From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity

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Identity continues to be the problem it was throughout modernity’, says Douglas Kellner, and adds that ‘far from identity disappearing in contemporary society, it is rather reconstructed and redefined’ – though just a few paragraphs later he casts doubts on the feasibility of the selfsame ‘reconstruction and redefinition’, pointing out that ‘identity today becomes a freely chosen game, a theatrical presentation of the self’ and that ‘when one radically shifts identity at will, one might lose control.’ Kellner’s ambivalence reflects the present ambivalence of the issue itself. One hears today of identity and its problems more often than ever before in modern times. And yet one wonders whether the current obsession is not just another case of the general rule of things being noticed only ex post facto: ‘Identity continues to be the problem it was throughout modernity’, says Kellner’s ambivalence reflects the present ambivalence of the issue itself. One hears today of identity and its problems more often than ever before in modern times. And yet one wonders whether the current obsession is not just another case of the general rule of things being noticed only ex post facto: when they vanish, go bust or fall out of joint.

I propose that while it is true that identity ‘continues to be the problem’, this is not ‘the problem it was throughout modernity’. Indeed, if the modern ‘problem of identity’ was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the postmodern ‘problem of identity’ is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open. In the case of identity, as in other cases, the catchword of modernity was creation; the catchword of postmodernity is recycling. Or one may say that if the ‘media which was the message’ of modernity was the photographic paper (think of the relentlessly swelling family albums, tracing page by yellowing page the slow accretion of irreversible and non-erasable identity-yielding events), the ultimately postmodern medium is the videotape (eminently erasable and re-usable, calculated not to hold anything for ever, admitting today’s events solely on condition of effacing yesterday’s ones, oozing the message of universal ‘until-further-noticeness’ of everything deemed worthy of recording). The main identity-bound anxiety of modern times was the worry about durability; it is the concern with commitment-avoidance today. Modernity built in steel and concrete; postmodernity, in bio-degradable plastic.

Identity as such is a modern invention. To say that modernity led to the ‘disembedding’ of identity, or that it rendered the identity ‘unencumbered’, is to assert a pleonasm, since at no time did identity ‘become’ a problem; it was a ‘problem’ from its birth – was born as a problem (that is, as something one needs do something about – as a task), could exist only as a problem; it was a problem, and thus ready to be born, precisely because of that experience of under-determination and free-floatingness which came to be articulated ex post facto as ‘disembeddedment’. Identity would not have congealed into a visible and graspable entity in any other but the ‘disembedded’ or ‘unencumbered’ form.

One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety of behavioural styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people around would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other’s presence. ‘Identity’ is a name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty. Hence ‘identity’, though ostensibly a noun, behaves like a verb, albeit a strange one to be sure: it appears only in the future tense. Though all too often hypostasized as an attribute of a material entity, identity has the ontological status of a project and a postulate. To say ‘postulated identity’ is to say one word too many, as neither there is nor can there be any other identity but a postulated one. Identity is a critical projection of what is demanded and/or sought upon what is; or, more exactly still, an oblique assertion of the inadequacy or incompleteness of the latter.

Identity entered modern mind and practice dressed from the start as an individual task. It was up to the individual to find escape from uncertainty. Not for the first and not for the last time, socially created problems were to be resolved by individual efforts, and collective maladies healed by private medicine. Not that the individuals were left to their own initiative and that their acumen was trusted; quite the contrary – putting the individual responsibility for self-formation on the agenda spawned the host of trainers, coaches, teachers, counsellors and guides all claiming to hold superior knowledge of what identities could be acquired and held. The concepts of identity-building and of culture (that is, of the idea of the individual incompetence, of the need of collective breeding and of the importance of skilful and knowledgeable breeders) were and could only be born together. The ‘disembedded’ identity simultaneously ushered in the individual’s freedom of choice and the individual’s dependency on expert guidance.

Modern life as pilgrimage

The figure of the pilgrim was not a modern invention; it is as old as Christianity. But modernity gave it a new prominence and a seminally novel twist.

