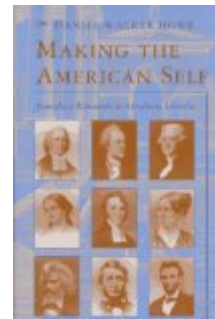


Daniel Walker Howe. *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997. 342 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-16555-7.



Reviewed by Kyle P. Farley

Published on H-SHEAR (November, 1997)

In this masterful book, Howe aims to lay bare the unique way in which Americans in the past have strived for self-identity. He conceives of the book as one of intellectual history that contributes to interdisciplinary American Studies. By using a selective list of famous Americans as "spotlights," Howe shows that there is a central theme running through one hundred and fifty years (roughly 1720-1870) of identity formation—faculty psychology. The paradigm is the view of the self as consisting of passions and reason, with prudence (or something close to it) intermediating. The passions were to be controlled by reason, but the problem is that although reason is "higher," the passions are stronger. Thus far, all of Howe's actors are agreed. But they passionately debated the implications.

The book begins with a discussion of Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin. While there are obvious differences between the Calvinist and the pragmatist, Howe convincingly shows they were both working within faculty psychology. Edwards' roots are traced to Plato and Augustine rather than Aristotle and Aquinas (pp. 34-6).

For Edwards, reason is perceiving, not motivating, and because of original sin, people are inherently selfish. Edwards' quest for overcoming the passions led him to supernatural grace, convincing him that only by God's power can fallen human nature be overcome. Franklin denied original sin, but he too saw the need to control the passions. He employed prudence to aid reason, keeping the onus of responsibility on the self (p. 27). Morality is thus rational, and "honesty is the best policy." But where these two differed, history reconciled. Howe points to George Whitefield, friend to both, as a contemporary synthesis, who foreshadows the nineteenth-century revivalists (p. 45).

In the next two chapters, Howe discusses the Founding Fathers by looking at the examples of Thomas Jefferson and Publius (the collective pseudonym for the authors of *The Federalist Papers*). As with Edwards and Franklin, synthesis is a fundamental force in the young Republic. For Howe, the Founding Fathers were, above all, practical, and this implied that they drew their arguments from many different sources. Admittedly Howe argues for the primacy of the Scottish Enlighten-

ment's influence, yet other rivalries in history and staunch contrasts in historiography begin to fade. All agreed that the passions must be controlled, but they disagreed on how. Jefferson was optimistic and felt benevolent passions could overcome malevolent ones (p. 77). Publius, like Franklin, was less optimistic and wanted to use some vices, such as self-interest, to keep other vices in check (p. 82). The "platform" of the Federalists, for example, was itself a synthesis and is eventually combined with the synthesis of the anti-Federalists. Notably, Jefferson and The Federalist both apply their notions of human nature and views of faculty psychology to the state. Passions are a metaphor for factions, and the proper government will keep them subordinate.

Moving on to the nineteenth century in the next three chapters, Howe shifts his focus from the elites to the masses. In the nineteenth century, de-centralized institutions and the market revolution resulted in the democratization of this faculty psychology. With ties to local communities fading, people adhered their identities to a national identity and to voluntary organizations (p. 110). Optimism increased, as seen in the revivals and the shift towards Arminianism and human agency, and polite culture assisted in the pursuit of self improvement, a goal which easily employed faculty psychology and its ideal of a well-balanced character. Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass were archetypes of self-made men, and they both used faculty psychology in their speeches to shape America into a place where others had the opportunity to make themselves.

Howe also looks at the use of faculty psychology in an age of social reform. Horace Mann and public schooling, Dorothea Dix and insane asylums, and Horace Bushnell and his ideal of nurture all highlight the prevalence of the faculty psychology. Each saw it as both highlighting a need and providing the rhetoric to transform America.

Lincoln is discussed in the middle of the book. The need, then, for the last three chapters is as an extended post-script that discusses an influential group that may otherwise be seen as an anomaly--the Transcendentalists. With their focus on transcending the self, it may seem they were not concerned with proper identity formation, but Howe shows their great concern for self-improvement and their use of the rhetoric and paradigm of faculty psychology as the means by which the self was transcended. Their focus on mind over matter correlated to the primacy of reason over the emotions (p. 196), although their understanding of faculty psychology was less rationalistic than their predecessors'. Howe keeps clear the often hazy line between Unitarianism and Transcendentalism by showing what the Transcendentalists inherited and what they disavowed (pp. 203-4, 210). Margaret Fuller formulated an interesting variation on faculty psychology, arguing that the ideal self balances male and female characteristics, rather than balancing reason and the emotions. Thoreau was an example of the possible conflict between the individual and the state. Both keep their rhetoric within the confines of faculty psychology.

Howe writes with great care and authority; each chapter is an essay that can stand alone, yet flows out of the previous and into the next. Throughout the book we find apparently incompatible views or influences combined in unique ways. This book is a truly synthetic work, in the Hegelian sense. Howe is able to transcend historical and historiographical debates by turning them into dialogues. Many of the common debates, such as those between the influence of Lockean liberalism or classical republicanism on Jefferson, are found to be helpful but misunderstood; rarely is one influence valid over and against another, but both are found to be true. All of this is done through faculty psychology. Nor is his synthesis a collective hagiography; Howe has enough respect

for each character that he is not fearful of showing their shortcomings.

This book is best compared with Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*. In his classic study, Bercovitch elucidates the nearly accidental influence of Puritanism on the American identity. Howe highlights the deliberate and self-conscious formation of the self during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If Bercovitch's Puritan influence is sub-conscious, Howe's faculty psychology is hyper-conscious. This book is also interdisciplinary. It is of obvious import to historians, but also to sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers, who would be interested in seeing the result of applying Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* to our nation's past.

Concerning inclusivity, women are far from ignored, though the pages accorded to slaves, the South and the frontier seem sparse. Yet Howe is forthright in the book's shortcomings and hopes this book will open questions of identity formation and the use of faculty psychology to other people, times, and places. Can faculty psychology, if the quest for individual identity is tied to a quest for national identity, explain the glaring gap between the Great Awakening and the Revolutionary War, or explain how a growing national identity could become so divided as to lead to our Civil War? Regardless of the answer, Howe has done us a great service with this book, using his "spotlights" to illuminate a theme throughout the ante-bellum period. And a resulting benefit is that by placing all his players on the same playing field (of faculty psychology), we can more readily compare them with each other.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shear/>

Citation: Kyle P. Farley. Review of Howe, Daniel Walker. *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. November, 1997.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1489>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.