

## REVIEW

**Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004). ISBN: 0300102518**

Dror Wahrman mentions Michel Foucault only twice in his book, a work that is arguably very Foucaultian in its concerns, subject matter, and methodological approach. The first time Foucault appears is in the Preface where his own words are used for the last of three epigraphs. Wahrman imagines a conversational link between the first and the third of the writers he quotes in order to suggest a possible congruity between George Berkeley's "early eighteenth-century diffidence" and Foucault's "post-modern contrariness" regarding personal identity. Standing between the two, with a great deal of self-assuredness, is G. K. Chesterton, who during the early twentieth-century expressed an absolute inability to imagine "a time or a place before the self."<sup>1</sup> Wahrman's intention here is to propose that if we follow him on his foray into eighteenth-century British culture we will discover it to be a foreign land that is both "strangely remote," yet also "uncannily close" to us. For he tells us that what we will find there is a world of predecessors who in their everyday lives took for granted the kinds of limits, gaps, and contingencies of selfhood and identity that have only recently been revealed to us by way of feminism, post-colonialism, and multiculturalism. And yet, it is also the case that the strangely familiar scene Wahrman reveals as the "*ancien régime* of identity" during the "short eighteenth century" stands in striking contrast to the world we inhabit today. What appears to us as old is revealed as new and what appears to us as new is revealed as old. One powerful effect of Wahrman's book is that we cannot help but recognize both the tremendous power of the intervening period in which the modern self arose and how much we *still remain* undeniably modern in our experience of ourselves and each other.

If Wahrman's arguments hold up, as I believe they generally do, then we are who we are today in large measure due to the radical transformations in the thought and practice of identity that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is perhaps for this reason (combined with the

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1 Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), xvii.

fact that it is difficult for us to fully comprehend this strangely familiar *ancien régime*) that he spends less space documenting how the modern self came to be made (he only arrives at the subject proper in the last of his seven chapters) than describing the *ancien régime* of identity that preceded it. Indeed, Wahrman repeatedly points out that even early nineteenth-century observers looked back at the mid-eighteenth century with “expressions of distance, incomprehension, and disbelief.”<sup>2</sup> We should be grateful for the impressive amount of careful work that he has put into making this period of time more palpable to us. As a history of our present, Wahrman’s book is an outstanding contribution.

The *ancien régime* was a fascinating historical moment in the history of human identity in the West, a singular period of no more than seventy or eighty years nestled in-between the previous Christian God-centered world and the revolutionary emergence of the modern self in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Wahrman clearly states that he is less interested in the staggered beginning of this complex and singular period of time than in its sudden end, a terminal point that brought us to where we are today. Readers who are relatively unfamiliar with the period may be surprised to learn that for a short time an epistemological/cultural space had been opened that allowed for the exposure of the limits of the categories of gender, race, class, and the distinction between humans and other animals. Some of the key “enabling conditions and circumstances” proposed by Wahrman include a newly developed autonomy in relation to the rigid social and psychological ordering of church orthodoxy, the increasing availability of consumer goods and diverse fashions in large anonymous cities where so much had become reducible to representation and “symbolic” value, and the ongoing colonial encounters with non-European peoples and cultures, most importantly in North America. Through a rich multitude of examples Wahrman illustrates how gender, race, class, and the human-animal divide were for years understood *and performed* as mutable non-essential categories that could be transformed by way of such cultural practices as theater, masquerade, fashion, habit, education, and (in the case of racial transformation) relocation to other climes and environments. What brought all of this to a sudden end were increasing moral, social, and political anxieties about identity and its categories – all of which came to a climax in the experience of what perhaps can only be explained as a mass identity crisis in response to the unprecedented turmoil of the American Revolution. Wahrman is careful to suggest that the revolution did not single-handedly play a determining role but rather served as a catalyst for igniting a complex of passions and anxieties that had been developing for quite some time. It was an event that left many

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2 Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, xiv.

in England not knowing who or what the Americans were or who or what they themselves were.

One of Wahrman's most poignant examples of the transition to modern selfhood is the radical transformation that occurred in the ideals of painting expressed in the practice of eighteenth-century portraiture. During the middle of the century the chief concern of the art of portrait painting was less a matter of capturing the individual likenesses and personalities of the sitters and more an attempt at revealing them as general "types" of characters, with a focus on their dress and accessories. What defined the subjects of portraiture were their surface appearances and the social and cultural references indicated by their habits and accoutrements. Indeed the subjects of mid-century portraits often appeared in masquerade – a form of social entertainment that was wildly popular for most of the *ancien régime* until, by the end of the century, it had fallen into great disrepute for its radical identity transgressions. Wahrman illustrates this with a series of portraits from the 1740s made by the painter George Knapton of the members of the Society of Dilettanti, an exclusive London gentlemen's club. The portraits are striking for their odd uniformity and extremely sparing use of distinguishing individual facial features. What sets the portraits apart from one another are the flamboyant costumes worn by the sitters including, in one instance, the sporting of a lady's domino (a hooded cloak and eye mask). The assumption of various personas and characters, including such gender-bending ones, was quite common and very broadly accepted at the time. By stark contrast, a group portrait of the very same Society of Dilettanti painted by Joshua Reynolds only thirty years later presents a composition featuring distinct individual likenesses conveying unique personalities offset from one another within a single frame. All the members are dressed in the typical gentleman's wear of the day. In place of the lady's domino one of the men stands clutching a lady's garter, thereby conveying, as Wahrman puts it "a different message regarding the performance of sexual identity."<sup>3</sup>