When Rome lay in ruins – humbled, humiliated and sacked and pillaged by Alaric’s nomads – St Augustine jotted down the following observation: ‘[I]t is recorded of Cain that he built a city, while Abel, as
though he were a merely a pilgrim on earth, built none.' 'True city of the saints is in heaven'; here on earth, says St Augustine, Christians wander 'as on pilgrimage through time looking for the Kingdom of eternity'.

For pilgrims through time, the truth is elsewhere; the true place is always some distance, some time away. Wherever the pilgrim may be now, it is not where he ought to be, and not where he dreams of being. The distance between the true world and this world here and now is made soon went out of its way to force them into monastic orders, under the supervision of rules and routine.

The Protestants, as Weber told us, accomplished a feat unthinkable for the lonely hermits of yore: they became inner-worldly pilgrims. They invented the way of embarking on pilgrimage without leaving home and of leaving home without becoming homeless. They could do, however, only because the desert stretched and reached deep into their towns right up to their doorsteps. They did not venture into the desert; it was the world of their daily life which was turning more and more 'like the desert'. Like the desert, the world turned placeless; the familiar features had been obliterated, but the new ones which were meant to replace them were given the kind of permanence once thought as unique to the sand dunes. In the new post-Reformation city of modernity, the desert began on the other side of the door.

The Protestant, that pattern-setter (or is he but an allegory?) for the modern man, so Sennett tells us, was 'tempted by wilderness, by a place of emptiness which made no seductive demands of its own upon him'. In this he was not different from the hermit. The difference was that instead of travelling to the desert, the Protestant worked hard to make desert come to him — to remake the world in the likeness of the desert. 'Impersonality, coldness and emptiness are essential words in the Protestant language of environment; they express the desire to see the outside as null, lacking value.' This is the kind of language in which one speaks of the desert: of nothingness waiting to become something, if only for a while; of meaninglessness waiting to be given meaning, if only a passing one; of the space without contours, ready to accept any contour offered, if only until other contours are offered; of a space not scarred with past furrows, yet fertile with expectations of sharp blades; of virgin land yet to be ploughed and tilled; of the land of the perpetual beginning; of the place no-place whose name and identity is not yet. In such a land, the trails are blazed by the destination of the pilgrim, and there are few other tracks to reckon with.

In such a land, commonly called modern society, pilgrimage is no longer a choice of the mode of life; less still is it a heroic or saintly choice. Living one’s life as pilgrimage is no longer the kind of ethical wisdom revealed to, or initiated by, the chosen and the righteous. Pilgrimage is what one does of necessity, to avoid being lost in a desert; to invest the walking with a purpose while wandering the land with no destination. Being a pilgrim, one can do more than walk — one can walk in. One can look back at the footsteps left in the sand and see them as a road. One can present actions. In the words of the present-day theorists, one would say that the hermits were the first to live through the experience of 'disembedded', 'unencumbered' selves. They were god-like, because whatever they did they did at nil nil. Their pilgrimage to God was an exercise in self-construction (this is why the Church, wishing to be the sole connecting link to God, resented the hermits from the start — and soon went out of its way to force them into monastic orders, under the close supervision of rules and routine).

We are pilgrims through time' was, under the pen of St Augustine not an exhortation, but a statement of fact. We are pilgrims whatever we do, and there is little we can do about it even if we wished. Earthly life is but an extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak. 'The desert is the habitat they must choose. The desert of the inner-worldly pilgrims. They may misguide, divert from the straight path, lead astray. They may prove to be obstacles rather than help, traps rather than thoroughfares. They may misguide, divert from the straight path, lead astray. The desert is the habitat they must choose. The desert of the inner-worldly pilgrims. They may prove to be obstacles rather than help, traps rather than thoroughfares. The desert, said Edmond Jabes, 'is a space where one step gives way to the next, whichundoess it, and the horizon means hope for a tomorrow which speaks.' You do not go to the desert to find identity, but to lose it, to lose your personality, to become anonymous. And then something extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak. The desert is the archetype and the greenhouse of the raw, bare, primal and bottom-line freedom that is but the absence of bounds. What made the mediaeval hermits feel so close to God in the desert was the feeling of being themselves god-like: unbound by habit and convention, by the needs of their own bodies and other people’s souls, by their past deeds and
effect on the road past and see it as a progress towards, an advance, a
rushing closer to: one can make a distinction between 'behind' and 'ahead',
and plot the 'road ahead' as a succession of footprints yet to beckmark the
land without features. Destination, the set purpose of life's pilgrimage,
gives form to the formless, makes a whole out of the fragmentary, lends
continuity to the episodic.

