

Comment on the Papers by Robert A. Schneider and Noel
Chevalier and Manushag N. Powell

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Welcome everyone again, this is our first session. Before I begin my comments, I'll briefly reintroduce those whose papers I summarize today and comment on. Rob Schneider, as you've heard, is a Professor of History at Indiana University Bloomington at the threshold of retirement. He's a specialist in Modern Europe with a primary research interest in France. His central theme, the central theme of large parts of his career has been the formation of the centralized state. The first book he devoted to it was titled *Public Life in Toulouse, 1463-1789* – you can already see in the title that he has a keen interest in local history which I think is a genuine strength in his work as well as something that is about to disappear today. He expanded this research in several other books, among them *The Ceremonial City*, and then in his third book became ventured into more cultural topics – the title of his third book is *Dignified Retreat: Writers and Intellectuals in the Age of Richelieu* which I think is a very interesting lesson for us today because I do think that forms of retreat become attractive in an unanticipated way. And then he moved on to write these broader books of contemporary relevance such as *The Return of Resentment: The Rise and Decline and Rise Again of a Political Emotion*, ending with the current book project and we will talk about that in a minute, about the concept of dignity.

Then we have Nush Powell, a literary historian and public scholar. She most recently served as secretary of facilities and associate head of English at Purdue University and has recently transferred to Arizona State University in 2024. Her academic interest is primarily in eighteenth-century British literature and culture, extending into historical publishing, women's periodicals, and narratives of piracy. Her books include *Performing Authorship in Eighteenth-Century English Periodicals*, *British Pirates in Print and Performance* with Frederick Burwick, *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690-1820s*. She's also editor of the Broadview Press edition of Daniel Defoe's *Captain Singelton*, and the author of the Wondrium *The Real History of Pirates*.

Last but certainly not least, we have Noel Chevalier, Associate Professor of English at Luther College University of Regina. (Noel Chevalier: As of couple weeks ago, now a full Professor. [Applause]). He has published widely and on different aspects of piracy. For example, he edited with Manushag Powell *The General History of the Pyrates* – or is about to. (Noel Chevalier and Nush Powell: We're working on it.). And ranging on topics such as "Pirate Vices, Public Benefits," and *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-World*, which is another one of his earlier publications.

So, welcome everyone, I will now begin my comments and first ask what really is an afterlife? Georges Didi-Huberman, around a decade ago, tried to write about ideas of cultural survival and afterlife, in the sense of Aby Warburg, contrasting that with – and Charles Taylor in the nineteenth century – or trying to establish that as a counter-history to survival. So where usually we might be tempted to think of cultural products, especially today, as something that survives through a process of competition where the artifact or cultural remnant remains relevant and active if it can stand the test of time and still be useful, he in a sense argues for the opposite; namely that culture is a repository from which things can always be actualized and do exactly *not* decay according to a logic of the survival of the fittest. I think that that's a very interesting idea at the same time it holds some power to legitimate what we do in the humanities in the broader sense and in particular, in eighteenth century studies where we are really convinced of the relevance and also contemporary and

future relevance of what we do, the artifacts that we take care of, while at the same time in the process of competition where usefulness seems to be the only criteria acceptable for the survival, we have a hard time making our arguments. I think in the end – and I hope to be able to return to this at the very end, I do think the two papers that we will discuss now represent two very different modes, two very different afterlives that can be contrasted with each other, of ideas, artifacts from the eighteenth century. I think in the case of Kant, so Rob Schneider's paper, in a sense he asks what happens to an idea that becomes relevant again in a very new form in the twentieth century, and this paper asks us, does it make sense to return, to the philosopher, for example, who first coined the phrase and to the period when it's modern usage emerged. So what is it about dignity that is used in its modern sense for the first time in the eighteenth century, in particular in Kant's philosophy? Why is it that in the twentieth century it unfolds such a relevance – does it make sense to go back to Kant and throw a new light on what is happening in the twentieth century or not?

I think in the paper that is primarily a paper on piracy we have a very different question. We have a question of how the story, a specific story that of piracy, that of Madagascar in particular as a place where piracy takes place, is imagined and is historiographically captured. In a sense does that change under the contemporary pressures of looking at history in a different way? I would say while the second paper transforms an artifact and in light of the present, I think the first allows us to re-perspectivize our own present in the eyes of the eighteenth century, and I hope this will become clear at the end of my couple of more specific remarks.

