

# Self Consciousness

An Alternative Anthropology of Identity

**Anthony Cohen**



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What is the relationship of the individual to society? What *is* the individual besides being a participant in social relations? Like other social sciences, anthropology has tended to neglect these questions, treating individuals simply as micro-versions of larger social entities, and imputing to them consciousnesses modelled on those of the groups to which they belong.

In this book, Anthony Cohen establishes the importance of the individual, arguing that, in order to appreciate the complexity of *social* formations, we must take account of self consciousness—individuals' awareness of themselves and their authorship of their social contexts and conditions. Drawing comparatively on a wide range of ethnographic studies and anthropological topics from around the world, he proposes that anthropological concepts such as 'culture', 'society' and 'social relations' should be approached from the self upwards. He shows how social and cultural forms and processes such as ritual, symbolism, organisation, rhetoric, socialisation, marriage, naming, ethnicity and cultural nationalism are shaped and interpreted by the creative self. In the course of the argument, Professor Cohen dismisses the contention that selfhood is a predominantly Western idea, and shows that attention to the particular, the individual and to self consciousness both informs and disciplines the larger picture.

*Self Consciousness* reflects the author's deep concern with social identity and the dialectical relationship of individual and society. It will be of great interest not only to anthropologists but to students and teachers of the other social sciences, including sociology, social psychology and cultural studies.

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This book is dedicated with love to

L.N.C.

I.P.C.

and M.A.C.

from whom I have learned the importance of trying to understand self consciousness—theirs, mine and other people's.

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# Preface and acknowledgements

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I do not know, cannot remember, for how long I have been conscious of the matters taken up in this book, but I realise that some must have been with me throughout my self-conscious experience. Therefore, I cannot date the origins of the book, and could not begin to acknowledge the influences, academic and other, which have contributed to it. I take instead an arbitrary moment in the early 1980s when, thinking about the ways in which individuals interpret symbols, I was led to hold deep reservations about how anthropologists tended to generalise the meanings of symbols to whole societies or to substantial groups within them. I realised then that, as an anthropologist who pursued an explicit interest in culture and culture theory, I was nevertheless dealing ethnographically with individuals, whose engagement with each other was problematic and fraught with misunderstanding, and who were reserved about their own generalisation into 'societies' or 'communities' or 'cultures' in ways to which anthropologists seemed insensitive.

As I write this, I remind myself that my first anthropological monograph, on local-level politics in Newfoundland, was essentially about seven individuals, and I squirm with some discomfort about how I made them stand for very large-scale social and cultural tendencies (Cohen 1985). It was in working through my long-term fieldwork in Whalsay, Shetland, that I became more aware of the inadequacy with which anthropology conventionally dealt with the complexities of individuals, and generalised them into collectivities. Just as one would expect, the better I came to know my friends and informants there, the more complex they seemed, and the more difficult appeared the task of committing them to paper. How well could any of us describe *ourselves* on paper within the disciplines of publishing and academic conventions? The problems delayed by some years my book on Whalsay (Cohen 1987) which, as I was even then uneasily aware, hardly avoided the

ethnographic practices about which I was expressing grave doubt, in common with many of my academic generation.

It was finally my preoccupation with the diverse personal stances which the anthropologist adopts in the conduct and writing of ethnographic research which persuaded me of the need for anthropology to explore other people's self consciousness.<sup>1</sup> I was hardly early into the field. A catalogue of books published in the social and literary sciences over the last ten years and containing the word 'self in their titles would be a very weighty tome indeed. Perhaps both for that reason, and because the problems I raise have long seemed so intractable to anthropologists, I sensed not a little despair among my friends and colleagues with my preoccupation, perhaps a sense of its futility. I have persisted in order to stress an aspect of this matter which I think has been inadequately recognised. Examining and reflecting on the self is not an alternative to addressing 'society' or social relations: they are mutually implicated. But I insist that we cannot properly do the latter, which I accept as the proper focus of anthropological enquiry, without the former. Anthropology will not fulfil its potential to offer sensitive accounts of social processes and formations unless it becomes self conscious—and, when it does so, will lead the way among the humane sciences.

Rather than just indulging me, my friendly interlocutors have helped me by their benevolent and expert criticism, both with their comments on earlier papers, or by taking the trouble to comment in detail on parts of the present book. I am especially indebted to Jim Fernandez, Ladislav Holy, Robert Paine, Nigel Rapport and Marilyn Strathern. Warmest thanks also to Malcolm Anderson, Frank Bechhofer, Jean Briggs, Roy Dille, Katsuyoshi Fukui, Kirsten Hastrup, Paul Heelas, Wendy James, Carmelo Lisón-Tolosana, Martine Segalen, Cris Shore, Sandra Wallman and Barrie Wilson. The arguments contained in this book have been rehearsed on successive cohorts of Senior Honours students at Edinburgh University, for whose forbearance I am indebted. I have also had the good fortune and privilege of working at Edinburgh with a group of postgraduate students who have helped me far more than they probably realise: Sandra Brown, Rupert Cox, John Harries, Jon Mitchell, Gillian Munro, Amy Porter and Sarah Skerratt.

There is only so much that critics can accomplish in improving a colleague's work. In the end, I have to accept responsibility for everything that follows.

Returning to my opening remarks, I have drawn here on a series of working papers written since 1986, most of which have been published

in journals or edited symposia. These are cited at the appropriate points in the text, but I would like to thank the editors and publishers concerned for allowing me to restate previously published work, specifically: Martine Segalen and Presses du CNRS; Judith Okely and Helen Callaway, and Paul Heelas and Paul Morris, and their publishers Routledge; my own co-editor Katsuyoshi Fukui, Murdo MacDonald and Edinburgh University Press; Ralph Cohen and Johns Hopkins University Press; Paul Bock and *Journal of Anthropological Research*.

I further express my gratitude to the following for permission to quote their work: Paul Bailey and Jonathan Cape, *Gabriel's Lament*, V.S.Naipaul and Penguin Group, *The Enigma of Arrival*, Tom Wolfe and Jonathan Cape, *The Bonfire of the Vanities*; M.Richler and Chatto & Windus, *Solomon Gursky was Here*.