The desert-like world commands life to be lived as pilgrimage. But
because life is a pilgrimage, the world at the doorsteps is desert-like,
featureless, as its meaning is yet to be brought into it through the
wandering which would transform it into the track leading to the
finishing line where the meaning resides. This 'bringing in' of meaning
has been called 'identity-building'. The pilgrimage and the desert-like world
he walks acquire their meanings together, and through each other. Both
processes can and must go on because there is a distance between the goal
(the meaning of the world and the identity of the pilgrim, always
not-yet-reached, always in the future) and the present moment (the
station of the wandering and the identity of the wanderer).

Both meaning and identity can exist only as projects, and it is the
distance which enables projects to be. The 'distance' is what we call, in the
'objective' language of space, the experience which in 'subjective',
psychological terms we speak about as dissatisfaction with, and deni­
gation of, the here and now. The 'distance' and 'dissatisfaction' have the
same referent, and both make sense within the life lived as pilgrimage.

It is the difference in amount between the pleasure of satisfaction
which is demanded and that which is actually achieved that provides the
driving factor which will permit of no halting at any position attained,
but, in the poet's words 'Presses ever forward unsubdued' (Faust),
observed Freud in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Janine Chasseguet-
Smirgel's offers an extended commentary on that seminal observation,
tracing the beginning of self-development, identity-building etc. to the
primary condition of delayed gratification, of the never-to-be-bridged
distance between the ego-ideal and the realities of the present.

'Distance' translates as 'delay'... Passage through space is a function
of time, distances are measured by the time needed to cancel them. 'Here'
is the waiting, 'there' is the gratification. How far is it from here to there,
from the waiting to gratification, from the void to meaning, from the
project to identity? Ten years, twenty? As long as it takes to live one's
vocation through? Time one can use to measure distances must be of the
sort the rulers are - straight, in one piece, with equidistant markings,
made of tough and solid material. And such was, indeed, the time of
modern living-towards-projects. Like life itself, it was directional, con­
tinuous, and unbendable. It 'marched on' and 'passed by'. Both life and
time were made to the measure of pilgrimage.

For the pilgrim, for the modern man, this meant in practical terms that
he could-should-had-to select his point of arrival fairly early in life with
confidence, certain that the straight line of life-time ahead will not bend,
that all diligent work of construction may prove to be in vain: its allurement is the fact of not being bound by past trials, being never irrevocably defeated, always 'keeping the options open'. The horror and allure alike make life-as-pilgrimage hardly feasible as a strategy and unlikely to be chosen as one. Not by many, anyway. And not with great chance of success.

In the life-game of the postmodern consumers the rules of the game keep changing in the course of playing. The sensible strategy is therefore to keep each game short - so that a sensibly played game of life calls for the splitting of one big all-embracing game with huge stakes into a series of brief and narrow games with small ones. 'Determination to live one day at a time,' depicting daily life as a succession of minor emergencies become the guiding principles of all rational conduct.

To keep the game short means to beware long-term commitments. To refuse to be 'fixed' one way or the other. Not to get tied to the place. Not to wed one's life to one vocation only. Not to swear consistency and loyalty to anything and anybody. Not to control the future, but to refuse to mortgage it: to take care that the consequences of the game do not outlive the game itself, and to renounce responsibility for such as do. To forbid the past to bear on the present. In short, to cut the present off at both ends, to sever the present from history, to abolish time in any other form, to cut the present from history, to abolish time in any other form.

The overall result is the fragmentation of time into episodes, each one cut from its past and from its future, each one self-enclosed and self-contained. Time is no longer a river, but a collection of ponds and pools.

