

Adapting, defending and transforming ourselves: Conceptualizations of self practices in the social science literature

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Abstract

Self practices – mental and bodily activities through which individuals try to give a shape to their existence – have been a topic of interest in the social science literature for over a century now. These studies bring into focus that such activities play important roles in our relationship to our social environment. But beyond this general insight we still do not have a framework for elucidating what kind of roles/uses have been attributed to self practices by social theorists historically. Through an analysis of the works of 5 major contributors to the literature (Durkheim, Mauss, Simmel, Giddens and Foucault), the article highlights three distinct conceptualizations, which draw attention to the adaptive, defensive and transformative uses of self practices. Adaptive uses allow individuals to adjust their conduct to collective norms; defensive uses serve the maintenance and protection of self-identity despite de-individualizing pressures; and transformative self practices target the development of alternative ways of living. It is further suggested that the framework developed in the article can provide important clues about the different ‘practical’ solutions offered by social theorists to the problems that modern individuals face in constituting themselves as autonomous subjects.

Keywords

asceticism, care of the self, individual autonomy, self practices, subjectivation

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Introduction

In all likelihood, right at this moment, someone is embarking on a new dietary regime. In the meantime, another is engaged in a meditative exercise, while a driver in some big city is trying to control his or her anger in the traffic – and so on. *Mental and bodily activities through which we try to give a shape to ourselves* constitute a fundamental dimension of our lives. I shall call these activities, *self practices*.

Self practices have been a topic of interest in the social science literature for a long time, beginning with the classical works of Durkheim (1957, 1961), Mauss (1973), Elias (1994), Simmel (1971, 1991) and Weber (1992). This interest has continued in the subsequent literature, especially in the context of studies focusing on the challenges that modern individuals encounter in forming and sustaining as well as in changing, their lifestyles and identities (e.g. Archer, 2003, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Sennett, 1977; Taylor, 1991). Moreover, Foucault's later work (1990a, 1990b, 1993, 2005, 2010, 2011) on 'care of the self' has given a further impetus to the studies on self practices and triggered new inquiries as well as debates (e.g. Allen, 2011; Butler, 2005; Davidson, 2011; Han, 2002; McGushin, 2007; McNay, 1994; Oksala, 2011; O'Leary, 2002). To this list, we can also add the research in more specific areas, ranging from modern forms of spirituality (e.g. Wood, 2007) to therapy (e.g. Rose, 1998), and from health promotion (e.g. Petersen, 1996) to body-building (St Martin and Gavey, 1996).

The examples of self practices investigated in these works comprise a myriad of different, though often interlinked, activities: reflexive thought processes through which we contemplate our own actions, ideas and feelings; exercises for developing various skills or forms of self-control, both for mundane purposes (e.g. table manners) and spiritual reasons (e.g. meditative and ascetic exercises); therapeutic drills for coping with pain, fear, anxiety, etc.; techniques of the body and hygiene, and so on. Although those investigations rarely deal with the minute details of such activities, they bring into focus an important fact; namely, that *the way we shape ourselves through self practices is often closely linked to the ways in which we relate to our social environment*.

The problem is that we still lack a framework for elucidating the ways in which this link is conceptualized in the literature. According to the existing studies, what basic roles do self practices play in our relation to our society? My primary aim in this article is to offer a preliminary answer to that question through an analysis of the major contributions to the literature. Focusing particularly on the works of Durkheim, Mauss, Simmel, Giddens and the late Foucault, I will argue that it is possible to discern three distinct, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, conceptualizations.

Let me begin with a general point. All the authors I consider in this article underline that self practices allow individuals to cope with various challenges in their social environment. There are nevertheless important differences in emphasis and focus. First, some contributors, most notably Durkheim (1957, 1961) and Mauss (1973), draw attention to the fact that self practices enable individuals to develop socially required habits and skills. According to this conception, such practices mainly facilitate the integration of individuals into their society, rendering it possible for them to live in harmony with others. I will call this first type 'adaptive'.

A second group of scholars focuses on those cases where self practices enable individuals to maintain their individuality despite de-individualizing social pressures (Simmel, 1971; Sennett, 1977) or to preserve their self-identity in the context of a fragmented risk society (Giddens, 1991; Taylor, 1991). I will refer to this second type as ‘defensive’.

Finally, many contributors to the literature – but most notably Foucault – draw attention to the existence of certain self practices that often stem from a disappointment with the existing forms of subjectivity and social relations, and serve the development of alternative ways of living. Following the widely used terminology in the literature, I will refer to this type as ‘transformative’. As we shall see, recently, the interest in such practices has grown considerably, giving way to divergent views about their social and political implications – so much so that it is possible to identify at least *two contrasting conceptualizations* or ‘sub-types’ here.

So far, these basic conceptualizations have not been considered within a comparative framework. In undertaking such an analysis, my aim is not to ‘surpass’ or ‘synthesize’ these conceptualizations but rather to reveal their interplay and limitations. This is, however, not meant as a mere analytic exercise. The crucial point is that, in developing these conceptualizations, the social theorists considered here have an essentially practical/political problem; namely, to identify *the possibilities that are open to modern individuals for constituting themselves as autonomous subjects*. Indeed, I will argue in the final part of the article that implicit in each conceptualization is a different understanding of ‘autonomy’ and a different solution to that problem. Thus, ultimately, it is in providing a starting point for mapping out these divergent ‘solutions’ that the most significant contribution of this article lies.