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# The neglected self

## Anthropological traditions

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Most Indians do not reveal themselves because it does not occur to them that they have unique selves to reveal.

(Gearing 1970:146)

The self has no private space...but no need for privacy.

(Greenhouse 1986:98)

### **POSITIONS**

Fred Gearing's sympathetic study depicts the Fox Indians of Iowa as defined by the statuses they occupy in their classificatory kinship system. They regard their behaviour as inhering in the structural niches in which they are placed, so that any other Fox who happened to be similarly located would behave in the same way. Carol Greenhouse imputes a comparable self consciousness—or lack of it—to the devout Southern Baptists she studied in Hopewell, Atlanta, believers who define themselves by their family roles, and who oppose individualism to Christianity (see Chapter 6).

This selflessness seems so at odds with the ways in which most of us might be assumed to think of ourselves that we have to work hard to understand what Gearing and Greenhouse may mean and to envisage the people they thereby describe. Anthropologists have laboured to elicit notions equivalent to our 'self' and 'selfhood' which are held by the people among whom they have lived and who they have studied. The difficulties of imagining and interpreting these notions are compounded by those of translation, which makes discourse about the self tricky among the speakers of different European languages, let alone those of more esoteric tongues. All sorts of metaphors and circumlocutions have been called in aid, such as 'indigenous psychologies' and 'inner' (as

opposed to 'outer') consciousness, all of which attempt to evoke a distinction between the private and public aspects of a person.

The public-private dimension is a clumsy construction. Writers such as Lienhardt (1985) and Hsu (1985) have shown (for, respectively, Dinka and Chinese) that selfhood is a composite, the constituents of which vary in public and private modes. Thus, the self is not 'replaced' by something else as its bearer moves from privacy into public social space; rather, it adopts or discards elements which are not pertinent in more private contexts (for example, in intimate interaction or in solitary contemplation). The self is not a monolith; it is plastic, variable and complex. But that is to say that its description should acknowledge its complexity, a requirement in which anthropologists have not distinguished themselves. We shall consider some reasons for their failings.

Historically, another feature of this concern in anthropology has been the attempt to distinguish among such categories as 'individual', 'person' and 'self. These distinctions are arbitrary, and are often difficult to sustain. They will be discussed at length. The motivation to make them clearly stemmed from theoretical influences at the turn of the century which demarcated the social and the psychological; and which elaborated the lineaments of social structure both to provide an analytic scheme and to demonstrate the primacy of society in the formation and determination of behaviour. For example, Durkheim was interested only in those aspects of the individual which could be socialised; he consigned the rest to psychology or physiology. And if these potentially social elements were not adequately socialised, this spoke, in his view, of the pathology of either the individual or society. In a normally functioning society, a person could not reasonably decide to behave in a way which defied social convention. In this theoretical perspective, selfhood was socially determined. The dominance of this perspective in British social anthropology is evident in that until quite recently 'the self and 'selfhood' were simply not recognised as anthropological problems, other than in a methodological sense, despite the publication in 1938 of Mauss's classic essay on the self, a work only given appropriate recognition nearly fifty years later (see Carrithers *et al.* 1985).

There was a tradition in American anthropology of concern with the self, due in large part to the influence of the social psychologist G.H. Mead, a scholar whose work has remained almost entirely absent from the undergraduate syllabuses of British social anthropology. But in North American anthropology, concern with the self settled on a rather obscure subfield of the discipline as a whole, 'psychological anthropology'—again, a specialism which has never been recognised

in Britain—associated with writers such as A.I.Hallowell and Dorothy Lee. It did not attract mainstream attention until very much later, when, with the ‘interpretive turn’ (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979), anthropologists everywhere began to be interested in processes of symbolisation, rather than just in the decoding of cultural symbols.

Selfhood finally moved to centre stage in the late 1970s and 1980s with the linked developments in ‘reflexivity’ and the critical scrutiny of anthropological and ethnographic writing, a movement which is often trivialised by its description as ‘post-modernism’. It was a trend of thought pertinent to selfhood because it interjected explicitly into the ethnographic scenario the figure hitherto proscribed by the canons of disciplinary practice, the anthropologist’s self, appropriately caricatured by Crapanzano (1992) as a ‘trickster’ and by Hastrup (1992a) as a ‘magician’; and, in so doing, triggered a critical examination of the distinction made by ethnographic style and convention between the self (the anthropologist) and the other (the anthropologised).

The convergence of these themes, selfhood and the posture of the anthropologist, was not adventitious. As scholars began to focus on self-awareness and cognate phenomena such as thought, emotion and cognition, the characteristic anthropological problem inevitably arose to pose unanswerable questions: How do you *know* what the other person is thinking? How do you know *that* the other person is thinking? How can you discriminate between the other person’s consciousness and your construction of his or her consciousness? The answer to the first and second questions, ‘I cannot know for certain’, leads inexorably to the answer to the third: ‘I cannot’. What we *can* do, what anthropologists customarily have done, as recent work has shown us, is to use literary devices of one kind or another to convey in our authored texts the impression of such a discrimination. But it is one which we as authors have engineered.

The enormity of this admission should not be underestimated, for it calls into question the methodological pretensions of modern anthropology. It amounts to the admission that the inevitable starting point for my interpretation of another’s selfhood is my own self. For at least the three decades since the philosopher Peter Winch pointed to this inevitability in his *The Idea of a Social Science* (1958), anthropologists have sought ever more sophisticated means of minimising, if not escaping, its limitations, and they have become very sophisticated indeed. The rigour of anthropological scholarship in validating its rendering of other cultures’ systems of knowledge, belief, thought and communication has arguably been unmatched by the other humane sciences. But it was all

predicated on the prescription to maintain the axiomatic difference between the anthropological self and the anthropologised other.

The argument of this book denies the authority of that axiom. It is plainly unacceptable to assume that anthropologist and anthropologised are alike; indeed, it could be perverse, for it might risk rendering anthropology redundant. But, equally, the assumption that they are *not* alike is unacceptable for it seems to lead inexorably to the construction of their difference. It is also perverse, for it denies the pertinence of the most potent investigative and interpretive weapons in the anthropologist's armoury: his or her own experience and consciousness.