No consistent and cohesive life strategy emerges from the experience which can be gathered in such a world - none remotely reminiscent of the sense of purpose and the rugged determination of the pilgrimage. Nothing emerges from that experience but certain, mostly negative, rules of the thumb: do not plan your trips too long - the shorter the trip, the greater the chance of completing it; do not get emotionally attached to people you meet at the stopover - the less you care about them, the less will cost you to move on; do not commit yourself too strongly to people, places, causes - you cannot know how long they will last or how long you will count them worthy of your commitment; do not think of your current resources as of capital - savings lose value fast, and the once-vaunted 'cultural capital' tends to turn in no time into cultural liability. Above all, do not delay gratification, if you can help it. Whatever you are after, try to get it now, you cannot know whether the gratification you seek today will be still be gratifying tomorrow.

I propose that in the same way as the pilgrim was the most fitting
The pilgrim’s successors

The stroller

Charles Baudelaire baptized Constantin Guy ‘the painter of modern life’ because Guy painted city streets scenes the way they were seen by the stroller (flâneur). Commenting on Baudelaire’s observation, Walter Benjamin made flâneur into a household name of cultural analysis and the central symbolic figure of the modern city. All strands of modern life seemed to meet and tie together in the pastime and the experience of the stroller: going for a stroll as one goes to a theatre, finding oneself among strangers and being a stranger to them (in the crowd but not of the crowd), taking in those strangers as ‘surfaces’ – so that ‘what one sees’ exhausts ‘what they are’ – and above all seeing and knowing of them episodically; psychically, strolling means rehearsing human reality as a series of episodes, that is as events without past and with no consequences. It also means rehearsing meetings as mis-meetings, as encounters without impact: the fleeting fragments of other persons’ lives the stroller spun off into stories at will – it was his perception that made them into actors, let alone the plot of the drama they play. The stroller was the past master of simulation – he imagined himself a scriptwriter and a director, pulling the strings of other people’s lives without damaging or distorting their fate. The stroller practised the ‘as if’ life and the ‘as if’ engagement with other people’s life; he put paid to the opposition between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’; he was the creator without penalties attached to creation, the master who need not fear the consequences of his deeds, the bold one never facing the bills of courage. The stroller had all the pleasures of modern life without the torments attached.

Life-as-strolling was a far cry from the life-as-pilgrimage. What the pilgrim did in all seriousness, the stroller mocked playfully; in the process, he got rid of the costs and the effects alike. The stroller fitted in the modern scene, but then he hid in it. He was the man of leisure and he did his strolling in time of leisure. The stroller and the strolling waited at the periphery for their hour to arrive. And it did arrive – or rather it was brought by the postmodern avatar of the heroic producer into playful consumer. Now the strolling, once the activity practised by marginal people on the margins of ‘real life’, came to be life itself, and the question of ‘reality’ need not be dealt with any more.

‘Malls’ in its original meaning refers to the tracts for strolling. Now most of the malls are shopping malls, tracts to stroll while you shop and to shop in while you stroll. The merchandisers sniffed out the attraction and seductive power of strollers’ habits and set about moulding them into life. Parisian arcades have been promoted retrospectively to the bridgeheads of the times to come; the postmodern islands in the modern sea. Shopping malls make the world (or the carefully walled-off, electronically monitored and closely guarded part of it) safe for life-as-strolling. Or, rather, shopping malls are the worlds made by the bespoke designers to the measure of the stroller. The sites of mis-meetings, of encounters guaranteed to be episodic, of the present prised off from the past and the future, of surfaces glossing over surfaces. In these worlds, every stroller may imagine himself to be a director, though all strollers are the objects of direction. That direction is, as their own used to be, unobstrusive and invisible (though, unlike theirs, seldom inconsequential), so that baits feel like desires, pressures like intentions, seduction like decision-making; in the shopping malls, in life as shopping-to-stroll and strolling-to-shop, dependence dissolves in freedom, and freedom seeks dependence.

