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## REVIEW

**Eyal Chowers, *The Modern Self in the Labyrinth: Politics and the Entrapment Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). ISBN 0-674-01330-1.**

By the mid-1990s, the intellectual trend marked by François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*, and Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* set the stage for a frenzied production of intellectual reflection in academic circles. This ferment grew from the implicit dual questions: if we are now in a postmodern era, what is the nature of the immediately past epoch, i.e., modernity, and how is it different from this new era. Thus began a flurry of publications about modernity. Some studies looked around the globe to see how modernity contextualized itself in postcolonial contexts, e.g., in Partha Chatterjee's *Our Modernity* and Lisa Rofel's *Other Modernities*. Elsewhere, intellectual concerns worked through the more traditional questions of European (or North American appropriations) of modernity.

Eyal Chowers' *The Modern Self in the Labyrinth* emerges from these 1990s ruminations on the nature of European modernity. He adapts this book from his 1996 award-winning dissertation at McGill University—the Leo Strauss Award from the American Political Science Association for the best dissertation in the field of political philosophy—to undertake a study of some of the great pessimists of modernity: Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and Michel Foucault. He links these three figures and a number of their antecedents within a framework of entrapment. In his coinage, entrapment means “the dehumanizing sameness that springs from the duplication of the social—the menace of homogenized existence in a world conceived of as self-made. Entrapment refers to the predicament wherein social institutions, which are perceived as overpowering and inescapable, sap moderns of their distinct identities.”<sup>1</sup> Entrapment functions as a meta-category that subsumes a broad spectrum of critiques of modernity.

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<sup>1</sup> Eyal Chowers. *The Modern Self in the Labyrinth: Politics and the Entrapment Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004): 2.

Ideology, discourse, the Weberian iron cage, technology and bureaucracies, *habitus*, etc., can all fall under this rubric of entrapment. The social, linguistic, and psychological structures created in and by the modern world have become so encompassing that there is no outside. Even interiority does not proffer an escape from these theorists of pessimism. Earlier, proto-entrapment thinkers still theorized a way outside of these seemingly all-encompassing structures, but by the time of Weber, the possibilities of escape were foreclosed.

Chowers' later claims move beyond this opening definition. For here, Chowers seems to imply that there is some identity prior to and outside of institutions, which merely sap that identity rather than shape it. As he moves through his eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual background for this twentieth-century pessimism, he starts laying a stronger claim for entrapment: it is that which shapes identity by establishing the conditions for modern life. In part, this opening ambiguity arises from his etiology of this peculiarly modern entrapment thinking. He traces its emergence to the rise of individualism at the moment "when individuals were beginning to celebrate their capacity for progressive rational conduct and for general authorship over the world."<sup>2</sup> Chowers traces the propensity of modernity to impose a hyper-order and for humans to undertake a doubleness that undermines individuality through discussions of Kant and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, who present contrary views of reason—uniformly functioning and clear, in the case of the former, and obscure and contingent in the latter. He juxtaposes these figures to establish a framework in which the hyper-rational, e.g., Weber's rationalizing bureaucracies, and the irrational, e.g., Freudian instincts, can play a role in entrapment.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, proto-entrapment thinkers began to see the limits imposed on social life by fragmentation, normalizing social institutions, and the dehumanization of modern economic and political conditions, yet they find the possibility for human action to transcend the strictures of modernity. Chowers traces the two primary paths outlined to overcome these binding social conditions: first, those writers exemplified by Nietzsche who attempt to escape modernity through the cultivation of individual authenticity, and second, those epitomized by Marx who argue for reining in society through purposive collective action. By the time intellectual life moved beyond these two, the self was so ensnared by modernity that escape became impossible.

In Chowers' estimation, the self of entrapment writers is an historical, elastic being shaped through modern institutions. His argument about an entrapped self problematizes liberal political theory's emphasis on individual rights in the formation of a self. The external social world of family, schools, media, and institutions entirely

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<sup>2</sup> Chowers. *Modern Self*, 3.

construct this self and thus undermine the possibility of free will. Yet, despite the overwhelming power of the collectivity of society to shape the individual, the influences of the social do not presage a unified community life, as tradition and culture remain as normative agents in the modern world. There is no true individuality, but also no basis for communal harmony.

The self and the particular entrapment take on a distinct form with each thinker. Weber's entrapment arises from rationalization run amok. The propensity for order takes hold and extends its reach into all facets of life, inhibiting the personality (which Chowers takes to mean a self) from finding meaning in a disenchanted world. The search for meaning, while possibly a concern for some later psychoanalysts, was not in any way central to Freud and his theory of the self. Moving away from the external search for meaning by Weber's individual, Freud turns the self and its formation inward. The Oedipal process culminates in the formation of a superego that is the internalization of external limits on instincts; the social is internalized in this formulation, rendering the family as the agent of entrapment. With Foucault, modern entrapment returns to the external world of discourses and disciplines; the institutions here look more like the Weberian mass bureaucracies and organizational disciplinary practices. For Foucault, language sets the limits of subject-formation; the implicit assumptions of the way that institutions deploy power and organize knowledge shape modern subjectivities.

Chowers points out that some modern entrapment thinkers do not entirely succumb to pessimism. Walter Benjamin holds out messianic hope; Hannah Arendt argues that a revived public sphere offers the potential for a political resolution to entrapment; Jürgen Habermas extends this political response to reach the optimistic conclusion that reason properly deployed for communication, rather than in subordination to the instrumentality of rationalization, can produce a vibrant public sphere in which humans may realize their freedom. But despite these naively optimistic hopes for escape from entrapment, the general tenor of twentieth-century social thought is found in the theorists of pessimism.