### **OBJECTIVES**

This argument cannot be made simply or briefly, but depends on extended demonstration. That is one of the purposes of this book. It is implicated in, but subsidiary to, its principal objective which is to show why we *must* address the question of the self since not to do so is to risk misunderstanding, and therefore misrepresenting, the people who we claim to know and who we represent to others.

It is always difficult to know quite when a book originated. I began to write the final version of this volume during the summer of 1992, but had been consciously and deliberately working on it during at least the previous six years. During this period as working papers and articles appeared, some of my friends and colleagues grew increasingly exasperated with the apparent futility of my argument which called for anthropologists to do what we all know cannot be done: to elicit and describe the thoughts and sentiments of individuals which we otherwise gloss over in the generalisations we derive from collective social categories. Some were more than sceptical about my suggestion that we should use in a rigorous and controlled fashion the only means which is available to us: our experience of our own selves. Still others insisted that this objective was simply not the proper business of anthropology. I hope to show in this book that, notwithstanding these entirely respectable objections, anthropologists inevitably engage with the self, their own and other people's, and that it is in the nature of their enquiry that they must do so. Because they are unaware of doing it, or are squeamish about it, it is often fudged. But, by drawing extensively on the work of anthropologists and on a wide spectrum of cultural experience and ethnographic expertise, I will try to demonstrate that social anthropology has incorporated self consciousness implicitly into its discourse, and should now come out of the closet in order to deal more faithfully and fully with the self.

There is nothing new in the argument that methodologically anthropologists cannot avoid the intrusion of their own selves. It has been rehearsed openly and repeatedly throughout the history of modern social anthropology, sociology and the philosophy of science. Further, the engagement with critical literary theory and with various 'post-modern' currents has extended this self-scrutiny from the investigative to the writing processes in ethnographic work. More recently, the argument has been further developed by systematic attempts to explore how what had previously been regarded as a methodological burden and inhibition might be transformed instead into a resource, even a virtue (see e.g. Okely and Callaway 1992).

This aspiration is the premise for the present study. The proposition is that anthropologists' self-consciousness may stimulate their sensitivity to the self consciousness of those they study. I am not advocating an egocentric anthropology, or anything so facile as the notion that 'we are all the same under the skin', and that we might therefore be justified in treating ourselves as models for others. But I do insist that if there is no justification for treating people axiomatically as being alike, then equally the assumption of their difference is also questionable. Modern social anthropology was built on the putative cultural distance between anthropologist and anthropologised, on the largely unexamined assumption of the differences between the self (observer) and the other (observed). Throughout the 1980s, anthropologists showed how this presumption had been made self-validating in anthropological analysis and writing. I shall argue later that one of its unfortunate consequences has been to deny to cultural 'others' the self consciousness which we so value in ourselves.

If my contention is correct, then our neglect of others' selves must be objectionable for all kinds of reasons and certainly raises serious ethical questions. But the implication on which I wish to focus is that it has probably rendered our accounts of other societies inaccurate in important respects, since they must be revealed as generalisations from the only partially perceived, at worst misperceived, elements of those societies—individuals to whom we have denied self consciousness.

Addressing self consciousness and selfhood thus brings us up critically and inevitably against two bulwarks of ethnographic practice: generalisation and cultural relativism. Indeed, acknowledging that other people have selves also means recognising that generalising them into such analytic collectivities as tribes, castes and ethnic groups may be a very crude means of categorisation, the inadequacies of which we have all experienced in similar categorisations of ourselves. Sensitive

ethnography demands nothing less than attention to other people's selves, an inquiry which inevitably entails to some extent the use of our own consciousness as a paradigm.

However, I repeat that my concern is not with the self for its own sake, but is to consider critically and constructively the assumptions we conventionally make about the relationship of individual to society. Western social science proceeds from the top downwards, from society to the individual, deriving individuals from the social structures to which they belong: class, nationality, state, ethnic group, tribe, kinship group, gender, religion, caste, generation, and so on. We have concentrated on these collective structures and categories and by and large have taken the individual for granted. We have thereby created fictions. My argument is that we should now set out to qualify these, if not from the bottom upwards, then by recognising that the relationship of individual and society is far more complex and infinitely more variable than can be encompassed by a simple, uni-dimensional deductive model.

This book is written with reference to, and from the perspective of, social anthropology, partly because it is my own discipline and because I am therefore criticising my own practice. However, readers may note that at various points in the text I identify the subject more generally with social science. This is not careless writing or absent-mindedness. While anthropological experience reveals the practices which I identify in the argument, they are also present in other social science disciplines which may have been even less sensitive to them. I have also long taken the view that, both because of its theoretical focus on culture, and, notwithstanding my critical stance, its general methodological rigour, social anthropology should be regarded as fundamental to social scholarship. My argument is therefore addressed in a non-sectarian spirit to all those academic disciplines whose practitioners regard themselves as engaged in the humane sciences in the hope that it may contribute to the discourse among them.<sup>1</sup>

### **WHY SHOULD ANTHROPOLOGISTS BE CONCERNED WITH THE SELF?**

Concern with the self has not been universally welcomed among anthropologists; indeed, it has provoked some trenchant comment and invective. There are those who dismiss it as mere 'self-indulgence' (*inter alia* Friedman 1987; Sangren 1988), a deliberate pun; those who argue that it is a Western-, Euro- or Anglocentric preoccupation; and those who maintain more substantially, if atavistically, that it detracts from our

proper attention to social relations, or that it poses such intractable methodological difficulties that it is really a blind alley. The first comment is too trivial to require an answer, the second a contention which is at odds with the ethnographic record, as the case studies which follow will show. The present book attempts to address the three latter points.