The malls initiated the postmodern promotion of the stroller, but also prepared the ground for further elevation (or is it purification?) of the stroller’s life-model. The latter has been achieved in the teletcy (Henning Bech’s felicitous term), the city-as-the-stroller’s-haunt, distilled to its pure essence, now entering the ultimate shelter of the totally private, secure, locked and burglar-proof world of the lonely nomad, where the physical presence of strangers does not conceal or interfere with their psychical out-of-reachedness. In its teletcy version, the streets and the shopping malls have been cleansed of all that which from the stroller’s point of view was sport-spoiling, an impurity, redundancy or waste – so that what has been retained can shine and be enjoyed in all its unsullied purity. In Bech’s words, ‘the screen mediated world of the teletcy exists only by way of surfaces; and, tenentially, everything can and must be turned into an object for the gaze. . . .’ There is, by way of ‘readings’ of the
surface signs, opportunity for a much more intense and changing empathy in and out of identities, because of the possibilities of uninterfered and continual watching. . . Television is totally non-committal.10 The ultimate freedom is screen directed, lived in the company of surfaces, and called zapping.

The vagabond

The vagabond was the bane of early modernity, the bugbear that spurred the rulers and the philosophers into an ordering and legislating frenzy.11 The vagabond was masterless, and being masterless (out of control, out of frame, on the loose) was one condition modernity could not bear and thus spent the rest of its history fighting. The Elizabethan legislators were obsessed with the need to rule the vagrants out of the roads and back to the parishes 'where they belonged' (but which they left precisely because they did not belong any more). The vagabonds were the advanced troops or guerrilla units of the post-traditional chaos (construed by the rulers, in the usual fashion of using a mirror to paint the image of the Other, as anarchy), and they had to go in order (that is, space managed and monitored) was to prevail. It was the free-roaming vagabonds who made the search for new, state-managed, societal-level order imperative and urgent.

What made vagabonds so terrifying was their apparent freedom to move and so to escape the net of heretofore locally based control. Worse than that still, the movements of the vagabond are unpredictable; unlike the pilgrim the vagabond has no set destination. You do not know where he will move next, because he himself does not know nor care much. Vagabondage has no advance itinerary – its trajectory is patched together bit by bit, one bit at a time. Each place is for the vagabond a stopover, but he never knows how long he will stay in any of them; this will depend on the generosity and patience of the residents, but also on news of other places arousing new hopes (the vagabond is pushed from behind by hopes frustrated, and pulled forward by hopes untested). The vagabond decides where to turn when he comes to the crossroads; he chooses the next stay by reading the names on the road signs. It is easy to control the pilgrim, so utterly predictable thanks to his self-determination. To control the wayward and erratic vagabond is a daunting task (though this proved to be one of the few tasks modern ingenuity did resolve).

Wherever the vagabond goes, he is a stranger; he can never be 'the native', the 'settled one', one with 'roots in the soil' (too fresh is the memory of his arrival – that is, of his being elsewhere before). Entertaining a dream of going native can only end in mutual recrimination and bitterness. It is better, therefore, not to grow too accustomed to the place. And, after all, other places beckon, not tested yet, perhaps more hospitable, certainly able to offer new chances. Cherishing one's out-of-place is a sensible strategy. It gives all decisions the 'until-further-notice' flavour. It allows one to keep the options open. It prevents mortgaging the future. If natives cease to amuse, one can always try to find the more amusing ones.

The early modern vagabond wandered through the settled places; he was a vagabond because in no place could he be settled as the other people had been. The settled wore many, the vagabonds few. Post-modernity reversed the ratio. Now there are few 'settled' places left. The 'forever settled' residents wake up to find the places (places in the land, places in society and places in life), to which they 'belong', no longer existing or no longer accommodating; neat streets turn mean, factories vanish together with skills, jobs no longer find buyers, knowledge turns into ignorance, professional experience becomes liability, secure networks of relations fall apart and foul the place with putrid waste. Now the vagabond is a vagabond not because of the reluctance or difficulty of settling down, but because of the scarcity of settled places. Now the odds are that the people he meets in his travels are other vagabonds – vagabonds today or vagabonds tomorrow. The world is catching up with the vagabond, and catching up fast. The world is re-tailoring itself to the measure of the vagabond.

The tourist

Like the vagabond, the tourist used once to inhabit the margins of 'properly social' action (though the vagabond was marginal man, while tourism was marginal activity), and has now moved to its centre (in both senses). Like the vagabond, the tourist is on the move. Like the vagabond, he is everywhere he goes in, but nowhere the place he is in. But there are also differences, and they are seminal.