Before proceeding further, I need to note that space limitations forbid me to carry out a more comprehensive analysis. First, the wide range of *psychological* uses of self practices is excluded from my discussion (see Baumeister, 1998). Second, I limit my focus to those contributions that most explicitly deal with *self practices in relation to the salient problems of modernity*. Many otherwise important contributions to the ‘sociology of the self’ (Callero, 2003), which address the issue of modernity only tangentially (e.g. Mead, 1934), are excluded from my discussion. Finally, I will not be able to delve into those works that focus on the uses of self practices for the realization of ‘self-interests’. Thus, Archer’s (2003, 2007) analysis of the personal uses of reflexivity, Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1977) work on educational activities undertaken by social actors for accumulating cultural capital, and Goffman’s (1959) study on ‘impression management’ remain beyond the scope of this article.

Adaptive uses of self practices

The most explicit reference to this type in the classical literature can be found in Durkheim’s posthumously published lectures on ‘professional ethics’, where he elaborates on the essential role of self-discipline in the formation of moral subjects:

A way of behaviour, no matter what it be, is set on a steady course only through habit and exercise. If we live amorally for a good part of the day, how can we keep the springs of

morality from going slack in us? . . . [H]ow [else] should we acquire a taste for any disinterestedness, or selflessness or sacrifice? (Durkheim, 1957: 12)

Durkheim (1961) elaborates further on this theme in his lectures on moral education, where he suggests that the route to the formation of moral subjects passes through individuals' accomplishments in self-restraint and discipline: 'Self-mastery is the first condition of all true power, of all liberty worthy of the name. One cannot be master of himself when he has within him forces that . . . cannot be mastered' (Durkheim, 1961: 45).

As the terms like 'liberty' and 'power' in the above passage indicate, the constitution of the individual self as an autonomous moral subject is a key concern for Durkheim. But this 'autonomy' should not be understood as the autonomy of the individual from society but rather as a mastery gained over 'inner' egoistic impulses. Such mastery is a precondition for a moral system in which 'the person [is] so constituted as to feel above him a force . . . to which he yields' (Durkheim, 1961: 34). In fact, Durkheim (1957: 21) often stresses that self-mastery cannot be seen as an exclusively individual accomplishment: 'If a sense of duty is to take strong root in us . . . [t]here must be a group about us to call it to mind all the time'. Thus, he will go on to maintain that '[i]nternal restraint can only be a reflection, an internal expression of external restraint' (Durkheim, 1961: 45).

On the basis of these observations, Durkheim arrives at the main idea underlying his late lectures; namely, that self-disciplinary practices serve an adaptive purpose. Throughout these texts, he repeatedly stresses that, in the absence of such an adaptation, society itself is likely to disintegrate. Conversely, he maintains that the ultimate function of such adaptive practices is to enable the individual to live in harmony with his or her group:

Man . . . is made for life in a determinate, limited environment . . . the sum total of his life activities is aimed at adapting to this milieu or adapting it to his needs . . . To live is to put ourselves in harmony with the physical world surrounding us and with the social world of which we are members . . . Discipline is thus useful, not only in the interests of society . . . but for the welfare of the individual himself. By means of discipline we learn the control of desire without which man could not achieve happiness. (Durkheim, 1961: 48)

In stressing the adaptive use of self practices, Durkheim's work is quite paradigmatic (I shall return to its political implications later). Empirically, however, his exposition is quite thin. He says precious little about by what methods 'moral education' can induce an inclination for self-discipline – except perhaps through verbal instructions. In this respect, Mauss's (1973) more empirically oriented analysis in his pioneering work on 'body techniques' is complementary to Durkheim's (see also Mauss, 2006). Here, he begins by drawing a distinction between rites and techniques; the former refers to collective practices, whereas the latter, while also socially guided and transmitted, implies a practice carried out by the individual self. 'The body', Mauss suggests, 'is man's first and most natural instrument . . . [and] technical object' (1973: 75–7) and, therefore, body techniques can be seen as 'procedures' that men and women 'voluntarily apply to themselves and to their children'.

Mauss provides many examples of such procedures, ranging from swimming methods to drills undertaken by young women to alter their ‘gait’. However, although he focuses exclusively on body techniques, ultimately, like Durkheim, he also views these techniques as inseparable from what might be called the *ethos* of a group. Such techniques are the very basis of a certain way of living and feeling; all these ‘modes of training, imitation and . . . fundamental fashions . . . can be called the “modes of life” . . . the manners, the way’ (Mauss, 1973: 78). Body techniques, in other words, can be seen as essential methods used in the formation of the individual as an ethical subject.

But Mauss’s approach is akin to Durkheim’s also for a second, and more important, reason, as he too views body techniques from a primarily adaptive perspective. Just as Durkheim conceives self practices as instruments of self-restraint and discipline, Mauss (1973: 86) portrays body techniques as a ‘retardation’ mechanism, leading to predictable, civilized social life: ‘education of the vision, education in walking, ascending, descending, running . . . composure’ can all be seen as ‘above all, a retarding mechanism, a mechanism inhibiting disorderly movements’; in effect, they are exercises for building up a ‘resistance to emotional seizure [which] is something fundamental in social and mental life’. For Mauss (*ibid.*: 85), such techniques ‘are assembled by and for social authority’ and ultimately serve the purpose of enabling individuals to develop a socially acceptable mode of existence.

In their broad outlines, Durkheim’s and Mauss’s approaches are echoed in many subsequent studies. Perhaps most notably, Elias’s detailed analysis of ‘manners’ (1994) can also be viewed as a study of adaptive self practices (see especially Buhrmann and Ernst, 2010). The historical texts Elias (1994) analyses do not only describe proper forms of behaviour but they also recommend various techniques for realizing them – including such minutely specific methods as squeezing one’s buttocks to avoid giving out air inadvertently. Elias sees such socially transmitted exercises as gradual steps in the constitution of a self capable of feeling shame and embarrassment in a wide range of contexts. More generally, he views manners as mechanisms of self-control, the refinement of which makes the individual more amenable to social control and, thereby, paves the road for the constitution of a ‘civilized’ social world. Elias, of course, is not the only example; many contemporary scholars recognize that self practices often function as adaptive mechanisms (e.g. Archer, 2007; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Foucault, 1990a: 29).