There is no essential opposition between the consideration of the self and the description and analysis of social relations, indeed, quite the contrary. In the past, our concern with groups and categories, that is, with the social bases of social relations, has largely ignored the dimensions of the self and self consciousness, and may therefore be regarded as having dealt with bogus entities. In treating individuals either explicitly or by default as merely socially or culturally driven, ignoring the authorial or 'self-driven' aspects of behaviour, is to render them at best partially, and, perhaps more often, as fictitious ciphers of the anthropologist's theoretical invention. It was an approach with a pedigree at least as long as the sociological concept of role, a term which focuses wholly on what a person *does* socially to the exclusion of who the person *is*. To treat social relationships as encounters among roles seems odd, and ethnographers rarely present their descriptions in this modest way. They are much more inclined to pretend that they are dealing *with people*, but, as I have suggested, this seems an unjustifiable pretence.

Let us take a step backwards. If we regard social groups as a collection of complex selves (complex, because any individual must be regarded as a cluster of selves or as a multi-dimensional self) we are clearly acknowledging that they are more complicated and require more subtle and sensitive description and explanation than if we treat them simply as a combination of roles. Indeed, the aggregation of these complex entities into groups may itself be seen as more problematic than would otherwise be the case. Collective behaviour is then revealed as something of a triumph, rather than as being merely mechanical. I suspect that this is a description which gibes more closely with our personal experience as members of families, committees, clubs, platoons or whatever.

If these problematic aggregations are then magnified to the level of society, we can put into a quite different focus the question of how society is possible. Far from being sociologically gratuitous, the question is a real one. The conventional answers of European social theory, most of which point to determinism of some kind or other, are inadequate. They do not take account of the individual's capacity to reflect on his or her own behaviour—that is, to be self-conscious—and to come to any

conclusion other than that there is no real choice about how to behave—the bleak, but unconvincing, views which Gearing and Greenhouse attribute to, respectively, the Fox and the Hopewell Baptists. Nor do they address the meaning which the decision has for the individual, which may be significantly different from its perception by others. For example, if I make a full and accurate statement of my annual income to the Inland Revenue, my behaviour would be interpretable at the macro-level as evidence of the power of the state to compel its subjects to make such disclosures and to penalise them if they are shown to be delinquent. The most this interpretation will allow to my discretion is the decision to be law-abiding. But a moment's reflection will suggest numerous other possibilities. The fact that these all eventuate in the same behaviour may not be irrelevant so far as the state and its revenues are concerned, but this simplistic view fails utterly to explain my behaviour. It neglects my reasons for my complicity with laws with which I may disagree. This kind of account therefore leaves the cohesion of people into societies unexplained, or, at best, only partially explained.

So if we return to the question, 'how is society possible?' or the less grandiose enquiry, 'how are social groups possible?' I suggest that, far from taking selfhood for granted, the question cannot be sensibly addressed without putting the self at its very centre. The problem lies in the putative contradiction between selfhood, individuality and socialness. It is perhaps an irony that we have to approach the fundamental problem of social cohesion through its apparent opposite, selfhood and personal identity.

### **COMPLEX SELVES**

Perhaps the issue may be put into focus if we contemplate ourselves as anthropologists contemplate the societies which they struggle to understand: that is, if we try to do some fieldwork on ourselves. We have curious mixtures of allegiances. The issue is not that we belong to many different kinds of group and association, although of course we do. Rather, the curiosity lies in their incompatibility. Many are positively antagonistic to each other. For example, I remember as an adolescent finding the presence of my friends embarrassing if I was with my parents. But why? I felt reasonably at ease with my parents when we were just among family, comfortable with my friends when exclusively in their company; but when both sets of associates were together, I felt acute awkwardness. You may experience similar discomfort if you try to mix together different sets of friends. It is not an uncommon experience

that people who get on well both with their consanguines and their affines nevertheless find it very difficult to resolve the apparently competing claims made on them by each set of relatives. We have routinely to juggle the incompatible claims of family and work, of family and friends, of friends and neighbours, of neighbours and coreligionists; of locality and ethnic peers, of ethnic peers and nationality, of nationality and locality, and so on. All of these associations pull us in different directions. It seems to me remarkable that, as individuals, we generally manage to cope with these many incompatible claims on our allegiance without cracking under the strain. It is little short of a triumph that we do so while also preserving a reasonable sense of loyalty to our own sense of self, that is, to our individuality. For it is a very odd characteristic of our kind of society (I write as a bourgeois British intellectual) that we are expected to be able to accommodate these plural claims which are made on us, while also having a strongly developed sense of self. Indeed, when a man or woman fails, or worries that they might fail, we say of them that 'they are not quite themselves'!

This demand which we are inclined to make of ourselves and others for a strong and stable sense of self makes all the more curious the penchant which British anthropologists have showed during the last thirty years for theories which depict social and personal identity as being highly contingent. These theories owe much to the American sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism, in the development of which Mead's influence was seminal. Mead was concerned with the ways in which individuals symbolise themselves in social interaction, a concern from which sprang the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism. He distinguished between the 'me'—the unthinking being, the enduring product of experience—and the 'I', the *consciousness* of being which, through its ability to symbolise, is capable of behavioural control, precisely because it conceptualises the self. The 'I', the active agency of being, has to be continuously creative to keep viable the person (including the 'me'), a view of the self which has been echoed in recent anthropological work (e.g. Heelas 1981a: 13–14; also Lock 1981:32). Much of Mead's work elaborated this creative aspect of the individual. For example, he dealt with the human's unique capacity to 'manipulate', to intercede, through 'mind', between means and ends, to intervene, through language, between perception and 'consummation'. This mediation takes the form of reflective thought, and is where individuality reposes.

For Mead, the self is nurtured, rather than determined, by interaction with the other, since interaction stimulates reflexivity (e.g. Mead 1934).

Indeed, like Cooley before him, he saw social interaction as being the very foundation of self-conception: both are accomplished by 'taking the role of the other', viewing oneself and one's behaviour from what is imagined to be the perspective of an other, anticipating the other's reaction. The 'I' component of the self is the analyst of this self-observation who modifies or plans behaviour on the basis of this analysis. The conceptual material for the analysis, in the Meadian view, is derived partly from culture, which explains the similarities to be observed among the members of a society. It is also mediated through the individual's consciousness in ways which reflect cultural theories of the relationship of individual to society.