First, the balance between ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors in the case of the tourist shifts toward the ‘pull’ end. The tourist moves on purpose (or so he thinks). His movements are first of all 'in order to', and only secondarily (if at all) ‘because of’. The purpose is new experience; the tourist is a conscious and systematic seeker of experience, of a new and different experience, of the experience of difference and novelty – as the joys of the familiar wear off and cease to allure. The tourists want to immerse themselves in a strange and bizarre element (a pleasant feeling, a tickling and rejuvenating feeling, like letting oneself be buffeted by sea waves) – on condition, though, that it will not stick to the skin and thus can be shaken off whenever they wish. They choose the elements to jump into according to how strange, but also how innocuous, they are; you recognize the favourite tourist haunts by their blatant, ostentatious (if painstakingly groomed) oddity, but also by the profusion of safety cushions and well marked escape routes. In the tourist’s world, the strange is tame, domesticated, and no longer frightening; shocks come in a
package deal with safety. This makes the world seem infinitely gentle, obedient to the tourist's wishes and whims, ready to oblige; but also a do-it-yourself world, pleasingly pliable, kneaded by the tourist's desire, made and remade with one purpose in mind: to excite, please and amuse. There is no other purpose to justify the presence of that world and the tourist's presence in it. The tourist's world is fully and exclusively structured by aesthetic criteria (ever more numerous writers who note the 'aestheticization' of the postmodern world to the detriment of its other, also moral, dimensions, describe - even if unaware of it - the world as seen by the tourist; the 'aestheticized' world is the world inhabited by tourists). Unlike in the life of the vagabond, tough and harsh realities resistant to aesthetic sculpting do not interfere here. One may say that what the tourist buys, what he pays for, what he demands to be delivered (or goes to court if delivery is delayed) is precisely the right not to be bothered, freedom from any but aesthetic spacing.

Second, unlike the vagabond who has little choice but to reconcile himself to the state of homelessness, the tourist has a home; or should have, at any rate. Having a home is a part of the safety package: for the pleasure to be unclouded and truly engrossing, there must be somewhere a homely and cozy, indubitably 'owned' place to go to when the present adventure is over, or if the voyage proves not as adventurous as expected. 'The home' is the place to take off the armour and to unpack - the place where nothing needs to be proved and defended as everything is just there, obvious and familiar. It is the placity of home that sends the tourist to seek new adventures, but it is the selfsame placity which renders the search of adventures an uncloudedly pleasurable pastime: whatever has happened to my face here, in the tourist land, or whichever mask I put on it, my 'real face' is in safe keeping, immune, stain-resistant, unsullied. . . . The problem is, though, that as life itself turns into an extended tourist escapade, as tourist conduct becomes the mode of life and the tourist stance grows into the character, it is less and less clear which one of the visiting places is the home. The opposition 'here' I am but visiting, there is my home' stays clear-cut as before, but it is not easy to point out where the 'there' is. 'There' is increasingly stripped of all material features; the 'home' it contains is not even imaginary (each mental image would be too specific, too constraining), but postulated; what is postulated is having a home, not a particular building, street, landscape or company of people. Jonathan Matthew Schwartz advises us 'to distinguish the homesick searching from the nostalgic yearning'; the latter is, at least ostensibly, past oriented, while the home in homesickness is as a rule 'in the future perfect tense. . . . It is an urge to feel at home, to recognize one's surroundings and belong there. 10 Homesickness means a dream of belonging; to be, for once, of the place, not merely in. And yet if the present is notoriously the destination of all future tense, the future tense of 'homesickness' is an exception. The value of home for the homesick lies precisely in its tendency to stay in the future tense for ever.

In play, there is neither inevitability nor accident (there is no accident in a world that knows no necessity or determination); nothing is fully predictable and controllable, but nothing is totally immutable and irrevocable either. The world of play is soft yet elusive; in it, the thing that matters most is how well one plays one's hand. Of course, there is such a thing as a 'stroke of luck' - when cards are stacked in one's favour or wind helps the ball into the net. But the 'stroke of luck' (or misfortune, as it were) does not lend the world the toughness it conspicuously lacks; it only signals the limits of how far playing one's cards right may go in making things certain, but shares in the no-necessity no-accident status of the player's calculations.