Defensive uses of self practices

Simmel was probably one of the first sociologists to draw attention to what I will call defensive uses of self practices. His essays (1968, 1971, 1991) on the changing nature of the individual’s relation to himself or herself in modernity are widely discussed. Here, I limit my analysis to ‘Metropolis and Mental Life’, where his specific contribution in this respect comes to the fore most explicitly. Simmel opens this essay by stressing that ‘[t]he deepest problems of modern life flow from *the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence* against the sovereign powers of society’ (1971: 324; emphasis added).

One way to read ‘Metropolis’, therefore, is to treat it as a study on the ‘attempts’ of modern individuals to defend ‘the independence and individuality of their existence’.

More specifically, I shall suggest that 'Metropolis' can be read as an analysis of two distinct self practices developed by modern individuals in response to two interrelated challenges they face in modern urban contexts.

The first of these is devised as a defence mechanism by the individual to guard her or his 'mental life' from the overwhelming stimuli coming from the metropolitan environment. 'The metropolitan type', Simmel (1971: 326) says, 'creates a protective organ for itself', by systematically focusing his or her attention on the most general/formal elements of external stimuli. She or he develops a 'mental habit', which enables her or him to reduce the complexity of the outside world. As such, paraphrasing Simmel (*ibid.*: 329) slightly, we can say that the metropolitan individual *intellectualizes his or her existence*.

The widespread use of this protective mental habit, however, generates a vital dilemma: it gives the individual an unprecedented freedom to live out his her or his individuality, but it also creates a frustratingly indifferent cultural atmosphere in which this individuality tends to be ignored. Thus, this time, in a desperate effort to save his or her individuality from the onslaught of indifference, the modern urbanite engages in the activity of '*making oneself noticeable*'. This does not only entail a growing self-awareness but also gives way to a *self-fashioning* activity whereby 'extremities and peculiarities and individualizations must be *produced* and they must be *over-exaggerated*' (Simmel, 1971: 336–8; emphases added). Although Simmel does not analyse the specific actions through which this self-fashioning is realized, we can sense that these are not merely mental exercises but also involve the way one walks, talks, conducts oneself in daily life, and so on. Later, Sennett (1977: 166–89) will provide a wide range of empirical examples, such as men's keeping the buttons of their coats scrupulously fastened, women's piercing their nipples, marceling their hair and using makeup. Although Sennett's account of 19th-century urban life is considerably different from Simmel's,¹ he too sees it as 'a fundamental truth of modern culture that the pursuit of personal awareness and feeling is a *defence against the experience of social relations*' (Sennett, 1977: 213; emphases added).

Simmel's approach is echoed in a number of subsequent studies. One notable example is Giddens's (1991) work on self-identity, which takes its starting point in an observation quite reminiscent of Simmel's analysis: 'Personal meaninglessness . . . becomes a fundamental psychic problem in circumstances of late modernity' and as a kind of *remedy* to this problem, '[t]he reflexive project of the self generates programmes of actualisation and mastery' (1991: 9). Giddens provides a more up-to-date analysis of the 'tribulations of the self' (*ibid.*: 181–208) in late modernity than Simmel, overviewing a whole range of dilemmas faced by modern individuals. Ultimately, however, like Simmel, he too suggests that individuals often engage in reflexive self practices for defensive purposes; namely, to maintain the unity of their existence in the face of the dilemmas of modern culture:

'Living in the world' . . . of late modernity involves various distinctive tensions and difficulties on the level of the self. We can analyze these most easily by understanding them as dilemmas which, on one level or another, have to be resolved *in order to preserve a coherent narrative of self-identity*. (Giddens, 1991: 188; emphases added)

This point comes to the fore most forcefully in his analysis of contemporary forms of therapy (including self-therapy), which he sees as a paradigm of such projects. Therapy,

he suggests, is not ‘only a means of adjusting dissatisfied individuals to a flawed social environment’, but should rather be ‘understood . . . as a methodology of life planning’ (Giddens, 1991: 180) – that is, as an effort to protect the unity and consistency of an individual’s life. Nevertheless, there is a rather critical tone in Giddens’s conclusion: ‘many . . . therapies are oriented primarily towards control. They interpret the reflexive project of the self in terms of self-determination alone’ (ibid.). Many contemporary forms of therapy, in other words, remain at a purely defensive level, and like most ‘reflexive projects of the self’ in late modernity, they fail to address deep existential and moral problems (ibid.: 8–9, 223).

Although I have used Simmel and Giddens to illustrate my point, they are certainly not the only social theorists who draw attention to the defensive/individualizing uses of self practices. There are many recent studies that approach individualizing tendencies in modern society in an even more critical manner than Giddens, paying particular attention to their connection to new governmental practices (e.g. Petersen, 1996; Rose, 1998). But the most crucial point for our concerns is that neither the individualizing practices described in ‘Metropolis’ nor most reflexive projects and self-therapeutic methods discussed in the subsequent literature can be characterized as attempts to induce a radical change in one’s way of existence and social life. Such practices, therefore, do not usually have a ‘transformative’ nature, which, in contrast, is the trademark of the type I will consider next.

