In and Out, Then and Now: The Conscious Self and Its Relation to Society in Pre-modern and Modern Times

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This article explores how the relationship of a single person and society is depicted in the twelfth century and the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries in French and German autobiographical writings. Shifting away from looking at the 'group–single person' relationship, which is so prominent in the debate on medieval individuality, and turning to 'society', the article suggests that this wider scope can offer new ways of identifying parallels and differences between modern and pre-modern concepts of the self. Drawing on sociological theory (Simmel, Luhmann) on conceptualising the self, the article argues that, with respect to self-esteem, self-consciousness and (if at all) 'autonomy' there are more similarities than differences between medieval and modern ways of being 'individual'. Besides the similarities, the fundamental differences can be found in the overall perspectives and the general frameworks against which concepts of the self are developed. On the one hand, people conceptualise themselves as being part of, or rather, exponents of society. On the other hand, they describe themselves as being counterparts of, or

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rather, external to society. Whether this approach helps to yield a different view of how pre-modern autobiographical texts can be read, with side glances to the merchant Lucas Rem and the professor Johan vam Hirtze (both fifteenth century), the study concentrates on Guibert of Nogent, a twelfth-century abbot, and Katharina Schütz-Zell, a sixteenth-century widow of a Protestant priest.

Introduction

That individuality, or rather individualism, and society are closely related is commonplace. The question is, however, in which form and to what extent. The theories of Georg Simmel and Niklas Luhmann are used here to conceptualise and, more importantly, to historicise individualism. In contrast to older approaches prominent in 'Geisteswissenschaften' (badly translated as 'humanities'), which see 'individuality' as a given that needs only to be discovered, and/or as a result of a sometimes century-long intellectual effort, and/or as the effect of cultural phenomena (e.g., Christianity or confession), the sociologist suggests that it is but a *product* of the structures of society. What is more, since our two authors portray the structure of pre-modern and modern society as being essentially different, so is the individualism they produce. In other words, individualism is seen, first of all, as a consequence of societal structures. Since pre-modern society is seen as being different from modern society, concepts of the self are seen as different as well. In this respect, this approach is more specific and more 'radical' than those postulating that individuality, for instance, is shaped by the interaction between a single person and others,[1] by socialisation or other processes.

However, it could be argued that for the historian, and especially for the medievalist, sociological theory should not be overestimated, not least because sociology focuses, first of all, on present-day society. Even if this is the case, it is still worth knowing how an abstract concept such as individualism in present-day society is theorised by this discipline. The above mentioned sociologists, though, do address pre-modern society as well. After all, the overall question for a historian is whether and to what degree the theory allows for a novel and—hopefully—enhanced reading of the sources, which can offer fresh insights.

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[1] One of the most prominent would be Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*.

How, then, are individualism and society theorised by our sociologists?[2] In short, modern society, in this approach, consists of a number of spheres or systems with very specific functions: law, economy, politics, but also family, education and even love are examples of such systems. Thus this is not about institutions, but about units of communication operating according to specific codes (right and wrong in the case of law, power in the case of politics). What is decisive is that these systems allow for the participation of a single person only in the form of roles, rather than as a whole person. One deficiency of modern society—if I may put it that way—is that it has no 'space' in which a single person can place him/herself. This structure of society, the lack of such a 'space', forces the person to reflect on him/herself as an entity outside society. Autobiographies[3] and therapies are two (out of many) ways in which a person can accomplish such a reflection,[4] and claiming originality and 'individuality' turns out to be the semantics that accompany this structure. Modern individuality is, therefore, not seen as a liberation from group ties or a discovery of a 'real', long-buried inner self. There is nothing pathetic about modern individuality, nothing our age can be proud of or should be ashamed by.

In contrast, the dominant structure of pre-modern society is a combination of 'segments' and strata or estates. A segment would be a *familia*, a guild, a monastery or the like. While the hierarchical position of a person is organised according to the strata or estate to which he or she

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[2] The brief outline follows the studies by Niklas Luhmann (for Georg Simmel see below); Luhmann, *Social Systems*, and recently translated; idem., *Theory of Society 1* and idem., *Theory of Society 2*, here esp. Chapter 4. and 5.13. It is a pity that, to my knowledge, Luhmann's main text concerning 'individuality' is only available in German; idem., 'Individuum': 149–258. Less to the point idem., 'The Individuality of the Individual'. See also Bohn, 'Einleitung: Inklusion und Exklusion': 7ff.; Nassehi, 'Exclusion Individuality': 124ff. The approach is broadly discussed in a collective volume that should be out by the end of 2015; Arlinghaus (ed.), 'Forms of Individuality and Literacy in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods'.