The symbolic interactionist tradition ran in a continuous line from Mead to Goffman. Goffman's early writing on personal identity was echoed in turn in Fredrik Barth's seminal statement on ethnicity which set the style for anthropological studies of ethnic identity for nearly twenty years. Goffman saw personal identity as an intentional construction designed to secure for its bearer the greatest advantage, or the least disadvantage, in his or her dealings with 'significant others'. Indeed he analyses all behaviour as if it was composed of tactical moves in a strategic game. The titles of his early books and articles make the point: 'On facework'; *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*; *Strategic Interaction*, and *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*.

Barth, trained both in Britain and the United States, based his transactional model of social behaviour on a similar calculus of advantage (1966). More specifically, in his seminal essay introducing the volume *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), he argued that ethnic identity is malleable. It is articulated at 'the boundary' since that is where ethnic groups encounter each other, and the identity of any group is modulated to and moderated by that of the other. That is to say that ethnicity is impermanent, adjusting itself to the specific circumstances of any ethnic interaction.

This kind of argument was made with respect to personal identity by Leach, another important influence on Barth (see Paine 1974). In his famous series of Reith Lectures, *A Runaway World?*, Leach said: 'I identify myself with a collective *we* which is then contrasted with some *other*... What *we* are, or what the *other* is will depend upon context' (Leach 1967a: 34). It is not at all clear whether Leach really intended to depict the self as being so ephemeral, so contingent as this. Might he have confused self with persona? It seems unlikely. The wording seems deliberate: 'I identify myself...'. There is no suggestion in this formulation that I associate

myself with a group for merely public purposes; rather I see myself in the character of a group which is itself constituted by the requirement for contradefinition. This contingency theory of the self was later developed by Boon into a view of *all* identity—ethnic, cultural, linguistic, sectarian—as being contrastive. Boon characterises these boundary transactions as ‘playing the vis-à-vis’ (1982). How can this notion of shifting selfhood be squared with the demand for a stable, core self?

The answer, which we shall explore at some length later, again derives from American social psychology, in which it is especially associated with Ralph Turner. It sees the individual as essentially a basket of selves which come to the surface at different social moments as appropriate. The basket, the container of these selves, is the individual’s identity. A.L.Epstein puts it as follows:

Identity...is essentially a concept of synthesis. It represents the process by which the person seeks to integrate his various statuses and roles, as well as his diverse experiences, into a coherent image of self.

(Epstein 1978:101)

## THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

The compelling requirement for a strong sense of self extends beyond individuals to groups, large and small. A sense of collective self may be qualitatively different from that of individual self, but the imperative need for identity is not less. A self conscious perspective explains this imperative: groups have to struggle against their own contradictions, which lie precisely in the fact that they are composed of individuals, self conscious individuals, whose differences from each other have to be resolved and reconciled to a degree which allows the group to be viable and to cohere. Moreover, as a collective entity it has also to suffer and reconcile the competing claims made on it by its collective associates. The segmentary world view so familiar to Arabists is by no means limited to the Bedouin: I am an individual; I am a member of a sibling group. I compete with my siblings for the attention of our parents. I and my siblings together protect our interests with respect to groups of siblings who belong to other families in our village or our clan. We families, related to each other by descent or by locality or by some other means, identify our common interests against those of another group of allies, and so forth. But, at the same time, we are also having to satisfy, or to fend off, the claims of those with whom we have trading relations, ethnic peers, would-be political allies, etc., and to

do so without impugning the integrity of the group's collective identity. It really is a bit of a puzzle how we manage to square these circles.

It may seem something of an intellectual mystification to characterise as a puzzle a social competence which we ordinarily take for granted. However, it is just an anthropological way of formulating the contradiction which we commonly experience between our sociality and our individuality, a contradiction which, far from being taken for granted, frequently causes us anguish, stress and perplexity. The state and other powerful social agencies compel us to compromise our individuality in our dealings with them by squeezing us into categories. The effect of this constraint is that we belong to society as members of collective entities (whether categories or groups) rather than as individuals. The application form compels me to render myself in ways which are not of my choosing. It would be a futile gesture to demand that whoever reviews my application for a passport or a driving licence or a job or a club membership should consider me—ME—the whole man. Instead, I have to contort my conscious self into: a husband; father of three sons; university professor; born in London; resident in Edinburgh; bearer of visible identifying features, etc., etc. My protest that these structural properties taken together do not add up to me are of no account: indeed, it is a mark of my eccentricity. Our social membership requires us repeatedly to belittle ourselves in this way. Individuality and socialness seem to be in contradiction to each other.

Of course, this is an entirely unoriginal thought in the tradition of Western social and political theory which bore on the development of social anthropology. It presages the need to distinguish individualism from individuality, a discussion which will be pursued in some detail in Chapter 7. The distinction has not always been clear. While Marx could entertain the idea of individuality as an aspiration for liberated human-kind, individualism was clearly regarded as a symptom of the alienation of individual from class. In the condition of alienation, we are inclined to confuse the nature and cause of our travails: to see them as attaching peculiarly to us *qua* individuals; indeed, to see ourselves as specifically marked out as individuals by fate or by other people's malice. The rationale for the achievement of class consciousness is to bring about in such alienated individuals the recognition of their common condition since it can be rectified only by common action. There is thus an intriguing paradox in the Marxist scheme. The object of communism is to restore people to the condition of completeness ordained for them by nature but withheld from them by the development of capitalism. Although barely spelled out by Marx, this completeness is intelligible only as the total

fulfilment of the individual as a hewer of wood, critic and drawer of water. Yet, this ideal can be accomplished only by the successive attenuation of individuality which marked the evolution of capitalism, and which has to be pursued to its logical conclusion through the revolutionary process which is to unwind the capitalist structure and to wither away its state mechanisms. The ultimate instrument of this revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat, anathematises the individual, reduces him or her to the spiritual ashes of the cadre or the assembly line.