Transformative uses of self practices

Despite all his emphasis on the adaptive uses of self practices, in some rare passages, Durkheim recognizes the possibility that sometimes such practices might also be invented as forms of resistance to existing norms, leading to important social changes. Referring to historical figures like Socrates and Christ, whom he associates with ‘great moral revolutions’, he maintains that ‘[h]ad their feeling of respect for the moral rules characteristic of their day been too lively, they would not have undertaken to alter them’ (Durkheim, 1961: 53).

Weber’s (1992) widely read study on *worldly* asceticism as practised by post-Calvinist Puritan sects can also be mentioned in this context. Elements of this worldly asceticism include the well-known work-ethic, which requires the constitution of a self who can draw pleasure from hard work. It also entails abstinence from worldly pleasures and luxuries, and the cultivation of a taste for simple and humble ways of existence. Finally, like most other ascetic practices, worldly asceticism too presupposes, to use Weber’s (1992: 119–21) terms, a ‘life guided by constant thought’ and ‘constant self-control’ – an ‘alert, intelligent life’. The crucial point is that these self practices cannot simply be characterized as either defensive or adaptive. Weber’s analysis implies that in comparison with the established norms of ethical conduct at the time of the Reformation, ascetic Protestantism entails an invitation to an alternative way of existence.

Beyond these classical texts, allusions to transformative uses of self practices can also be found in several recent studies (e.g. Archer, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Taylor, 1991). Here, however, I will limit my discussion to Foucault’s later work, which involves the most explicit reference to such practices.

Foucault: Practices of the self and subjectivation

In many of his late interviews,² Foucault (1996: 441) announces his interest in a new research project: 'I am interested in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of the self.' More precisely, one of his main concerns in his later works is to explore how 'a human being turns him- or herself into a subject' through the 'work s/he carries out on him/herself' (Foucault, 1982: 208). As such, for him, a self practice is, in effect, a process of *subjectivation*.

This concept can be seen as the crystallization of three basic propositions. First, *subjectivation* implies that neither the self nor the subject is a fixed substance but rather a process. Second, *subjectivation* can be described as a 'form-giving' activity. Foucault (1990a: 13) often describes the practices of ethical self-constitution as *etho-poiesis*; that is, as a process of giving a 'form' or 'character' – an *ethos* – to one's existence. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the concept of *subjectivation* implies that the individual self *participates* in the process of subject-formation *in an active fashion* (Foucault, 1996: 441). In this sense, *subjectivation* can be posited as complementary, if not as an alternative, to the concept of 'subjection' which delineates a condition of 'being subject to' – of being formed as a subject under the exclusive guidance and control of – outside forces (Han, 2002: 159–66; Veyne, 2010).

Indeed, Foucault (1982) acknowledges that in his earlier work he studied the processes of subject-formation mainly as forms of subjection, focusing primarily on the role of scientific discourses and technologies of power in the constitution of subjects in western culture.³ But then he begins to discern that the process of subject-formation is *not exclusively* governed by discursive and institutional practices but almost always requires some 'collaboration' from the self that is being formed as a subject. Thus, Foucault (1990a: 4–7) offers the concept of *subjectivation* to highlight the relation of the self to itself as an *ontologically irreducible* domain of activity (see also Deleuze, 1995; Han, 2002: 154; McGushin, 2007: 30).

This idea is interpreted in divergent ways.⁴ What I should stress here is that ontological irreducibility does not necessarily imply that self practices should be seen as the creations of a transcendental self. Such practices, Foucault (1996: 441) insists, are 'not something invented by the individual himself'; they are 'models that he finds in his culture'. The important point is that the *implementation* of these practices cannot be seen as an automatic process but requires some form of self-activity.

However, the argument that the self is actively involved in the *subjectivation* process has no immediate bearing on the question of whether this process will be utilized for adaptive, defensive, or transformative purposes. The crucial point is that *subjectivation has a history and can take many different forms*. One of Foucault's key aims is to map out such historical mutations.

'Care of the self' as a critical and transformative practice

'Self-mastery', Foucault (1990b: 94) notes, had been a common practice especially in aristocratic circles in ancient Greece for a very long time, but it was valued mainly due to its social functions: it 'implied a close connection between the superiority one

exercised over oneself, the authority one exercised in the context of a household, and the power one exercised in the field of an agonistic society'. In this early mode of subjectivation, therefore, individuals – i.e. mostly free men with high social status – would engage in practices of self-discipline as a prerequisite of their social roles in a highly stratified society.

Due to a series of changes in ancient societies, however, this smooth connection 'between power over the self and power over others' (Foucault, 1990b: 95) would break down.⁵ With the rise of Hellenistic monarchies and the Roman Empire, there emerges, instead, a 'more extensive and complex field of power relations', giving rise to a difficulty in defining 'the relations between what one was, what one could do, and what one was expected to accomplish' (ibid.: 95, 84). Foucault refers to this event as a 'crisis of subjectivation'.

It is in the context of this social transformation in the ancient world that the 'self' would become a *matter of concern* (McGushin, 2007). And it is in light of this concern that there would emerge 'efforts to find in devotion to self' the key to a meaningful existence (Foucault, 1990b: 95). One of the earliest expressions of these efforts can be observed in Socratic/Platonic philosophy, where the practice of 'care of the self' is defined as the only way to give a purpose to one's existence, the only way to live a 'true life' – that is, a *philosophical life* (see also Hadot, 1995). According to Foucault, these efforts signal the emergence of a *new mode of subjectivation* where 'the emphasis is on the forms of relations with the self. . . and on the practices that enable him to transform his own mode of being' (1990a: 30; emphases added).

