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– Section 4: Reviews –

Book Reviews

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# Book Reviews

L. Delaini

*Review of Sluhovsky, Becoming a New Self: Practices of Belief in Early Modern Catholicism, University of Chicago Press 2017.*



**1** MOSHE SLUHOVSKY, *Becoming a New Self: Practices of Belief in Early Modern Catholicism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017, xi+ 215 pp. ISBN 9780226472850, \$ 45,00.

Moshe Sluhovsky's work is a direct response to Michel Foucault's seminal studies on confession and "technologies of the self", tracking the emergence of modern subjectivity. The book aims to reclaim a role for Catholic tradition in the formation of Modernity, thus countering the myth of a Protestant origin, which is extremely common in the literature on this topic. Moreover, this book also counters the view of Catholic contributions as solely oppressive, exemplified by Foucault's *reductio ad confessionem*. Foucault, in fact, stated that confession in particular developed to tie the construction of subjects to a dialogic and hierarchical device of self-narration. The confessional exchange thus became constant, and ultimately internalized. This way, the interaction with another person led to the gradual renunciation to one's autonomy, rather than to the unveiling and discovery of one's truth. In this way, the confessional device constitutes a subject structured as dependent and self-surveilling, which for Foucault is the essence of modern subjectivity. Sluhovsky's book analyzes

early modern practices of self-formation deriving from the religious realm, expanding beyond confession, and adding nuance and depth to Foucault's reconstructions.

Sluhovsky highlights the diversification of practices similar and complimentary to confession that emerged or were re-elaborated in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially as a derivation of Ignatius of Loyola's instructions. Sluhovsky's analysis and historical reconstruction, which is drawn from substantive archival research, points to various aspects that contradict or correct Foucault's condemning judgment. In particular, the author highlights, first, how the practices completing and surrounding oral confession (examination of consciousness, spiritual exercises, general written confession) required an active participation of the practitioner. Participation in turn demanded a degree of control and assertiveness denied by Foucault's rendition of Early Modern subjectivity. Second, these practices were, in Sluhovsky's rendition, highly democratizing, expanding beyond the clergy to include the laity; as such, they were often opposed by pre- and post-Trent institutions. Third, the element of contemplation and the relationship between the individual and the divine was just as important as that between the devout and the confessor or spiritual guide.

These fundamental aspects of early modern devotional practices emerge from the analysis of a vast and varied body of work, which spans from late Medieval to 17<sup>th</sup> century documents, and several genres (books of hours, manuals for confessors, chronicles of saints...). Sluhovsky thus connects Foucault's writing on medieval monastic experiences to his reflections on early modern discontinuities, which has been, until now, a missing link in the literature. Moreover, the author shows how, rather than resulting solely in the internalization of surveillance typical of post-*age classique* power structures, these techniques are also part of the genealogy of the responsible individual representative of the Enlightenment.

This reconstruction shifts Foucault's reading by tracing the changes to medieval practices in early modernity, and by interpreting their importance. Sluhovsky does this by adding elements to the story. Sometimes these are deeply significant details, for example the insistence on the devout's development of a relationship with God through emotional and physical labor; or the difficulties, emerging from the subtexts of devotional manuals, in conveying methods for worship through printed sources, while refraining from making the laity too

autonomous. At other times, Sluhovsky urges our attention towards historical factors that have been entirely overlooked, like the importance of non-clergy and often non-male spiritual guides, or the practice of general confession. The author analyzes this technique, described and prescribed by Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*, which was hugely popular (not to mention hotly debated) between 1500 and 1600. General confession is distinguished, and relevantly so, from the oral confession studied by Foucault, in that it was written, explicitly narrative, and highly dependent on the individual's initiative over more marginal (yet still necessary) guidance.