Although proceeding from a very different notion of human nature, Durkheim too saw an essential contradiction between individual and society. But whereas Marx's communism envisaged a reconciliation of the contradiction by eliminating the ways in which society compromises the individual, Durkheim's objective was just the opposite. In his view, individualism revealed the failure of social integration, and could therefore be regarded as pathological. It was a failure which eventuated in the condition of *anomie*. Anomic individuals, lacking the means to organise their behaviour, are literally normless. They behave in a kind of moral isolation. Without guidelines, they have no means of orientating themselves to others, no means of organising their behaviour through their expectations of how others might respond to them, simply because they cannot have any such expectations. Durkheim saw this awful normlessness as a consequence of a malfunctioning society, rather than of pathological individual psychology. Its extreme manifestation is suicide, and the examples of *anomie* which he gives in *Le Suicide* all point to the sudden loss of norm and normative constraint: the newly widowed man, unprepared for freedom from the regulations and restraints which inhere in the normal domestic routine; the speculator, unable to calculate the odds in an abnormally booming market. He generalised the condition from individuals and extended it to other individual components of society—groups of one kind or another—which were inadequately integrated into society as a whole and engaged in social analogues of *anomie* suicide: striking, fighting and pursuing unrealisable sectional interests.

Marx and Durkheim both saw a contradiction between society and the individual, but resolved it in opposite ways. Marx invoked the full panoply of state power over the individual to bring about a society in which social control of the individual would be minimised and replaced by something rather like a Rousseauian General Will to explain the compliance of individuals with each other. Durkheim argued for the maximisation of society's control over individuals (and over its individual parts). That was what motivated his advocacy of the division

of labour which was, for Marx, the quintessential manifestation of alienation.

If we consider the ways in which modern social anthropology has treated the problematic relationship of individual to society, we find not surprisingly that the influence of Durkheim has predominated. Right through the traditions of structural-functionalism and British structuralism, the individual was consigned to membership of structural elements of a society: a lineage or segmentary lineage; a village, caste, or some other collectivity. In so far as they were considered at all, individuals were presented as refracting the conditions and characteristics of these collective entities. In fairness, this was less a reflection of ethnographers' lack of imagination than it was the consequence of prevailing theoretical fashion. For example, Radcliffe-Brown was consistent both with his positivist forebears and with subsequent Parsonian sociology in his view of society as a mechanism (in Durkheim's paradigm, an organism) the various parts of which could be objectively identified and specified by reference to their unique functions. Function was related to the logic by which the mechanism was configured: it was a matter of what any component contributed to the functioning of the whole. Its description and explanation were scientific matters which could be evaluated by the degree to which they conformed to the correct analytical procedures. There is little to choose in this respect between the positivism of Radcliffe-Brown's *A Natural Science of Society* (1957) and Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method*—nor even, come to that, of Weber's *Methodology of the Social Sciences*.

### **SOCIETY : INDIVIDUAL :: FORM : MEANING**

Anthropologists did not attribute any importance to the problem of what these structures actually meant to those who populated them. In this kind of theoretical scheme, people, individuals, were important only as structures in themselves, or as related to structure in some identifiable way. The view has persisted into the present day, not least through the writings of Louis Dumont. Dumont is one of the scholars responsible for perpetuating the indefensible contention that the individual is a peculiarly Western concern, an error which is attributable to his failure to make the distinction between individuality and individualism to which I referred above (see, especially, Dumont 1986). Two mistakes follow from this neglect. The first is the denial to non-Western cultures of concepts and values of individuality, a contention which is clearly contradicted by the ethnographic record, even for India,

the area of Dumont's special ethnographic interest (see, for example, Mines 1988). The second is the axiomatic dichotomisation he makes between individualistic and holistic sociologies and ideologies, and which he reads into the very fabric of their respective societies. The opposition itself seems unsubtle in its attribution of monolithic character to so large-scale an entity as the aggregates we call 'societies'. But it is also a crude reduction of the variations among societies and their organising ideas into these polar types (see Morris 1992:262–74).

Even in the rather different French structuralist tradition, known to us principally through the work of Lévi-Strauss, Barthes and de Heusch, individuality tends to be subordinated to the uniformities that are supposedly present in the ways in and through which human cognition is structured. With the important and intriguing exception of Mauss, the French holistic tradition sees individuality as a theoretical and practical problem. Theoretically, it is a deviation from the norm which requires explanation. Practically, it is an aberration which requires constraint. Hence, we encounter the implicit or explicit assumption that social structures, to which the analyst should be able objectively to assign functions, determine the meanings which their members find in the world, meanings which are consonant with the functions identified by socio-anthropological analysis. Both theoretically and normatively individuals are regarded as the determined products of their social environments.

The holistic tradition, so influential among American sociologists and the British structural anthropologists, stresses the need for society to impose itself over individuals and to imprint itself on their consciousnesses. It is out of this kind of programme that there emerged a concern with 'socialisation', the processes through which society retrieves its neophyte members from what would otherwise be a state of nature. The task is much more fundamental than one of explicit education, but inheres in such basic cultural concepts of cognition and classification as those of normality and deviancy, gender, sexuality and emotion (see Erchak 1992). In order to explain differences among members in their social behaviour, this kind of sociological determinism has to resort to such essentially psychological concepts as those of personality and intelligence, provided that society is functioning 'normally' (whatever that may mean). It is a theory which allows explanation to emerge from the more or less mechanical association of meaning with structure. Members are standardised by socialisation; even individuality may be socially ascribed, as when a community designates an individual as 'a character', and inscribes the character in a nickname (see e.g. Cohen

1978). And, when they depict social process in this bleak manner as a matter of conformity to social and cultural standards, it is hardly surprising that these anthropologists can indulge in generalisation with so few ethnographic and theoretical qualms.

Of course, this style of anthropology was not limited to accounts of individuals, but extended to the interpretation of social phenomena generally. It is the 'representational' style which regards symbols as 'standing for' particular referents which can be objectively identified (rather than just being means for conveying the raw material for individuals' interpretative work), which sees religions as comprehensible and explicable through the analysis of their dogmatic texts (rather than through their perception and interpretation by believers), and which in its later Lévi-Straussian incarnation sees myths as being explainable by their reduction into binary structures. It may not be too much to say that this was an anthropology in which people *qua* individuals were almost incidental, indeed, were ignorable if they could not be generalised into some category or other. It was only much later in the history of anthropology, when meaning was more generally recognised as problematic and when social differentiation in every respect was recognised as being normal, that problems of generalisation were pushed to the centre of the methodological stage and the approach to the individual changed appreciably.