So, let me begin with the second paper because I want to end with Kant for bad or good reasons. Noel Chevalier and Manushag Powell ask us to reconsider the history of pirates. It is well known that pirates belong to a history of criminalization as marginal figures inhabiting the sea – as this space still unregulated and not captured by the legal system – so there's this history of criminalization in which the pirate is something like an anarchic nightmare. There's a certain projection of lawlessness, criminality, either oppressed or unleashed sexuality for example, and from that same perspective that has for a long time dominated both the historic accounts but also the perspectives on piracy as it appears in literature, these settlements in Madagascar are viewed as unsuccessful attempts of colonization by something like a parasitical colonizer that doesn't really belong to an empire nor a nation-state. The contrast with that with the standard history of criminalization, David Graeber's account or at least based on David Graeber's account, that establishes pirates as semi-democratic figures that have a tight organization on their ship, on land, that assimilates and that don't found a colony but rather presents something like a revolution of ways of organizing the social in Madagascar. In a third step – and this runs through the whole paper – they compare this process with the process that happens in coffee houses with the emergence of a public sphere. And I think that's a quite intricate argument that unfolds there which is that there is a certain exclusion of one part of the reality of coffee houses, namely the lack of civility, the strife, the struggle, and the coffee house becomes part of a history of increasing civilization of the political and associated with that is a certain white-washing of the real reality. So it's interesting already to see or to establish those two histories in parallel – I thought it was illuminating and at the same time it's worth questioning much more, of course, because what you give us is inevitably only a sketch. And there's a third part in which they claim that in fact the history of piracy and in particular the history of Henry Every – I hope I'm pronouncing that well – who among other things appears in *The General History of Pyrates* that for a long time was attributed to Defoe which is I think a very interesting thing, so they observe in this one case, in a sense how one figure really emancipates itself, becomes dominant for the perception of piracy, and then they show us that that really depends on something like a stable author figure that in a sense stabilizes the discourse of this book. In

that sense, Defoe is important and of course, he has been replaced by different authorship, but they try to argue that in fact this type of authorship, just as our perspective on piracy and the coffee house, rely in the end on a specific fiction of an authentic self, and that acknowledging the irremediably mediated nature of piracy, the coffee house, history, literature, forces us to abandon, I think, this projected authentic self and then an imbricated space appears where in a sense the two alternatives in viewing these two histories – so the positive and the negative aspects, for example, of piracy – engage with each other and are inextricably linked and create a much more mixed reality in the sense that it is much harder to really establish a very clear perspective and a clear-cut narrative. That seems to me the basic arguments, though I thought it was interesting how you give reasons for abolishing this authentic self by quoting Naomi Klein – through the book on the *Doppelgänger* – and also almost more interesting to see a nice category of interests that appears as one of these aesthetic key terms, where the *doppelgänger* marks the problem that comes with authenticating a clear viewpoint that allowed us for a long time to have simplified narratives and interpretations. So it's a challenge in a sense to us, what in our current point irritates us, what is really a symptomatic point of where things conflict, but precisely this unease opens a new path to the eighteenth century and to its afterlife.

Rob Schneider's paper on Kant – just as this one, incredibly interesting – in one of its arguments tries to reconstruct the history of human dignity, there in its relation to legal history. The starting point is a clear-cut history where in the eighteenth century, in particular in Kant, is the first time the concept really appears as a prominent concept, and then in the nineteenth century remains dormant until in the UN Charter, in 1945, it really becomes the core term around which a whole legal international order and universe is formed. He considers briefly the option of thinking that this is a possible placeholder in a sense for what Hannah Arendt whose life is marked, of course, by the experience of refugee status and statelessness, calls the "right to have rights" which for Arendt does not have a permanent home in nation-states because it's precisely in situations of conflict of those nation-states that the problem of a legal standard that would guarantee everyone rights disappears for those that do not belong to one of these nations. In a way, he asks, with authors he quotes, is it that this question of dignity and the concept of dignity really becomes prominent in response to events that reduce the human in a way to bare survival such as the Second World War and the Holocaust or the French Revolution in the eighteenth century, is there a link between the emergence of the need for this concept and historic events – he doesn't go there, but I think Agamben would say that those events, what happens there, is that reducibility of the human to bare life and also its severability from a cultural form is really a historic reality. He tries to argue, in a sense against, a lot of scholarship, in particular the very prominent but not very thorough sometimes thinker Pinker [laughter]. He tries to argue that he attempts to point to the empty nature of this dignity, so the problem of pointing to a substrate of it, pointing to, for example, what is it – is it really just being by virtue of being a being in the world that one holds dignity, or what is it, right? There's a certain emptiness that is rightly pointed out and it seems to me that Rob tries to defend this emptiness as marking an important place that we need because in the end there is no anchor, at least in our current conceptual universe, that would allow us to stabilize and to clearly define what dignity is. So then, the other historical background that's interesting is that there's not only Kant, but in the twentieth century in the writing of the UN Charter there is a Catholic influence that involves Pope Pius and then a French intellectual Jacques Maritain and that therefore through them, but also through Roosevelt who surprisingly is involved in this, and who – I recommend you to read her introduction to the English edition of Anne Frank, which is, I didn't know that she had wrote it but I found out not too long ago – which really would establish also a link to this other historic thread that Rob is presenting to us, namely to Second World War, the Nazi period,

