

The Self as a Political Problem

Work-in-progress workshop

November 13 & 14

Organizers: Lucy Osler & Jan Slaby

Center for Advanced Studies *Human Abilities*

Schönhauser Allee 10/11, Room 4.17

Many philosophers consider talk of ‘the self’ dubious, as the reflexive-pronoun-turned-noun might be taken to stand for a substantive entity that doubles the individual, creating the impression of an inner citadel harboring an elusive essence. Under the spotlight of mediatized publics, sloppy talk can take a hold culturally and produce serious consequences. In part thanks to its grammatical elusiveness, the self comes into being as a shadow entity and moving signifier, a screen on which cultural materials can be projected. As self-interpreting animals, “our self-(mis-)understandings shape who we are” (Taylor 1985). This has always been true, but in today’s ubiquitous social media environments, propelled by immaterial capitalism in which the self increasingly becomes the product, self-defining and self-inflating cultural narratives are omnipresent, tailor-made, precisely targeted, and constantly optimized. We live in a time of frantic and increasingly weaponized “politics of our selves” (Allen 2008).

It is interesting that the operative principle of Western theoretical philosophy since Descartes and Kant, the autonomous subject, has grown a cultural double with more dubious credentials. However much philosophers are inclined to hold onto a pure understanding of constitutive subjectivity, a more credible story is that there has always been an entanglement of the theoretical and the cultural. The guiding fiction of an autonomous subject is intertwined with the governing codes of bourgeois subjectivity, which are formulated and refined as much in the marketplace, the corporate office, or the newsroom as in some purified realm of rational discourse. Both the idealized rational and “transparent” subject and the much-derogated self of the born-to-be-governed (“affectable subjects”, da Silva 2007), bear the marks of societal power relations, with racial and misogynistic undertones much in evidence (Wynter 2001).

In this work-in-progress workshop, we foreground the current political dynamics that run firmly through the sphere of subjectivity. The self as a political problem concerns the potentials and liabilities of contemporary selves to be acting or acted-upon in today’s political arena, and the targeting of the self as a conduit for ideological orientations in an increasingly polarized global present. For instance, right-wing populist movements harness tendencies on part of individuals to safeguard longstanding privilege in face of environmental or social-justice related challenges, fueling anger, hatred and resentment, while drawing on habits of ‘propertied personhood’, including entitlement to goods, service, status and privilege, even – or in particular – where actual possessions or prerogatives are no longer in play (von Redecker 2020). Such a weaponization of subjectivity, often running through the affective dimension that constitutes a person’s sense of self and forms the backbone of identity, has become a mainstay in the repertoire of populist politics. Polarization entrepreneurs of various ilk have perfected the art of nudging status-anxious individuals into defensive postures, drawing on the reactive energies of resentment, indignation and wounded pride. In view of the limitless potential for humiliation and injury, once a person’s self-esteem is seriously violated, the vulnerable, needy, stability-deprived contemporary self presents an opportunity that few populists and ideologues can afford to leave unexploited. Accordingly, contemporary politics has seen the emergence of apparatuses that amplify such sense of injurious infringement on part of the vulnerable and the powerful alike.

In the workshop, we will address this constellation critically from the perspective of non-ideal philosophy of mind, critical emotion theory, and social philosophy. We explore old and new ways to understand situated subjectivity between autonomous agency and power-driven societal mind-shaping, and focus on the ways in which major political fault lines – the climate crisis, migration, inequality, gender – have begun to run squarely through individual orientations and self-relations. The self as a political problem thus includes, but is not limited to, the following topics:

Complex affective orientations: such as entitlement, resentment, wounded pride, status anxiety; problematic affective orientations such as varieties of unfeeling (structural apathy, habits of affluence, surrogacy emotions).

The politics of self-relation: such as self-critique, self-monitoring, or self-care, practices of self-blame, shame, and self-forgiveness, and how these modes of self-relation shape political agency and the (im)possibilities of solidarity and collectivity.

Temporality, futurity, and the political self: such as the foreclosure of future horizons and its effects on agency and motivation; chronic presentism and the erosion of long-term political imagination; nostalgia as political orientation; the promises and perils of hope.

Narratives and scaffolding of selfhood: for instance, narratives about a private and depoliticized self and how they arise, are circulated, and sustained (e.g., through conceptions of the quantified self, personal authenticity, and framings supported by the wellness and therapeutic industries and digitalization)

Antidotes to targeted political manipulations of subjectivity: for instance, emotional abilities and dispositions to take-in and process reality, even if highly unwelcome ('capacity for the real'), to take responsibility for oneself and others in challenging situations, e.g. involving rapid societal change or loss of privilege, and practices of narrative resistance

Instead of fully developed talks or papers, the workshop will consist of less formal presentations of various lengths with much discussion time and opportunities for open exchange. Participants are encouraged to present work-in-progress or give focused inputs on specific themes, for instance select sources, case studies or anecdotal observations that relate to the general picture here outlined. While the main emphasis will be on phenomena and developments in the current expanded political arena (including everyday life and its many spaces, niches, practices and subcultures), methodological considerations and more general conceptual issues are also welcome topics. Ideally, the workshop will collect aspects of a bigger picture and inspire collaboration among participants.

Participants: Gen Eickers, Henrike Kohpeiß, Hannah Lee, Kristina Musholt, Lucy Osler, Ruth Rebecca Tietjen, Imke von Maur, Marie Wuth, Jan Slaby, and more.

Dates: Thursday, Nov. 13, 9.30am-6pm; Friday Nov. 14, 9.30am-ca.4pm

Location: Human Abilities, Schönhauser Allee 10/11, room 4.17

Please register by mail to l.osler@exeter.ac.uk – places are limited!!

Schedule: *see next page*

Workshop Schedule

Thursday, November 13

09.30	Welcome, Short Intro + Self-Introductions of Participants
10.00	Standing in a Hall of Mirrors: AI-Mediated Self-Relation (Lucy Osler)
11.00	<i>Coffee Break</i>
11.30	Subjectivity, Weaponized (Jan Slaby)
12.30	Input (Henrike Kohpeiß) + Discussion
13.00	<i>Lunch Break</i>
14.15	Short Inputs + Discussion/Brainstorm
15.15	<i>Coffee Break</i>
15.45	Affective Politics around Gendered Selves: Transness and Masculinity (Gen Eickers)
16.45	<i>Short break</i>
17.00	Brainstorm Session, Reactions, Recap Day 1
Ca. 18.00	<i>End of Day 1</i>

Friday, November 14

09.30	Communities of the Lonely (Ruth Rebecca Tietjen)
10.30	<i>Coffee Break</i>
11.00	Affective Identity Crisis (Imke von Maur)
12.30	<i>Lunch Break</i>
13.45	Short Inputs + Discussion
14.45	<i>Short Break</i>
15.00	Final Discussion, Reactions & Wrap Up
ca. 15.45	<i>End of the Workshop</i>
ca. 16.15	Debriefing with drinks (in a bar nearby)