



Identity In Question

A History Of Persons

Paul du Gay

In terms of undertaking a history of persons who can we actually turn to for guidance, what sort of theoretical instruments do we need, and who do you think best supplies them?

Professor David Saunders

First of all I'd like to say I want to lower the theoretical temperature because the historical work is descriptive rather than theoretical, but look, you've got some superb points of reference in your readings. I'd recommend strongly very careful reading of Marcel Mauss's two lecture essays, including that startling essay from 1938 on the Notion of Person and the Notion of Self, and the history of those two notions.

Paul du Gay

Why is that so startling, David?

Professor David Saunders

Well first of all because for the first time really Mauss is distinguishing between person and individual, just as we've been doing, but the other thing about it is that it covers such an immense range, you'll have read it and seen that it passes from pre-history clan societies in which really there weren't individuals in our sense at all, they were just collectives, trans-individual institutions. I mean things like a name, a name of a family, a family name, an ancestral name that is available once every third generation. Hard for us to believe, but then going on to the two really great changes in western culture that have been the history of person, and the history of self, so I just say to these two things – the first is legal and the second is religious. The first is Roman law so there is a link with legal personality. As Mauss tells us in that 1938 essay, Roman law for the first time distributed personhood widely to all individuals, to all Roman citizens, that meant simply people who lived within the city walls. It didn't depend on having any particular inward relation any self at all. It was public and open. But then Mauss goes on to give us that tremendous history of self, the distribution of souls. First of all souls, then of course consciences, then of course consciousnesses, then and he's writing and talking at the period of psychoanalysis, then sub-consciousnesses. So you've got quickly sketched out there a whole history of how we come to have the persons that we have, and why we are tempted to link our persons to our selves. He does end by saying the arrangement whereby we try to link everything to self, all our persons and the legal person is just one, he says this arrangement is only for us among us.