and the French Revolution. So through them there is another historic background that serves for criticism of the concept, right, because who would really like, today, a Catholic concept – even though we might have newfound hope in a Catholic Pope – who would really like to support that. I think that this is a really really important book and in particular today, and I think it's really a long time since this has been so acute. I do think human rights are at stake again, in a sense they are, since probably the invasion of Iraq but I do think that there are really acute problems because in more parts of the world than in a long time before, I would say that basic human rights are simply not respected and, or at least subdued, subjected to other more important seeming rights, so I think that this promises to be really important.

It seems to me that I am pointing to Kant but not really elaborating it. Rob invites us to really go back to Kant and ask ourselves, well, what is actually happening in Kant. I mean in Kant, it's interesting that the concept is part of a history of cultivation – it's not very important, not very central if you read the passages, but I'll just end by reading a little bit of Kant to you in a translation so you get the real sound and you can see that for Kant, the link to a sort of foundational role for laws is not there really. That's a twentieth century addition. But there's a completely different dimension which is the relationship to the self, and I think we come back, actually, to the first paper. So for Kant a self-relationship is very centrally involved in dignity. I'll just read two longer passages.

This respect-inspiring idea of personality which sets before our eyes the sublimity of our nature in its higher aspect, while at the same time it shows us the want of accord of our conduct with it and thereby strikes down self-conceit, is even natural to the commonest reason and easily observed. Has not every even moderately honorable man sometimes found that, whereby an otherwise inoffensive lie he might either have withdrawn himself from an unpleasant business, or even have procured some advantages for a loved and well-deserving friend, he has avoided it solely lest he should despise himself secretly in his own eyes? When an upright man is in the greatest distress, which he might have avoided if he could only have disregarded duty, is he not sustained by the consciousness that he has maintained humanity in its proper dignity in his own person and honored it, that he has no reason to be ashamed of himself in his own sight, or to dread the inward glance of self-examination? This consolation is not happiness, it is not even the smallest part of it, for no one would wish to have occasion for it, or would, perhaps, even desire a life in such circumstances. But he lives, and he cannot endure that he should be in his own eyes unworthy of life. This inward peace is therefore merely negative as regards what can make life pleasant; it is, in fact, only the escaping the danger of sinking in personal worth, after everything else that is valuable has been lost. There's a lot problematic, but I think there are a lot of interesting things here as well going on. The second one is a little shorter.

It cannot indeed be denied that in order to bring an uncultivated or degraded mind into the track of moral goodness some preparatory guidance is necessary, to attract it by a view of its own advantage, or to alarm it by fear of loss; but as soon as this mechanical work, these leading-strings have produced some effect, then we must bring before the mind the pure moral motive, which, not only because it is the only one that can be the foundation of a character, but also because it teaches a man to feel his own dignity, gives the mind a power unexpected even by himself, to tear himself from all sensible attachments so far as they would fain have the rule, and to find a rich compensation for the sacrifice he offers, in the independence of his rational nature and the greatness of soul to which he sees that he is destined.

So those are the two quotes, provocative, but I think it points to a dimension in Kant that goes beyond what Rob emphasizes which is that that dignity is a concept that is about something worth in itself versus everything else that is embedded in chains of purpose, of advantage, of causation, so it's something worth in itself, but I think in Kant there is in a

sense more to it, and we can or cannot discuss it. And a lot of this is highly problematic because, of course, he seems to be saying on the one hand dignity allows us to transcend bare life but it's only through dignity that bare life is endowed with value, but it's a value in itself. So that seems to me one of the several logics here that is quite complicated, so I recommend you read Kant more, of course, this is just something like a teaser.

So I guess my question is on the one hand, what is here then, afterlife, do you agree with the characterization I gave of the two different forms of afterlife, and more specifically in what way do you think the self and the relationship to the self which, surprisingly, in both papers is implied in some way as involved in our view of history, literature, of these conceptual problems, how that plays out. Thank you.