zengotita, Thomas de. *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2005.

RELATIONALLY NETWORKED

Across these studies and others like them, experiences of depthlessness, flexibility, performative self-consciousness, and sensitivity to fitting in are connected to the idea that self-experience is increasingly located and embedded in networks of relationships. In her study of social criticism and self-help literature, *In Conflict No Longer: Self and Society in Contemporary America*, sociologist Irene Taviss Thomson shows that relationships have become "constitutive of the self." This does not mean that groups or communities as such have become primary. Individuals are not simply a part of relationships; they "have" relationships and so retain a distance from them. Moreover, many of these relationships, as other writers note, are not centered in any local

community but are widely disbursed and maintained through electronic communications—think Facebook again. The idea of a relational self, rather, is that in a highly fluid social environment, individuals develop a unique and flexible configuration of groups and relationships with which they identify and through which they fashion and anchor their sense of self. This experience, according to Thomson, is other-directed—acutely attentive to what is socially appropriate and adapting to each context of interaction—and self-reflexive. Individuals immerse themselves in relationships yet are also ready to disaffiliate from others as they self-consciously negotiate their multiple social worlds. Because more relational, there is less tension with social institutions and feelings of alienation.

- Thomson, Irene Taviss. *In Conflict No Longer: Self and Society in Contemporary America*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.

CONCLUSION

As this brief review suggests, social changes are having an important impact on self-experience. Any such analysis of change is always in danger of over-generalization and of missing alternative outcomes and important forms of resistance. There is no one pattern that applies to everyone. However, certain broad trends do stand out that together suggest not the "death of the subject" or even the "twilight of subjectivity," as in the postmodern formulations, but rather an "exteriorization" of subjectivity.[9] This movement, felt in everyday life, helps to explain the popularity of certain theories in the human sciences. More importantly, as the studies noted here suggest, it has significant implications for all that we conceive as being or taking place "inside"—authenticity, privacy, character, superego or conscience, maturation, self-knowledge, and the like.

ENDNOTES

1. Evelyn Fox Keller, "Whole Bodies, Whole Persons? Cultural Studies, Psychoanalysis, and Biology," *Subjectivity: Ethnographic Investigations*, ed. João Biehl, Byron Good, and Arthur Kleinman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 359.

2. John F. Kihlstrom, "The Automaticity Juggernaut—or, Are We Automatons After All?" *Are We Free? Psychology and Free Will*, ed. John Baer, James C. Kaufman, and Roy F. Baumeister (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 155–80.

3. Psychoanalytically informed scholars have noted not only the powerful tendency within psychiatry to abandon the interpretative, symbolizing self, but a wider cultural movement to reject any picture of humans as having depth and psychological complexity. See Jeffrey Prager's *Presenting the Past: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Misremembering* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), and Jonathan Lear's *Open Minded: Working Out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

4. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966; New York: Vintage, 1994) 387.

5. Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

6. Also see the discussion of this transformation by cultural historian T. J. Jackson Lears in *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (1981; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

7. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

8. Some online participants insist they are a unitary self. See, for example, the ethnographic data in chapter 3 of Dennis D. Waskul, *Self-Games and Body-Play: Personhood in Online Chat and Cybersex* (New York: Lang, 2003).

9. The phrase "twilight of subjectivity" is from Fred R. Dallmayr, *Twilight of Subjectivity: Contributions to a Post-Individualist Theory of Politics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981).

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Essays Related to The Interpersonal Experience of Self-Definition. 1. Interpersonal Communications. Those who have mastered its effective use can change their own experience of the world and the world's experience of them." Two kinds of communication are intrapersonal and interpersonal. For me, I have problems to communicate to some people through interpersonal. Assignment #3: Discursive Bibliographic Essay. You cannot hope to be successful in college without learning how to research effectivelyóand how to apply the research in your writing. Without solid evidence, you will be unable to construct firm foundations for your arguments and they will crumble as a result. Most often, this evidence emanates from your research. But conducting quality research is not enough: you must also develop skills for conveying the evidence cogently and lucidly. To achieve your purpose, you will examine at least four (but no more than eight) sources you consulted for your definition essay. What information did each source contain? What did you learn from it? How valuable was the source in enhancing your understanding of the topic or term? A bibliography is a list, either indicative or comprehensive, of writings used or considered by an author in preparing a particular work. Formats vary, but an entry for a book in a bibliography usually contains the following information about it: author(s). title. Annotated bibliographies give descriptions about how each source is useful to an author in constructing a paper or argument. These descriptions, usually a few sentences long, provide a summary of the source and describe its relevance. Bibliographies differ from library catalogs by including all relevant items rather than all items that are actually in a particular library. However, some national libraries' catalogs also serve as national bibliographies, as they contain almost all their countries' publications.