In play, the world itself is a player, and luck and misfortune are but the moves of the world-as-player. In the confrontation between the player and the world there are neither laws nor lawlessness, neither order nor chaos. There are just the moves - more or less clever, shrewd or tricky, insightful or misguided. The point is to guess the moves of the adversary and anticipate them, prevent or pre-empt - to stay 'one ahead'. The rules the player may follow can be no more than rules of thumb, heuristic, not algorithmic instructions. The player's world is the world of risks, of intuition, of precaution-taking.

Time in the world-as-play divides into a succession of games. Each game is made of conventions of its own; each is a separate 'province of meaning' - a little universe of its own, self-enclosed and self-contained. Each demands that disbelief be suspended - though in each game a different disbelief is to be suspended. Those who refuse to obey the conventions do not rebel against the game; they only opt out and cease to be players. But the 'game goes on', and whatever the quitters say and do after that does not influence it a bit. The walls of the game are impenetrable, the voices outside reach the inside only as a muted, inarticulate noise.

Each game has its beginning and its end. The worry of the player is that each game should indeed start from the beginning, from 'square one', as
Impact is somewhat less decisive than in the times of 'classic' modernity. I action from moral judgement and, indeed, moral significance. These processes are by no means a thing of the past - but it seems that their result was, on the one hand, the tendency to substitute ethics, that is a socially constructed and managed supra-individual agencies, or through floating responsibility inside a bureaucratic 'rule of nobody'. "The overall result was, on the one hand, the tendency to substitute ethics, that is a law-like code of rules and conventions, for moral sentiments, intuitions and urges of autonomous selves; and, on the other, the tendency towards 'adiaphorization', that is exemption of a considerable part of human consciousness. There is no contradiction here, though. The cult is no more than a psychological (illusory and anxiety-generating) compensation for the loneliness that inevitably envelops the aesthetically oriented subjects of desire; and it is, moreover, self-defeating, as the consequence-proof interpersonality reduced to 'pure relationships' can generate little intimacy and sustains no trustworthy bridges over the sandpit of estrangement. As Christopher Lasch noted a decade and a half ago, 'the culture of personal relations . . . conceals a thoroughly disenchanted with personal relations, just as the cult of sensuality implies a repudiation of sensuality in all but its most primitive forms'. Our society 'has made deep and lasting friendships, love affairs and marriages increasingly difficult to achieve'.

Political disablement of postmodern men and women arises from the same source as the moral one. Aesthetic spacing, preferred by and dominant in all listed postmodern strategies, differs from other kinds of social spacing (like moral or cognitive) in that it does not choose as its points of reference and orientation the traits and qualities possessed by or ascribed to the objects of spacing, but the attributes of the spacing subject (like interest, excitement, satisfaction or pleasure). As Jean-François
recently observed, 'the objects and the contents have become indifferent. The only question is whether they are “interesting”’. The world turns into the pool of potentially interesting objects, and the task is to squeeze out of them as much interest as they may yield. The task and its successful accomplishment stand and fall, however, by the effort and ingenuity of the interest-seeker. There is little or nothing that can be done by, and about, the objects themselves. Focusing on the interest-seeking subject blurs the contours of the world in which the interest is to be sought. Met (mis-met?) only perfunctorily, in passing, surface deep, the objects do not come into vision as entities in their own right, such as may need more vigour, improvement, or a different shape altogether; we do not ratinate on the way to rectify commodities displayed on the supermarket shelves — if we find them unsatisfactory, we pass them by, with our trust in the supermarket system uncathed, in the hope that products answering our interests will be found on the next shelf or in the next shop. Emancipation, says Lyotard, 'is no more situated as an alternative to reality, as an ideal set to conquer and force itself upon reality from outside'; in consequence, the militant practice has been replaced by a defensive one, one that is easily assimilated by the 'system' since it is now assumed that the latter contains all the bits and pieces from which the 'emancipated self' will be eventually assembled. The 'system' has done all it possibly can. The rest is up to those who 'play it'.