However, while fascinating and well written, this work leaves points not entirely clear to the reader. For example, the difference between the active self-subjugation at the core of these subjects' formation, and, on the other hand, the "joint agency" one gains through the spiritual exercises remains murky. In fact, the discovery of a God "already present and active within the self" requires a kind of self-mastery. This masterful devotion could constitute a mediation between the two poles described by Foucault: Hellenistic practices of self-care, vis-a-vis the formation of religiously subjugated individuals. What separates this self-mastery from mere obedience is the oscillation, shown by Sluhovsky in his corpus, between supervised and autonomous work of narration, construction, and maintenance of the self. The author's care for historical accuracy fruitfully blurs and adds depth to the picture drawn by Foucault's sharp lines. This study thus adds nuance; however, the oscillation it registers is not part of an individuated procedure: it is highlighted, but not fully explained. This prevents Sluhovsky's contribution from reclaiming a more systematic revision not only of the role of Catholicism in the path towards modernity, but also of the concept of modernity itself, in light of its Catholic origins.

While this hesitation is dictated by prudent and meticulous close reading, with careful accounting for historical context, it is also a consequence of JM's methodology. The choice of corpus is rich and significant, but it focuses on manuals for spiritual direction and practices. If extended to other texts documenting devotional practices of the time and before, like for example confraternal statutes and chronicles, this analysis would reveal the deep roots of Loyola's initiatives. The many references to Savonarola present in the book are apt: however, charismatic Dominicans were not the only ones who understood, spread and coordinated the laity along devotional paths in urban contexts. Fri-

ars all over Italy and Europe were animating confraternities working across gender, class and even nationality, with very different scopes ranging from civic to spiritual ones, often intertwining them. Sluhovsky recognizes the existence of confraternities in their discursive constructions, but does not delve into them in any detail. This is understandable for many reasons –from the scarcity of literature on these institutions, to the difficulty in recuperating relevant material. Nonetheless, it would be important to establish Loyola’s mostly individual-oriented effort as preceded by these more communal ones, because many of the activities suggested, along with the people practicing them, would pertain to both experiences.

Moreover, in his studies of Hellenistic practices, Foucault describes multiple techniques of self-shaping that are similar to those proposed by Sluhovsky’s analysis. While the comparison with Foucault’s reading of confession is sharp and attentive, these other techniques (journaling, examination of consciousness, etc) fall away. If they had been more systematically outlined, the relationship between Hellenistic and Catholic practices would offer poignant interpretative solutions to the reader and a fitting completion to the confessional enterprise. Hellenistic journaling and general confession, for instance, present important common traits (the individual and self-narrative character), but they also differ in key aspects (the breadth and frequency of the practice; the ultimate scope). By continuing his work with a more complete analysis of Early Modern self-shaping devices, Sluhovsky would facilitate greatly the conversation with and about Foucauldian theories on this topic. The publication, in 2018, of *Les Aveux de la Chair*, the posthumous 4<sup>th</sup> volume of *The History of Sexuality*, clarified Foucault’s interest in, and verdict on, Catholic practices. While his works from the ‘80s seem to reject these last ones and turn to ancient Greece, and especially Rome, as virtuous examples, *Les Aveux de la Chair* requires that this impression be re-evaluated. Early Christian practices are here treated in detail and often shown in their liberating, sometimes subversive value. Monasticism then, rather than Christianity itself, is individuated as generative of disciplinary societies, invalidating previous techniques of “care”, and shaping, of the self. However, the monastic experience is deeply transformed in the centuries leading to the *Age Classique*: Sluhovsky’s book shows a central way in which monastic techniques and practices were recuperated and modified. By connecting them with their early Christian and Hellenistic predecessors, the

scholarly community could start mapping the evolution of Western techniques of self-shaping with more precision than Foucault's illuminating, but necessarily limited, outlines. In doing so, as Sluhovsky's book already shows, it would be possible to understand the hidden dynamics and potentials of apparently oppressive systemic devices. But it would also be possible to recognize how the necessities of distinct religious communities translated into differentiated evolutions of Western thought, power production, and subjectivities.

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