This maturation out of the earlier generalising tendency was overdue. In saying this, I suggest neither that anthropology should be able to account for social behaviour and human nature in all their infinite varieties, nor that we should regard the individual as paramount. Both propositions seem manifestly absurd. My objection to the kind of generalisation in which we indulged is that it has little or no authenticity in our *own* experience. Therefore, I do not see how we can be content with it as an account of *other* people. Most of us will occasionally have felt ill-served, even outraged, by having had attitudes imputed to us because we are categorised in certain ways. We feel these impressions of ourselves to be inadequate or inaccurate expressions of the people we believe ourselves to be. Statements of these general kinds are made about 'students', 'Brits', 'Yids', 'Prods', 'Blacks', 'intellectuals', 'tourists' and so forth, labels which we may well regard as inappropriate descriptions of ourselves, even if we belong to these categories. Our disenchantment with them may even extend to a feeling of injustice: we take seriously the importance of representing ourselves precisely, and anything less is misleading, and may be demeaning.

There is nothing novel in saying that the stereotype is a crude device. The issues raised by its use in ethnography are not just those of its

crudity, but also the question of whether we are aware that we are indulging in it. It is a mode of generalisation which ignores or neglects the rich diversity among people in a kind of deference to those features which they might be construed as having in common. As such, it confuses *social form* with substance, reiterating the fallacy of the “representational” anthropology discussed above: the meaning conveyed to any individual by a symbol is neglected in favour of the symbol’s formal character; the meaning of belief is obscured by its dogmatic statement; the character of an individual is displaced by the formal matrix into which our theories can squeeze the person.

I emphasise that it is not my intention to reinvent the wheel of methodological individualism, nor to allow individuality to obscure commonality. People *do* have things in common socially—culture has always been the premise of my own anthropology—and I do not dispute that they should be the focus of anthropological enquiry. All I plead for here is that we should pay more careful attention to their limits, and to the ways in which they impinge upon individuals, than we have done in the past.

## SELF AGAINST ORTHODOXY

I have suggested above that we cannot take for granted the existence of common understandings and meanings among even closely knit groups of people: that is, that we should always be careful to distinguish between the appearance and the reality of an interpretation common to different individuals. I will argue and illustrate the point in greater detail in later chapters. But for the moment, let me hasten to acknowledge that within groups of people there will be a modicum of agreement; at the very least, there will be a feeling among the members that they do share a modicum of agreement. This sentiment may be regarded as a *sine qua non* of the group’s very existence, suggesting that however little the members may actually share with each other, it must be more than they share with members of, what they recognise as, other groups.

The interpretations which people make of behaviour, of symbols, of the world, are not usually random. Although profoundly influenced by personal experience, they are made within terms which are characteristic of a given group, and are affected (I deliberately put it no more strongly than this) by its language, its ecology, its traditions of belief and ideology, and so on. The vehicles of interpretation are symbols, which are by their very nature malleable, manoeuvrable, manipulable by those who use them. It is this character of symbols which permits them to be shaped to the interpretative requirements or inclinations of their

individual users, and which reveals as misguided the representational theory of symbols as 'standing for' other things. If symbols did indeed refer objectively to other things they would be redundant: why use a symbol if instead you can simply refer to the thing for which it supposedly stands? Their potency lies in their capacity to refer to these 'other things' in ways which allow their common form to be retained and shared among the members of a group, while not imposing on these individuals the constraints of uniform meaning. Symbols can be made to fit the circumstances of the individual (see Cohen 1985).

The argument may be illustrated by considering an ethnographic study of the relationship between religious believers and the dogmatic symbols of their organised religion. In his study of a Pietist congregation in Stockholm, Stromberg argues that the members use the Church's theology, the dogmas which they supposedly share by virtue of their common membership of the Church, and their common liturgy to make entirely personal commitments to their faith. This personal discretion, the individualisation of religious belief and practice, is an explicit and distinguishing feature of Pietism. It is a faith which denies the integrity of orthodoxy, and which makes personal experience the very foundation of its beliefs (Stromberg 1986:16). The religion offers its members common forms, and the church offers them the opportunity for assembly; to this extent they are congregants. But so far as their meanings are concerned, these forms and structures are insubstantial. Members render them intelligible to themselves through their personal experience of their faith—experience which Stromberg renders as 'commitment'. By individualising these putatively common structures, members transform them to the extent that their common-ness may well become illusory. Therefore, Stromberg says,

people may share commitments without sharing beliefs; it follows that they may constitute a community without that community being based in consensus.

(Stromberg 1986:13)

And further,

the fundamental point which must be grasped...is not that the individual is more highly valued than the community but, rather, that the individual is in a logical and theological sense *prior to* community.

(Stromberg 1986:19)

And, finally,

common discourse is forged out of diverse meanings rather than shared ones.

(Stromberg 1986:51)

I would suggest that although Pietism may be unusual within the JudaeoChristian tradition in making explicit the creativity and agency of self, it is really making a virtue out of what is inevitably the case. However powerful their orthodoxies may be, however strictly enforced their dogmatic regimes, no Church or religion can legislate for a uniformity of experience and meaning. If I was a practising Jew, I would spend Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in synagogue with my fellow Jews, fasting as they all fast, reciting the same liturgy as they do at more or less the same time, beating my breast to give emphasis to the confession of my misdeeds and to ask for forgiveness and a clean sheet in the divine ledger. I would bow with them in a gesture of reverence as the scroll of law, the *sefer torah*, is carried past us in procession. With my neighbours, I would almost certainly utter a comment of relief when the *shofar* was sounded in the evening to signal the end of the fast. I would nod in agreement or acceptance during the Rabbi's sermon as he pronounced authoritative interpretations of scripture. But nothing in all of this choreographed, uniform behaviour entails that my experience of prayer, or of faith, or of the religion generally is the same as anyone else's. We may weep together or exult together, but still the meanings which religious commitment have for us may be quite different. At the very least, we cannot know that they are the same. We deploy the same symbols to signal the commonality of our beliefs, but this says little about how we interpret and make meaningful to ourselves those symbols.<sup>2</sup>