But is there a usefulness in categorizing this group of thinkers and, more importantly, the nature of modernity, as a period of entrapment? The dominant categories of analysis of modernity have long involved some type of institutional, linguistic, psychological, or social structure in which humans are intertwined. Whether ideology, discourse, *habitus*, etc., entrapment is an integral part of critiques of modernity. This book simultaneously names this common element (entrapment) and elevates it to the defining characteristic of modernity. Yet, by making it the *sine qua non* of modernity, Chowers implicitly shifts the periodization of modernity. Everything prior to the twentieth century is prologue, since entrapment thought does not reach its fruition until Weber. Conventional wisdom of the highpoint of modernity coinciding

with the long nineteenth century is upended, but we are given no compelling reason for this revision. Why should high modern thought cover the Weber-to-Foucault arc of thought and not Kant through Marx? He defers high modernity to the point where its frameworks were imploding; the fragmentation that had broken up social life so continued the process of atomization that the individual became a multitude of selves. The climax of modernity in the Chowders thesis is at the moment of its collapse.

Beyond the question of periodization, the question of cognitive continuities emerges. The similar thematic concerns in the Weber-to-Foucault arc do not mean the cognitive frameworks are in any way mutually intelligible. Chowders passingly acknowledges the break (146), but primarily approaches the problem not as an epistemic shift but as a difference in degree. In his interpretation, all three thinkers focus on entrapment but each has a distinct sphere to which he applies his analysis of it. But if the grids of intelligibility cannot speak to each other, is this a useful category? Chowders' argument is not merely about entrapment, however; it is predicated on two concepts: entrapment and the self, where we find an even greater break.

Significantly, in the decades between Freud and Foucault there are two broad intellectual developments. The first, I will represent with Lacan's idea that any sense of ego became so fractured that the possibility of a transcendental ego collapsed. The second, for which Lacan could again stand in but is more clearly aligned with other mid-century appropriations of Saussure, is the linguistic turn in philosophy. By the time of Foucault, there is no longer a self but selves, and the subject becomes an entirely discursive construction. Chowders' habit of collapsing the category of self into the quite distinct one of the subject (143, 154) creates some problems and some mistaken sense of continuities between the thinkers.

Implicitly, Chowders smuggles a Cartesian knowing subject into the work of Foucault by collapsing these distinctions. With the notable exception of the famous Trombadori interview,<sup>3</sup> the subject for Foucault is an object of knowledge [*connaissance*] shaped through the interplay of modern institutions, disciplines, and practices. Power and discourses create new forms of subjectivity in the deployment of knowledge. The formation of individual identity, which is at the heart of Chowders' modern selfhood, is of little concern to Foucault's studies of subjectivation, which he traces through modern mental, medical, and penal institutions.<sup>4</sup> Even in those places where he appears to be

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault. "Interview with Michel Foucault," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, Vol.3* (New York: The New Press, 2000): 239-297. At two points here (241 and 247) Foucault talks of engaging in a personal experience of desubjectivation, which is unrelated to the category of the subject as an object of knowledge.

<sup>4</sup> Even his early, more Nietzschean *Tel Quel* writings undermine the transcendental categories of modern humanistic thought. For instance, Foucault predicts that the death of 'man' will soon follow that of God. See Michel Foucault "A Preface to Transgression," trans. by Donald F.

juxtaposing these categories, e.g., the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, he is still looking at “the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject.”<sup>5</sup> This subject is in no way Cartesian but still an object of knowledge constituted through an external gaze. Smuggling interiority into a subject that is an object of knowledge enables Chowder to posit greater continuities with the entirely interior subjectivity of psychoanalysis. Chowder’s Foucauldian crypto-ego legitimates the selection of these three particular thinkers and elides the shifts in epistemic assumptions between the pessimistic humanism of Weber and Freud, on the one hand, and the more pessimistic entrapment thought of Foucault, which posits a completed postmodern dehumanization. The more pessimistic turns of entrapment thought trace the displacement of the category of the “human”: there is no humanity to be sapped or lost. With Foucault, one finds an ancient self or modern subjects, but not a modern self in Chowder’s sense of an individual personality or identity; there is no modern self in a labyrinth, and there is not even the possibility of flight into the interiority of selfhood.

This is a book in which the parts are greater than their sum. Chowder’s understanding of individual authors, Freud in particular, can be quite compelling. But his case for the category of entrapment is much less so. The confining nature of social structures is a standard target of critiques of modernity. Identifying Weber and Foucault as entrapment thinkers is hardly a leap; after all, Weber has provided the most popular moniker for the subordination of modern life to the technological and economic demands of capital – the iron cage – and Foucault’s studies famously depict subjectivities entirely constituted through the language and practices of modern institutions. His reading of Freud through the lens of entrapment and homelessness requires more nuance than the analysis of the other two thinkers and thus provides a more compelling set of concepts. But the category of entrapment will not become an everyday term of political thought nor significantly alter evaluations of modernity. Though an interesting reading of important thinkers, *The Modern Self in the Labyrinth* fails to establish a new paradigm (or periodization) for analyzing the modern world.

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Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault, Vol.2* (New York: The New Press, 1998): 69-87. The transcendental ego or a knowing subject of modern thought is notably absent in the work of Foucault.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure*, tr. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1986): 6.