Exaggerating the picture, but only slightly, one may say that in popular perception the duty of the postmodern citizen (much like the duty of the inmates of Rabelais's Abbey of Telèrme) is to lead an enjoyable life. To treat subjects as citizens, the state is obliged to supply the facilities deemed necessary for such life, and not to give occasion for doubt that performance of the duty is feasible. This does not necessarily mean that the life of so reduced citizens must be unmitigated bliss. Discontent does arise, sometimes so acute as to prompt action reaching beyond the ordinary preoccupation with self-care. This happens time and again, even regularly, whenever the limits of individual pursuit of the 'interesting' are brought into relief; whenever factors evidently beyond individual control (like for instance planning decisions about a new bypass, motorway, residential developments likely to attract 'outsiders', closing a hospital, 'rationalizing' a school or a college) interfere with the interest-content of the environment. And yet the momentary explosions of solidarity action which may result do not alter the essential traits of 'the sum of its parts'. Besides, the diffuse grudges and grievances, as a rule spawning one-issue campaigns, do not add up, condense or show a propensity for reinforcing each other. On the contrary — vying with each other for the scarce resource of public attention, they divide as much as they unite. One may say that the bones of contention do not fit together to form a skeleton around which a non-fragmentary and continuous, shared engagement could be wrapped.

Stuart Hall has pithily summarized the resulting condition and the prospects it may or may not hold: 'We don't have alternative means by which adults can benefit from the ways in which people have released themselves from the bonds of traditionalist forms of living and thinking, and still exert responsibilities for others in a free and open way. We have no notion of democratic citizenship in this sense.' Or perhaps we may have — imagine — such a notion; what we cannot imagine, having no time left for exercising imagination, is a network of relationships that would accommodate and sustain such a notion. It is, in the end, the old truth all over again: each society sets limits to the life strategies that can be imagined, and certainly to those which can be practised. But the kind of society we live in limits such strategy(ies) as may critically and militantly question its principles and thus open the way to new strategies, at present excluded because of their non-viability. . . .

Dedicated to Judith Adler

Notes

5 Sennett, Conscience of the Eye, pp. 44, 46.
8 Ibid., pp. 57, 62.
Questions of Cultural Identity

16 Says Lasch: 'Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to “relate”, overcoming the “fear of pleasure”' (*Culture of Narcissism*, p. 29). Let us add that the diffuse, unfocused feeling that not all is well with the programme tends to be articulated as an issue of therapy aimed at the hapless or inept self-improver - but is channelled away from the programme itself, if anything, the programme emerges from the test with reinforced authority.

3

Enabling Identity? Biology, Choice and the New Reproductive Technologies

Marilyn Strathern

Whether primacy is given to social ties or biological ones, it seems that the late twentieth century affords new possibilities for people who wish to be certain about how and why they are related. This is true both of legal redress (what the courts are prepared to countenance) and of technological intervention in the reproductive process. As possibilities, these instruments and techniques exist in a cultural environment of empowerment or enablement. If, then, one were to ask what might be new and what might be old in such pursuits of identity, one would have to consider what is being enabled. One would also have to consider the value put on ‘enablement’ itself. This chapter sketches some of the cultural paradoxes that the idea stimulates, and some of the resultant contradictions that seem to lie in what people are able to make of identity through kinship.

It was with an evident sense of novelty that in 1992, first a girl and then a boy were reported in the British press to have divorced their parents. They were both exercising the power, under the 1989 Children Act, to take legal action on their own account, and did so from a desire to move away from their mother and to reside with their grandparent(s). A claim going through the Florida courts a couple of months earlier had attracted similar publicity. Whereas in the British cases the severance of the child’s tie with the parent lay in the assertion of legal autonomy and rejection of the parental home, the Florida twelve-year-old, in the words of the *New York Times,* asked the court ‘to end the parental rights of his biological mother’. It was not just a question of where the boy should live but who would be recognized as a parent (he wanted his foster parents to adopt him). The case was widely interpreted as an example of a child wanting to ‘choose’ his or her parents.

One might conclude from the way the issues were being presented that desire is thus realized in the exercise of choice. This would make sense of the analogy with marriage and its undoing, ‘divorce’.

Yet the analogy is an odd one. Divorce is the undoing of a choice, as the contract is usually construed, whereas the boy was contesting rights...