The Problem of Personhood: How Ingrained Enlightenment Concepts of the Self and Property Disarm Collective Social Transformation in America

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Post-Revolutionary America promised not just a transformation in government but a transformation that extended to the depths of the very character of American society itself. Thomas Paine exclaimed in 1782, “We are now really another people.” Benjamin Rush, public intellectual of the time and signatory to the Declaration of Independence, declared, “Every man in a republic is public property.” This ethos of the self enjoined that citizens put the public good before private interests. Concurrently and conversely, the Enlightenment project was defining the self in possessive individualist terms. One owned one’s self and talents, owing nothing to society for them, reaping the benefits by selling oneself freely on market. These dual concepts of the self informed such Republican debates as to whether the accumulation of wealth was consistent with, even definitive, of freedom, or antagonistic to it. The debate hinged on how the self was conceived—as embedded in social relationships such that we had to recognize how our behaviors impacted others, or, as we see, say, in Adam Smith’s work, understood as fanatically autonomous.

These incompatible notions of the self, I argue, informed American Post-Revolutionary thought and evolved through the nineteenth century tending to eschew the understanding of personhood as embedded in social relationships such that individual behaviors are understood as impacting the well-being of others. The latter possessive individualist concept, which I argue functions as an unquestioned rhetorical structure underlying American thought, defines the self apart from social relationships. I argue that the writings of figures like Henry David Thoreau and Smith, among many others, are rooted in and premised on a concept of the self that is already alienated and already a product of capitalist economy, rooted in the commodity structure.

Certainly this tendency is countervailed by the slave narrative, by feminist writers such as Sarah Margaret Fuller, and others, who define the self in collective terms and theorize a more complex understanding of the self as product of society and as embedded in social relationships, such that cultivating individualism requires collective transformation of social relationships along racial, gender, and class lines.

This essay explores these contradictory concepts of the self and how they have functioned implicitly in American thought to this day. The individual mandate that was central to the Affordable Care Act, recognized individuals as responsible to others for their own behaviors. Those who challenge Black Lives Matter with All Lives Matter aren’t counter-posing two different collectives, but rather challenging collective Black identity with a possessive individualist one. This essay explores these underlying rhetorical structures and how the dominance of an unquestioned possessive individualist conception of the self has often been an obstacle to social transformation.