[3] Despite Augustine's 'Confessiones' and many medieval texts that followed him one way or the other, not only as a term, but also as a phenomenon, 'autobiography' is a child of the 18th century; see Misch, *Autobiographie*, vol. 4.2: 585f. For autobiography as a genre, see Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Autobiographie* and idem., 'Stand der Autobiographieforschung': 188ff.

[4] For therapy, confession and autobiography as 'generators of biographies' ('Biographiegeneratoren'), see Hahn, 'Partizipative Identitäten': 60f.

belongs, inclusion in society as such is the task of the named ‘segments’, via belonging to a *familia* or a guild, or via being a monk in a monastery or a citizen of a town. These entities provide a person with an identity that goes far beyond what our ID-cards or passports would offer. Seen from the perspective of the single person, these segments offer a place in society that ‘individuality’ can lean and build on. As modern individuality, in this theoretical framework, is not charged with a story of (self-)liberation, neither is pre-modern individuality seen as having a deficiency in this respect, nor does this concept of individuality have a kind of village-style romanticism à la Ferdinand Tönnies’‘Community and Society’ to offer. ‘Exclusion individuality’ in modern and ‘inclusion individuality’ in pre-modern society: these are the terms used by Niklas Luhmann to mark the difference. A hundred years earlier, Georg Simmel had similar ideas, which will be mentioned later in this article.

Sociologists may make their points when it comes to present-day society, but are their assumptions about pre-modern times really what historians would consider adequate? Is medieval and early modern society not already much too complex to be described in the way depicted above? Did the people of the thirteenth or sixteenth centuries not play roles more or less as we do? And did they not change their membership in guilds and their citizenship in towns sometimes even more frequently than people today? Before looking at the conflicts that a Cologne University professor had with the city council as a concrete example, it is worthwhile to highlight that recent historical research on ‘individuality’, inspired by new approaches in cultural history, has already wiped out the concept of ‘autonomous individuality’ and is more open to questions of ‘belonging’. This research is very sensitive to any teleological bias in an argument put forward[5] and able to discuss the topic in a global perspective.[6] How conscious and self-aware ordinary people ‘even’ during the Middle Ages acted within their social context is proven by Gary Shaw,[7] while Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezakhas demonstrated how the changing perception of such media as seals can inform one about how people conceptualised their selves.[8]

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[5] Greyerz (ed.), *Selbstzeugnisse.*

[6] Ulbrich et al. (ed.), *Selbstzeugnisse und Person*. This paper benefitted much from the sensitive interpretations of Early Modern autobiographical texts put forward by Kormann, *Ich, Welt und Gott* and Jancke, *Autobiographie als soziale Praxis*.

[7] Shaw, *Necessary Conjunctions*.

[8] Bedos-Rezak, ‘Signe d’identité’.

with it the basis to elaborate on a self that is built on such a membership. Telling the story of her life as an answer to Rabus's accusations was within the logic of membership and individuality laid out above—and right to the point. Katharina, a widow in her late fifties, with so many important friends already dead, knew perfectly well what she was doing when she used the new medium of her time to tell all of Strasbourg about the controversy, carefully placing the letters exchanged between her and Rabus in a sequence that would be favourable to her.

Katharina's aim, when writing about her life, in essence was not to legitimise what she did or did not do. As the letters from Ulm did not aim to accuse her of any wrongdoings but denounced her as being a papist and a heretic, and that means 'not one of us', she tried to prove the contrary, not by justifying her deeds, but by showing that she was part of the community. However, 'part of the community' is, in our perspective, not precise enough. Sure, Katharina Schütz-Zell asked her fellow-citizens of Strasbourg to judge the matter, thus addressing the city as a single, concrete entity. Sure, it was of great importance for her to be accepted in her immediate social environment. However, Schütz-Zell does not refer to any personal relations within Strasbourg in particular. Instead of any friends or neighbors or any name of a Strasbourg citizen, we find Luther, Judith and Anna.

Although Rabus did not question her citizenship in the Alsacian town, Katharina addresses Strasbourg when publishing the letters. And while she asks her hometown to decide if she is in or out, her argumentation draws on a much broader 'community', a community that is not based on what usually would be considered 'group ties'. The situation appears to be somewhat strange. Nevertheless, Katharina knew perfectly well what she was doing. After all, it would be hard if not impossible for a widow suspected of not adhering to the Protestant faith to live in that town. After all, Strasbourg and its city council are the entity to decide whether Katharina, despite severe accusations by a famous protestant preacher, could be considered a respected member of the city community, and thus of society as such.

Conclusion

More than five centuries lay between Guibert of Nogent and Katharina Schütz-Zell. It was not just a huge time span that seemed to make any connection impossible: a male Catholic abbot here and a Protestant woman there, a monk here, whose autobiographical text centers on conversion and feeds on the dichotomy of mundane and monastic life, and an enraged widow there, whose life story focuses on her work in the Strasbourg parish and relationships with leaders of the Reformation—the list of differences certainly does not end here.