A detailed analysis of the exercises that make up 'care of the self' is beyond my scope here (see Foucault, 2005; Hadot, 1995). In very broad terms, however, we can identify at least three major categories. The first concerns self-knowledge and knowledge of the world. These exercises are often carried out in the form of a dialogue and involve a systematic questioning of the taken-for-granted ideas one has about the world and oneself – as a method of 'turning to truth'. Second, we can talk about what might perhaps be called spiritual exercises, which target one's desires and anxieties. These often take the form of thought experiments such as looking at oneself and the world from a distance so that one can recognize the pettiness of most everyday life concerns and obsessions; or imagining the worst possible things that can happen to one in life; or meditating about our moment of death and so on. Finally, we can talk about more 'practical' or 'bodily' exercises like controlling one's appetite and pleasures, in relation to activities like eating, sleeping and having sex.

All these exercises target spiritual as well as bodily perfection and, in this sense, they can be described as activities oriented towards the *aesthetization of the self* (Foucault, 1990a: 10–11). Let me, however, immediately note that, according to Foucault (1990b, 2011), with some exceptions, this development cannot be seen as a defensive turn to individualism in the face of frustrating socio-political conditions. He dwells on this point especially in his last two lectures, in light of a particular crisis in Greek politics (Foucault, 2010, 2011), which concerns democracy or, more precisely, political *parrhesia* (i.e. the practice of 'speaking the truth' in a political assembly, despite the risks involved). This is, in effect, a crisis which stems from the increasing predominance of rhetoric in political life, as *parrhesia* becomes a growingly risky, if not a futile, activity.

The philosophical project of care of the self emerges as a response to this development and, therefore, has its origins in ‘a problematization of political activity’ in ancient societies (Foucault, 1990b: 86). Underlying this project is the assumption that, if *parrhesia* failed in the political field, this was because political actors did not have the proper ethical constitution to practise it – and that was because they did not take care of themselves properly. As a remedy to this problem, a philosophical way of life was expected to allow its practitioners to ‘speak the truth’ to others – friends and disciples – and, thereby, reinvigorate *parrhesia* as a social practice.

Practices of ‘care of the self’, then, can be seen as a vivid example of a transformative mode of subjectivation, with two unique characteristics. First, they are not primarily adaptive practices but, on the contrary, they stem from a problematization of the existing forms of power relations and subjectivity in a society. And, second, their ultimate goal is not simply to defend the individual against an overwhelming social complexity but the constitution of new ways of existence.

Self practices and ethico-political projects: A comparative analysis

So far, I have been trying to map out the existing conceptualizations of self practices in the literature. In developing these conceptualizations, however, the social theorists discussed in this article have almost never been motivated by purely theoretical concerns. Rather, what seems to be at the heart of their inquiries is a desire to understand the possibilities that are open to individuals in contemporary societies in constituting themselves as autonomous subjects. In effect, the three types of self practices I have highlighted above can be seen as three distinct ways in which the self can achieve an autonomous existence.

This, however, does not mean that what we have here are simply three different routes towards the same end. Rather, each type presupposes a different conception of the ‘self’ and targets a different kind of ‘autonomy’. In fact, not only do the different types of self practices aim to overcome *different types of obstacles* as a precondition for autonomy, but they do so *in order to* achieve quite different results. These differences can be summarized as follows:

1. Adaptive self practices imply that the self must gain autonomy from nature, in order to accomplish moral deeds required by a collective existence.
2. Defensive self practices imply that the self must gain autonomy from society, in order to maintain his or her individuality and self-identity.
3. Transformative self practices imply that the self must gain autonomy from itself (i.e. from its past dispositions), in order to explore new forms of existence.

I will elaborate on these brief formulations in a moment. But the crucial matter to note at this point is that, in each case, not only the questions of *what* autonomy means and *how* it can be achieved but also *why* one should strive for it are answered in substantially different ways. Not surprisingly, therefore, different uses of self practices tend to resonate with different ethico-political projects, which involve quite distinct propositions about

how we should relate to ourselves and to our society. I will devote the final part of this article to the discussion of 4 such projects (where the 4th one is derived from the criticisms directed to Foucault's conceptualization of transformative self practices).

1. *Use self practices to restrain your egoistic impulses, so that you can live in accordance with the higher values of a collective existence.*

This invitation is voiced most explicitly by Durkheim (1957, 1961). Here, 'autonomy' is understood as mastery over 'natural' egoistic impulses and the main route to its realization passes from the disciplining of such tendencies. It is only then that the individual, while retaining her or his autonomy as a moral subject, can participate in a higher form of collective existence.

Underlying Durkheim's propositions is an unmistakably dualistic conception of the self. Human beings, he argues in one of his latest essays, lead a 'double existence': 'the one purely individual and rooted in our organisms, the other social and nothing but an extension of society' (Durkheim, 1973: 162). Here, he explicitly affirms those historically persistent conceptions of the self which view it as consisting of a 'body' and a 'soul', or a 'natural' and a 'rational' side. As in most such dualistic approaches, in Durkheim too, the self appears as a *locus* of tension – above all, as a being caught up between nature and society – and it is by moving from the natural to the social side that he or she can truly become an autonomous subject.

Durkheim's late lectures on moral education follow from these premises, where he is particularly concerned with the erosion of collective moral norms in modern society. This erosion, he argues, severs the harmony between the self and society, pushing the modern individual in the direction of a relentless egoism, especially in the field of economic activities. Some of Durkheim's concerns are repeated also in the subsequent literature, especially by scholars who point to the negative repercussions of a 'culture of narcissism' (Lasch, 1978; see also Miller, 1996; Sennett, 1977; Pearce, 2001). More generally, in today's world, political ideologies that incorporate elements similar to Durkheim's suggestions continue to have an appeal in religious as well as secular social movements.

