

The Soul's Economy: Market and Selfhood in American Thought, 1820–1920. *By Jeffrey Sklansky*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiii + 313 pp. Index, notes. Cloth, \$45.00; paper, \$19.95. ISBN: cloth 0-807-82725-8; paper 0-807-85398-4.

Reviewed by Mark Pittenger

Jeffrey Sklansky has written an ambitious, tightly argued, sometimes dense, but finally rich and rewarding book about how social scientists and other intellectuals rethought the nature of selfhood and the self's relation to society during the hundred-year rise and consolidation of industrial capitalism. Sklansky's willingness to think big, to address many thinkers across an impressive chronological sweep in only two hundred and thirty-two pages of text, is amply grounded by a firm command of the several scholarly literatures—on the histories of selfhood, economic thought, social science, business, labor, culture, and intellectual life—at whose intersection he works. Historians specializing in all these areas will find value in Sklansky's book, but his cast of characters is an especially familiar one to intellectual historians, as it runs the canonical gamut from Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Bushnell, and George Fitzhugh in the early and mid-nineteenth centuries through William James, John Dewey, and Charles Horton Cooley in the Progressive Era. The book's originality lies in the author's rereading of these familiar figures as contributors to a discourse on self, economy, and society that saw the eclipse of the Revolutionary Era classical political economy's autonomous self and the emergence, by the turn of the twentieth century, of Cooley's "looking-glass" or "social self" (p. 205).

At the heart of Sklansky's argument is his assertion—made from a position on the political left—that twentieth-century notions of interdependence and social selfhood, which were developed to address the declining possibility of propertied autonomy, were "something less than an unambiguous advance" for social theory (p. 4). In a series of cases beginning with Emerson, we see how observers of emergent industrial capitalism criticized the British tradition of political economy for its alleged amorality and soullessness, and articulated more social and cooperative approaches to the formation of identity and to individuals' relation to society. The end point of this trajectory was "an

alternative social science in which propertied independence yielded to psychic interdependence as the foundation of social order” (p. 77). In a pivotal chapter addressing the post–Civil War greenback movement, the reformer Henry George, and the champion of capital, William Graham Sumner, we see how the focus of critical economic thought—whether radical or conservative—shifted from the realm of production, property relations, and rights to the realm of exchange, consumption, and the cultivation and channeling of desires and instincts. Yet none of these critics challenged the fundamental reorganization of the economy away from the “commercial republic of yeoman farmers and shopkeepers” (p. 5) that had been the basis of Revolutionary Era theories of self-mastery and citizenship. Emerson set the tone: labor was valuable for psychological, not material, reasons, and if things were increasingly in the saddle in his New England, “the answer lay in the self, and not in the social order” (p. 45). In so dismissing classical political economy, American thinkers in this tradition also abandoned its resources for recognizing and theorizing class conflict. By the book’s end, Cooley essentially echoes Emerson: the solution to class conflict was “to socialize the psyche rather than property” (p. 221). Meanwhile, Sklansky points out, the ownership of property grew ever more concentrated, the class divide grew ever deeper, and the wage system, unchallenged by these mainstream social critics, exacerbated those conditions under the new ideological cover of the “social self,” whose desires and instincts were both shaped and satisfied in the marketplace.

Every reader with an interest in social thought or in these particular intellectuals will both learn from this book and take issue with parts of it; a review of this length cannot practically address every aspect of so complex a work. I found the book to be carefully researched and, for the most part, compellingly argued. Sklansky is especially effective at confronting the reader with pairings of seemingly disparate thinkers (Emerson and Bushnell, George and Sumner) in order to illuminate their underlying similarities. He also puts to good use his immersion in primary sources to show both tensions and unexpected connections between the earlier and later works of individual thinkers, such as Margaret Fuller and Sumner. On the other hand, the book is sometimes repetitive: the basic argument about the critique of political economy and the shift to social selfhood is presented in every chapter, as if the author was worried that we might

forget it. It also seems curious that we do not hear more about Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and other female social scientists whose distinctively gendered perspectives on self and community would seem relevant, or about diehard guardians of the old Revolutionary Era tradition of autonomous selfhood, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Why, I also wondered, does the book end when it does, with Cooley's writings of the Progressive Era? There is no mention of World War I and its impact, if any, on social organicism and theories of the social self, nor of the 1920s and the persistence of the "scientific" and technocratic dimensions of Progressivism, which might have carried further some of the book's themes (one thinks of Mary Parker Follett's work on community and management theory, or of Herbert Hoover's ideas on the "associative state"). Perhaps everything had been said by Cooley's last book, but the ending is not clearly linked either to the internal development of the discourse or to external, contextual forces. Finally, there is the question of how ideas relate to action. Sklansky announces a strong program in the first sentence, which states that the intellectual shift chronicled in the book "played a defining part in the development of industrial capitalism" (p. 1). By the book's end, it is clear that both economic relations and ideas about the self did change, but the causal relation remains undeveloped. How exactly did ideas shape broader material changes? Of course, this is a perennial question for intellectual historians and one that we would all like somebody to resolve for us. But having raised the issue, had Sklansky engaged with it more thoroughly and consistently, he might have made this already excellent book into a genuinely groundbreaking one.

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