What is more, the way in which they reflected and wrote about themselves is also in many ways quite different: In Guibert's text, his mother and his tutor, as well as education in general, play an important role. His text is full of implicit parallelisations between his life and salvation history ('Heilsgeschichte'), thus making him part of that history. Guibert is not on the defensive. His writing focuses on the perfect way towards a perfect life. Katharina's situation is quite different because due to the attacks on her by Rabus, her position in Strasbourg is in danger. Addressing 'Strasbourg' to judge 'the case', while using the new medium of her time, marks a clear difference from the twelfth-century abbot. In contrast to Guibert, Katharina hardly mentions any close friends or Strasbourg citizens, apart from her deceased husband. And while she explicitly draws on a number of biblical figures, she does not inscribe her life in salvation history as Guibert does.

Autobiographical texts of the early twelfth and fifteenth/sixteenth centuries are, not surprisingly, different from each other; self-descriptions changed in many ways during the long centuries of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period. However, they have something in common: their authors display a high degree of self-confidence and self-esteem, sometimes even stubbornness in expressing their strong opinions in reaction to the mainstream attitudes of their times. Their texts are rich in original stories and they know which media to use to find readers. In these respects they are very modern. They leave no room for 'semi-consciousness', and no 'veil' prevents them from reflection, as Jacob Burckhardt would say.[54]

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[54] To cite the famous passage of Burckhardt's book, published 1869, once again: 'In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness—that which was turned within as that which was turned without—lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossessions, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation—only through some general category.' Burckhardt, *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*: 98.

Nevertheless, compared to most modern autobiographies, these texts differ fundamentally with respect to the basis on which they operate and the general aims and purposes their authors have in mind. Instead of putting a distance between the protagonist of the autobiographical texts and society, they elaborate on a position in society that they feel comfortable with. Instead of working on a unique *result* of their reflections (individuality), they are more interested in telling a unique story about the *way* in which the person achieves a certain 'inclusion individuality'. Instead of claiming originality, they are more interested in surpassing others who have the same position.

Nineteenth-century romanticism about 'community' does not help much when trying to get an idea of how medieval society was structured. However, is it also not helpful to underestimate the differences between the twelfth and the twentieth centuries. The sociological theory on which this paper leans tries to explore the differences between the modern and the pre-modern, not in terms of mentality or the like, but with respect to societal structure. The core notion of Georg Simmel's and Niklas Lumann's suggestion is—and in some points they resemble each other—that modern society is differentiated into 'circles' or 'systems'. These entities have limited expectations of the people who participate in them, and the people, on the other hand, participate in them in limited roles. In contrast, pre-modern society, dominated by 'segments' and estates, provides a space in which to place the self. The example of Johan vam Hirtze, the university professor who became mayor of Cologne, suggests that pre-modern society was based on 'membership' and demanded more or less clearly defined places for the self. The autobiographical text of Lucas Rem, in turn, seems to fulfil this 'programme' by deliberately downplaying the 'nobleman-aspects' of his life, characterising himself and his family as merchants par excellence.

The consequences for conceptualising the self, according to our sociologist, are far reaching. Having no space to lean on, when reflecting about the self in modern times the self is often portrayed as being alien or opposite to society. The claimed 'originality' and 'individuality' of people today goes hand in hand with this view and seems to be making a virtue out of necessity rather than an achievement. Having a space on offer for the self to be placed in, as pre-modern society did, does not, on the other hand, render any self-reflections superfluous. Pre-modern society was complex, and people were often able to make choices, like Johan vam

Hirtze, or wanted to avoid any ambiguity, like Lucas Rem. Sometimes they tried to show off and wanted to be remembered as perfect exponents of an estate or segment, like Guibert of Nogent, sometimes their place in society was questioned by others, like Katharina Schütz-Zell's, and they tried to prove their membership in various ways. With their autobiographical texts—which were often embedded in or combined with other texts—the authors answered these challenges.

Originality, uniqueness, putting the self in opposition to society; in short, spelling out exclusion individuality—as in our times—is not at all a prerequisite for self-consciousness and self-esteem. Placing the self in society, elaborating on 'inclusion individuality' and writing about this 'placing' not only produce fascinating texts, but also present authors with a high degree of self-reflection, consciousness and self-esteem. These reflections, though, are of different kind and format in modern and pre-modern times; they follow different concepts and aim at different goals. While it is true that every self described in an autobiographical text may claim uniqueness, it is also true that the different societal structures in different epochs provide the basic concepts on which these descriptions are built.

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