The project of achieving autonomy through adaptive self practices, however, has also been a target of strong criticisms. One notable example is Nietzsche's (1989: 84–5) well-known warning in *The Genealogy of Morals* that an individual constantly preoccupied with overcoming his or her natural dispositions is bound to turn into a self in perpetual turmoil (see also Milchman and Rosenberg, 2007). On a slightly different note, for a number of critical social theorists, political ideologies that endorse self-discipline in order to create subjects who can 'yield to collective authority' underscore the 'totalizing' tendencies in modern society, with their well-known dangers (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997; Marcuse, 1964). Finally, it is important to note that while Durkheim views egoistic attitudes as a threat to collective existence, he also often depicts these attitudes themselves as a product of modernity. As such, his arguments as a whole allude to the possibility that individualism might not simply be a symptom of non-adaptation but might indeed be a response – a form of 'defensive adaptation' – to the peculiar conditions of modern society. It is precisely this possibility that is underlined in the project I will consider next.

2. *Use self practices to maintain your individuality and to give a coherent and liveable form to your existence, despite the challenges of a complex and rapidly changing risk society.*

In contrast to the previous suggestion, society here does not appear as a benign reality, promising happiness and harmony to the individual self, but as a potentially overwhelming force. Despite this important difference, however, the second project too assumes a dualistic conception of the self, except that this time the dualism is not between nature and society but between the 'inner' mental life of the individual and, what Simmel characterizes as, 'the sovereign powers of society'. Thus, here, 'autonomy' is understood as relative independence of the self from the social environment and, especially in the context of modern society, it presupposes the ability of the individual to devise 'defensive' strategies against de-individualizing pressures.

As we have seen, Simmel was probably the first sociologist to observe the prototype of this tendency in the self-protective attitudes of modern urbanites. Since Simmel, however, such practices have become highly systematized and institutionalized. In the contemporary context, this is an orientation that is most paradigmatically articulated by modern therapeutic practices analysed by Giddens (1991) and the 'psy' disciplines highlighted by Rose (1998). For the most part, however, this is not a suggestion advocated by a particular social theorist but is implicit in modern teachings transmitted by agencies ranging from government-funded institutions to freelance writers (e.g. of 'self-help' books). In fact, as we have seen, such practices have been widely criticized in the social science literature.

To recapitulate, perhaps the most notable problem with defensive self practices is simply that they are primarily defensive. While, for example, modern therapeutic practices can to some extent help individuals to protect their 'inner' world from external pressures, the question of how, if at all, this inner freedom can be invested in a more positive and meaningful manner under the conditions of modernity remains open. Moreover, ironically enough, the growing popularity (as well as institutionalization) of such therapeutic practices implies that in modern societies maintenance of individuality tends to take the form of a mass phenomenon.

Finally, although the two projects discussed above are, in a sense, almost diametrically opposed to each other, *structurally* there is a striking similarity between them. Namely, both link the autonomy of the self to its independence from forces that are external to it – i.e. nature or society. Both aim, in other words, to adapt or defend the self *to/from something else*. In fact, in a sense, *adaptive self practices* can also be seen as an attempt to *defend* the self against its natural dispositions. Conversely, as Simmel puts it openly, *defensive self practices* can be characterized as '*adaptations made by the personality in its adjustment to the forces that lie outside of it*' (1971: 325; emphasis added). In this sense, it might even be argued that both projects share a common paradoxical ground: both make the autonomy of the self *dependent on its independence* from an external reality. Especially in this respect there is a substantial difference between these two projects and those that build on transformative self practices, which I will consider next.

3. *Treat your life as a work of art; question the historically specific norms of behaviour imposed upon you and experiment with alternative ways of existence.*

Foucault views the ancient ‘arts of existence’, which constitute his main historical example of transformative self practices, as products of a historical era utterly different than ours. Nevertheless, he also hints at the recurrence of similar practices in several important moments in European history, referring, for example, to the Renaissance and Montaigne (Foucault, 1990a: 11; 2005: 251), and to the 19th century and Baudelaire (Foucault, 1984: 42). Moreover, although in these late texts Nietzsche is seldom cited, his notion of ‘giving style to one’s life’ (Nietzsche, 2006: s. 290) constitutes another major source of inspiration for him.⁶

Yet, ultimately, he ‘do[es] not think we have anything to be proud of in our current efforts to reconstitute an ethic of the self’ (Foucault, 2005: 251). Much indicates that his historical research was triggered by his quest for the possibility of reinvigorating practices of care of the self in a modern context. As Davidson (2011) underlines, he views this as a major form of ‘counter-conduct’ that can induce a change in existing power relations in contemporary societies. In this context, the close link that the ancient practices of care of the self establish between the critique of socio-political order and ethical self-transformation is crucial for him because he sees a similar potential in modern culture (Foucault, 1984, 2007; Butler, 2002; McGushin, 2007: 242–59). Foucault describes this project as a ‘critical ontology of ourselves’, which aims to establish ‘an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them’ (1984: 50).⁷

There are several important differences between this project and the previous ones. First of all, although the problematization of the existing social order is often a major motivation for individuals to engage in transformative self practices, such practices do not *primarily* target something ‘external’ to the self. Unlike the previous two approaches, therefore, this one does not assume a dualistic conception of the self. Rather, implicit in Foucault’s later works is a conception that is quite akin to Peirce’s *temporally heterogeneous* self, comprised of three distinct temporalities: a past, a present and a future.⁸ For, at the heart of transformative practices is the idea of a self who confronts, at every moment, the question of whether it will continue acting in accordance with its past dispositions or whether it will attempt to transform itself and experiment with new modes of existence.