Closely related are the transformations that occur in the depiction of children in eighteenth-century painting. Earlier in the century children were painted as though they were "little adults" wearing miniature versions of grownup attire and expressing very little by way of individual character and personality. These kinds of depictions were closely in keeping with the contemporary Lockean idea that each human being was born as a malleable *tabula rasa*, becoming the particular individual they did only by way of an innate capacity for imitation that made use of outward relations to society, culture, and the influences of education and custom. As late eighteenth-century views on pedagogy and human identity began to change, so too did the depiction of children in painting. By this time children were thought to be

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3 Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, 269.

distinct individuals with natural inborn characters and innate personalities waiting to be “discovered.” Paintings of children from the late 1780s onward exhibited an increased focus on their unique individuality and expressive character and often depicted them engaged in play or other childhood activities.

All of Wahrman’s analyses of transformation reveal the power of historical identity practices to radically alter cultural and political ideologies over time. One of the many examples he refers to is the change in popular and critical attitudes towards “breeches parts” in the theater. During the early and middle part of the eighteenth century, when gender was generally thought to be “assumable” (i.e., capable of being imitated, learned, adorned, or otherwise performed) there were a number of female actresses who gained widespread popularity as a result of playing male characters. One such actress was Peg Woffington, who was most famous for her portrayal of the rake Sir Harry Wildair in George Farquhar’s *The Constant Couple*. Using secondary sources with quotations from the 1740s and 1750s, the period of Woffington’s greatest notoriety, Wahrman reports:

Spectators and critics dwelt on this theme: ‘Her charms resistless conquer all,/ Both sexes vanquished lie’; and again, ‘it was a most nice point to decide between the gentlemen and the ladies, whether she was the finest woman, or the prettiest fellow’. One admirer even blamed his passionate love for Woffington – without any self-conscious awkwardness – on her ability to pass so well for a male that she swept women as well as men off their feet. Her cross-dressed heroes were seen as exhortations to patriotic virtue, or as models for emulation for women with ‘manly hearts’. Most revealingly, fans of Woffington’s breeches parts resorted to *nature* to drive home their point: one addressed her as the ‘true judge of Nature’, another marveled at ‘lavish nature, who her gave/ This *double power* to please’ (both sexes), and a third commented on how ‘she has more than most players of either sex, given a loose to nature’ in expressing her ‘great sensibility’. <sup>4</sup>

What was viewed at this time as nature’s triumph would in a matter of decades come to be seen as precisely an *un-natural* abomination from the gradually emerging perspective of what Wahrman refers to as “gender panic.” By the 1770s breeches parts were routinely being condemned as an overstepping of nature’s modesty. To the extent that gender-crossing was indeed successful, it presented a grave moral danger in its capacity to deceive and thereby eliminate natural distinctions. By the turn of the century the very *possibility* of successful gender-crossing would be refused altogether and the practice came to be widely ridiculed. In addition to having this power to transform ideologies over time, Wahrman’s analyses also illustrate how regimes of identity were able to cut across contemporaneous cultural and

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4 Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, 49.

political divides. An example of this is evident in the fact that both abolitionists and anti-abolitionists alike were able to base their opposed arguments on the emerging essentialist notions of race and identity in the last quarter of the century. And while the *Encyclopedia Britannica* consistently maintained an anti-slavery position throughout the entire century, it gradually moved away from its earlier descriptions of race as mutable towards a more essentialist description near the end of the century.

I noted above that Wahrman mentions Foucault twice. The second time is nine pages from the end of his book. There he reveals that Foucault, along with Marcel Mauss and Charles Taylor, is to be counted among the scholars who have helped him “set the terms” for his inquiry.<sup>5</sup> At least twice in the book Wahrman points out that while Charles Taylor<sup>6</sup> has traced a similar story in the philosophical history of ideas he has been very careful not to reduce the cultural transformations he describes to the intellectual currents of the time, a reduction that would thereby give philosophy an undue determinative role (a temptation that Taylor also avoids). Instead, Wahrman views philosophy as one more mode of production developing within the broader context of historical and cultural transformation. This was something that Foucault himself insisted upon whenever he claimed that he was less interested in producing histories of ideas or practices than in discovering the historical conditions for the possibility of their emergence. In this light I think Wahrman is right to claim that “the anthropological insight (with its subsequent echoes in neighboring disciplines, such as philosophy and literary criticism) – that the supposed universality of the individual subject with a well-defined, stable, unique, centered self is in truth a charged, far from natural, recent Western creation”<sup>7</sup> --makes the question of this creation a properly *historical* topic. As a historian, Wahrman is exemplary in the meticulous care with which he illuminates the complex and multifaceted cultural contexts out of which the specifically modern ideas and practices of self arose. His narrative produces a spiral that moves through time across various cultural domains that when viewed together constitute a topographic map of gender, race, class, and the human/animal divide. Through these repetitions he reconstructs a series of historical layers that reveal the *ancien régime* of identity and the sudden emergence of modern selfhood, a revolutionary development that in turn led to the contemporary modern subject that is still with us today.

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5 Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, 312.

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

7 Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self*, xii.