Symbols enable individuals to experience and express their attachment to a society or group without compromising their individuality. Indeed, the members of a group may be unlikely to recognise the idiosyncratic uses to which each puts their shared symbols, so that they are unaware of these distortions of meaning. If a concert hall is acoustically deficient, the music played in it will not sound the same to members of the audience who are seated in different sections of it. Symbols mediate stimuli in a similar way, so that the stimuli are rendered sensible by members in ways which we cannot assume to be the same. We may all listen to the same Mahler symphony, but hear it differently. We may all participate in the same ritual, pray the same liturgy, speak the same language, but we cannot assume that these social forms convey to us the same meanings. That is why societies go to extraordinary lengths in the attempt to coerce their members into similar meanings, as we shall see in Chapter 3 when we examine some rites of initiation.

In representational accounts of ritual, the events tend to be described as if their participants are so choreographed that the prescribed orthodoxy of their behaviour displaces their freedom or necessity to think for themselves—as if they become automata. It is description which, perhaps unwittingly, makes audacious claims about the generality of states of mind: ‘the Bemba think that...’; ‘the Bedouin believe Quite apart from generalisation, it also makes gross assumptions about the relationship of action to belief, as if the thoughts or mental states of ritual participants could be read off from their ritual behaviour. Why *do* we make these outrageous assumptions? We know from our own experience that while we *may* become absorbed by some activity, we frequently do not, and go through an apparently absorbing activity while thinking about something else altogether. Which academic has not listened to, even delivered, a lecture while thinking of something quite different? And even if genuinely absorbed, who is to say that the absorption produces a state of mind so hypnotic that it is identical to other people’s who are also engaged in the same activity? This mode of description can be seen as based on a tacit premise that cultural others are different from ourselves. Intentionally or not, this essentially methodological prescription became a substantive statement as well: *we* are self-aware and therefore capable of detachment; *they* are not.

It may be because of this unconscious ethnocentrism that we find ethnographers treating as bizarre aberrations occasional instances of the failure of ritual to compel its participants, such as that of the Sebei girl who ‘cried the knife’, escaping at the last moment from the clutches of her initiators who were about to perform clitoridectomy on her. A week after the event, she claimed to have run in order to escape the malign attentions of a suspected sorcerer who she had spotted in the crowd. She was then made to feel such shame that she threatened suicide (Goldschmidt 1986:102–4). This kind of ethnographic reporting implies that it is not only exceptional for people to resist the discipline of ritual (which it may well be), but unusual for them to think for themselves—a questionable position for anyone to take. It reveals an essentially deterministic anthropology which attributes to social structures the power to mould formulaic thinking among the members of society.

Common forms do not generate common meanings. Recent research which focuses on the personal experience of rituals of initiation, rather than on their sociological significance, shows that even the most coercive forms induce different kinds of reaction and are interpreted differently by different people, even though they are all coerced by them (Poole 1982; and see Chapter 3 below). This being so, the description and

explanation of individuals in terms of their groups or categories must be misleading. Individual and society are too complex and too subtle to be reconciled satisfactorily in so mechanical a fashion. We have to see the relationship between group and individual as questionable. We cannot take belonging or social membership for granted: it is a problem which requires explanation.

One of the most sustained attempts to provide such an explanation for 'post-traditional' societies has been made by Giddens. In his *Modernity and Self-identity* (1991), he treats the self as a 'reflexive project', having to sustain itself by a continuous process of reflection and revision. The problem is to maintain the 'ontological security' of the self in a 'risk culture'. He concedes that 'The self is not a passive entity' but 'has to be reflexively made' (2–3), and considers factors such as trust which might attack this ontological security to see how the self fights back. Its reflexive project is continually to adjust itself as it is implicated in changes in the institutional order, having lost the protection which the individual enjoys in 'the small community' and 'tradition' (32–3), a strangely atavistic evocation of long-discredited distinctions made in anthropology between 'folk' and 'urban' cultures, and between Great and Little traditions.

For Giddens, self-identity (the object of self consciousness)

has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflective activities of the individual.

(Giddens 1991:52)

It is

the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography.

(Giddens 1991:53)

The trouble with this argument is its essentially Durkheimian posture. Giddens' 'structuration theory' treats society (rather than self) as an ontology which somehow becomes independent of its own members, and assumes that the self is required continuously to adjust to it. It fails to see society adequately as informed by, created by selves, and by implication, therefore, fails to accord creativity to selves. The 'agency' which he allows to individuals gives them the power of reflexivity, but not of motivation: they seem doomed to be perpetrators rather than architects of action:

Agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place....

(Giddens 1984:9)

It seems a sadly attenuated self to which we attribute the capacity for action but whose intentionality we neglect either because it can be regarded as incidental (even adventitious) (*ibid.*), or because the agenda for action is set by superior powers (Giddens 1991). It is as if he answers the question of the possibility of society by defining out of existence the problems of selfhood and individuality.

By contrast, attention to selfhood, to the individual's consciousness, resurrects the fundamental question of how society can be possible. How is it that groups can cohere when their members perceive significant differences in them? How can the group 'speak' as a whole to the rest of the world when the internal discourse among its members is so diverse? How does it come to pass that individuals who have such disparate understandings of the group's symbols, and of the world in general, nevertheless come to have such a committed attachment to the group? Under what circumstances are groups mobilised into activity *qua* groups, and when do they languish? How do they mediate between their individual members and the wider society?

These are all recognisably authentic questions for anthropology, indeed for the social sciences generally. The argument I make in this book is that answers to them which somehow assume, explicitly or implicitly, that individuals are made in the image of their societies—to the extent that their consciousness of themselves can be ignored—are too simple to be plausible. We should focus on self consciousness not in order to fetishise the self but, rather, to illuminate society.

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