This, of course, does not mean that the individual self is an absolutely ‘self-ruling’ entity. As we have seen, neither the past dispositions of the self nor the new practices through which she or he aims to overcome them are purely individual inventions. Nevertheless, there is still something akin to ‘autonomy’ here, which implies one’s ability to give a (new) form to one’s life. More precisely, what is at stake here is the possibility of becoming someone other than what one is now, which Foucault often describes as his major interest in life and work.

Finally, all this implies that the possible outcomes of transformative self practices – both for the self and for his or her social environment – are far more indeterminate and unpredictable than the previous cases. After all, such practices have a primarily experimental nature. Foucault himself poses, but leaves open, the question of ‘[a]t what cost and under what conditions’ (2005: 251) such experiments can lead to the formation of a new ethics and politics of the self in the contemporary world. Moreover, he seems

deliberately to refrain from proposing specific normative principles or ultimate aims for such experiments. This absence has given way to a range of controversies as well as to new propositions in the subsequent literature.

4. *Use self practices in the service of an autonomous existence, but do so in light of normative principles and higher ideals, which take into account the presence of others and your society.*

I derive this suggestion from the works of a range of scholars who are more or less critical of late Foucault. But since these criticisms are voiced from highly divergent perspectives, this is anything but a uniform position. In fact, it might be more pertinent to see it as an extension of the previous one. The only thing that seems to be common to this rather ‘heterogeneous’ position is the emphasis put on the self’s relation to others and politics of the collective. This emphasis, however, should not be construed as a return to a Durkheimian understanding of autonomy. For the question here is not simply the harmony of the individual with her or his society, but rather to what extent self-transformation can proceed without paying heed to issues of social transformation.

To begin with, several critics voice the idea that an individual who engages with care of the self is bound to lose interest in his or her social environment, becoming ‘intrinsically monadic, closed in on itself and shut off from emotional intimacy and communal bonds’ (Elliott, 2001: 100–1; see also McNay, 1994: 153). Such criticisms are countered by scholars (e.g. Cordner, 2008; Longford, 2001; O’Leary, 2002), who refer to various passages from Foucault’s works, where he stresses that most historical practices of care of the self did not exclude the possibility of caring for others. Foucault does indeed emphasize that in the ancient world, care of the self ‘constitute[d] a social practice, giving rise to relationships between individuals, to exchanges and communications, and at times even to institutions’ and, in many contexts, ‘the intensification of the concern for the self [went] hand in hand with a valorization of the other’ (Foucault, 1990b: 45, 149).

However, even if the argument that care of the self is *necessarily* a narcissistic practice is questionable, we have no reason to assume that it *always* goes hand in hand with a ‘valorization of the other’ either. Foucault’s historical examples might allow us to pose the question of the relationship between care of the self and care of others in a more nuanced manner, but they do not bring a closure to it. The bulk of the other criticisms in the subsequent literature revolves around parallel themes.

Thus, for example, Taylor (1991: 68) argues that in the absence of higher, socio-cultural ideals – ‘horizons of significance’ – that might endow meaning to the choices of an individual, the kind of ‘self-making’ espoused by Foucault is bound to yield ‘a flattened world in which there aren’t very meaningful choices because there aren’t any crucial issues’ (see also Habermas, 1987). On a somewhat parallel note, Allen (2011: 52) emphasizes that, even if the transformative self practices Foucault advocates ‘are not wholly individualistic... this does not mean that [he] offers us a fully satisfactory account of the collective dimension of the political’. And Hadot (1995: 207) too criticizes Foucault for exaggerating the significance attributed to the self in ancient practices, suggesting that these also involved the project of going ‘beyond the self’, to think and act ‘in unison with universal reason’. He overlooks this desire to identify with an ‘Other’,

‘propounding a culture of the self which is *too* aesthetic’ (ibid.: 211; see also Seigel, 2005; Taylor, 1989). In a similar vein, some scholars underline that even if care of self might also involve care of others, it cannot have the same moral intensity as a genuinely ‘other-oriented’ ethics (Cordner, 2008; Kögler, 1996).

Implicit in these criticisms, therefore, is a suggestion quite different from Foucault’s. Although these scholars often endorse the search for alternative or ‘authentic’ ways of existence, they also insist that such an endeavour should be carried out under the guidance of certain *normative principles and ideals* – which, above all, take into account the interests of the collective in which the self exists and the others to whom she or he relates.

Finally, however, this position too has not been without its critics. The most pressing question here, of course, concerns the source and justification of such normative principles or ideals. But there is also an important sociological criticism, which is voiced especially against the claim that a genuine morality can only be ‘other-oriented’. In response to this claim, several scholars emphasize that the ‘other’ is not an ahistorical given which can unproblematically constitute a foundation for moral norms (Butler, 2005; Connolly, 1993; Levy, 2004). Butler (2005: 23–6), for example, underlines that which types of subject can be deemed as an ‘other’ deserving morally responsible treatment often depends on the acceptable/‘authorized’ forms of subjectivity in a given society. As such, whether we are able to conceive forms of subjectivity *other* than those dictated by social norms is likely to have a direct bearing on how we conceive the ‘other’ (and what we include in this category). Thus, one might insist, the objection raised against the pursuit of critical self-transformation by the defenders of ‘other-oriented’ ethics does not stand on a very solid ground.

Conclusion: Notes for future consideration

It must by now be clear that the suggestions discussed above cannot be reduced to a single denominator. Not only do they conceptualize the self differently but they also propose quite divergent and partially conflicting answers to the question of how modern men and women should relate to themselves and to their society. As such, they can be seen as the constitutive elements of a specific political field revolving around the self.

That such a political field has long been in the making in contemporary societies is underlined by many scholars. Melucci (1989), for example, has observed that in a range of new social movements, demands for meaningful forms of existence play a central role. Giddens (1991) too predicts that ‘life politics’ – i.e. a politics concerned with ‘processes of self-actualisation’ – will gain growingly more importance in modern societies. On a somewhat similar note, in one of his late texts, Foucault (1993: 222–3) suggests that changing the historically specific ‘technologies’ and practices through which we constitute ourselves might be ‘one of the main political problems’ of our time – an endeavour that he describes as ‘the politics of ourselves’. And, one way to understand what is at stake in this ‘politics’ is to pay closer attention to the tensions between the plurality of orientations in the contemporary world regarding self practices.

In light of my analysis in this article, I shall argue that the most important ‘fault line’ in this political field can be drawn between ethico-political projects endorsing

transformative self practices and those that opt for the other two – adaptive and defensive – types. I have already noted some of the most salient conceptual differences underlying this fault line. From a practical viewpoint, however, perhaps the most significant difference between them concerns the way in which these projects view modern society. Put simply, whereas ethico-political projects that endorse adaptive or defensive self practices often focus on the negative aspects of modernity, those that advocate transformative self practices see a more positive potential here – a point that has been implicit in my discussion so far.

Thus, for example, Durkheim offers adaptive self practices as a remedy for the worst effects of what he sees as a rather dangerous tendency in modern society; namely, the disappearance of collective moral codes. Conversely, as both Simmel and Giddens underline, defensive self practices often develop as a remedy for yet another negative development; namely, the growing predominance of formal, instrumental codes of behaviour, which tend to flatten all individual uniqueness.

Especially in his late writings on the Enlightenment, Foucault (1984, 2007) interprets these developments from a different angle. It might be true that in modern society traditional moral codes lose their authority and new instrumental codes fail to offer meaningful alternatives to modern individuals. But precisely because of this, it now becomes possible – if not, indeed, necessary – for modern individuals to explore new forms of existence. In fact, Foucault (1984: 42) sometimes formulates this possibility as a task: '[t]o be modern . . . is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration'.

Now, this means that ethico-political projects that endorse transformative self practices aim to tap into the most unique and positive aspects of modern society, in the sense that they opt for what modernity *makes possible*, rather than trying to provide a remedy for what it lacks or fails to fulfil. The suggestion then is close to hand that political projects that aim for critical self-transformation are likely to generate more heat in the coming years, as the controversies surrounding Foucault's later work already seem to attest.

All this, however, does not mean that ethico-political orientations that endorse transformative self practices will eventually supersede the others. One reason for this is that, although transformative self practices are more 'future-oriented' than the others, this future remains a rather open and risky one. It is therefore highly questionable that everyone living in modern societies will be willing to take such risks or be interested in experimenting with new forms of existence. Thus, to the extent that adaptive and defensive self practices, whatever limitations and dilemmas they might involve, offer relatively less risky and, in a sense, more 'straightforward' alternatives, they are not likely to lose their appeal. Much, therefore, indicates that ethico-political orientations that endorse different self practices will continue to *coexist* in the modern world and this will, in all likelihood, be a rather tense coexistence.

It is, in other words, quite likely that in the decades to come, a significant range of social and political movements will demand from their participants an adherence to primarily to one of the three types of self practices I have identified in this article. One potential contribution of the 'typology' I offer in this article for future research, therefore, lies in providing a scheme for analysing different socio-political movements in terms of what kind of self practices – and, thereby, visions of selfhood and autonomy – they affirm.

But, finally, it seems to me that the analysis I have undertaken in this article is not exclusively of interest to social researchers. For the question of whether they should

adapt, defend, or transform themselves is likely to confront most – if not, indeed, all – individuals in contemporary societies at some point in their lives.

Notes

1. The kind of self-fashioning described by Simmel would probably best apply to the figure of the *flâneur* (see Tester, 1994). For Sennett, however, most urbanites of the late 19th century were not particularly interested in being remarkable.
2. Although Foucault's earlier work is well known in the social science literature (Power, 2011), so far, his later research and its subsequent critique have received relatively less attention. See, for example: Davidson (2011); Huijter (1999); McGushin (2007); O'Leary (2002).
3. As Deleuze (1995: 100) interprets it, in his earlier work, therefore, Foucault seems to set up a circular trap for himself, by envisioning a power–knowledge apparatus that creates the very subjects it feeds on – leaving little room for resistance. Thus, towards the end of this period, 'what Foucault felt more and more . . . was that he was getting locked in power relations. And it was all very well to invoke points of resistance as "counterparts" of foci of power, but where was such resistance to come from?' For an extended analysis of this shift in Foucault's orientation, see Davidson (2011).
4. It is sometimes interpreted as a reference to a 'prior' (Archer, 2000: 33) or 'sovereign' self (McNay, 1994: 149). Others strongly oppose such interpretations (e.g. Colebrook, 1998; Gordon, 1999; O'Leary, 2002). See also the debate between Han (2002) and Gutting (2003).
5. For a detailed account of these changes in the political field and matrimonial relations, see Foucault (1990b: 71–95).
6. See, especially, Milchman and Rosenberg (2007) and Nehamas (1985).
7. Allen (2011: 44) has suggested the term 'critical self-transformation' for this attitude (see also Butler, 2002, 2005; Longford, 2001).
8. For detailed discussions of Peirce's theory of the self, see Archer (2003) and Colapietro (1989).

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