

---

### 3. Theories about Identity

Identity is, of course, a key element of subjective reality and, like all subjective reality, stands in a dialectical relationship with society. Identity is formed by social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations. The social processes involved in both the formation and the maintenance of identity are determined by the social structure. Conversely, the identities produced by the interplay of organism, individual consciousness and social structure react upon the given social structure, maintaining it, modifying it, or even reshaping it. Societies have histories in the course of which specific identities emerge; these histories are, however, made by men with specific identities.

If one is mindful of this dialectic one can avoid the misleading notion of 'collective identities' without having recourse to the uniqueness, *sub specie aeternitatis*, of individual existence.<sup>40</sup> Specific historical social structures engender identity types, which are recognizable in individual cases. In this sense one may assert that an American has a different identity than a Frenchman, a New Yorker than a Midwesterner, an executive than a hobo, and so forth. As we have seen, orientation and conduct in everyday life depend upon such typifications. This means that identity types can be observed in everyday life and that assertions like the ones above can be verified – or refuted – by ordinary men endowed with common sense. The American who doubts that the French are different can go to France and find out for himself. Clearly the status of such typifications is not comparable to that of the constructs of the social sciences, nor do the verification and refutation follow the canons of scientific method. We must leave aside the methodological problem of what the precise relationship is between everyday-life typifications and scientific constructs

---

### SOCIETY AS SUBJECTIVE REALITY

---

(a Puritan knew himself to be a Puritan and was recognized as one by, say, Anglicans without much deliberation; the social scientist, however, who wishes to check Max Weber's thesis about the Puritan ethic must follow somewhat different and more complex procedures in order to 'recognize' the empirical referents of the Weberian ideal type). The point of interest in the present context is that identity types are 'observable' and 'verifiable' in pre-theoretical, and thus pre-scientific experience.

Identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society. Identity types, on the other hand, are social products *tout court*, relatively stable elements of objective social reality (the degree of stability being, of course, socially determined in its turn). As such, they are the topic of some form of theorizing in any society, even if they are stable and the formation of individual identities is relatively unproblematic. Theories about identity are always embedded in a more general interpretation of reality; they are 'built into' the symbolic universe and its theoretical legitimations, and vary with the character of the latter. Identity remains unintelligible unless it is located in a world. Any theorizing about identity – and about specific identity types – must therefore occur within the framework of the theoretical interpretations within which it and they are located. We will return to this point presently.

It should be stressed again that we are here referring to theories about identity as a social phenomenon; that is, without prejudice as to their acceptability to modern science. Indeed, we will refer to such theories as 'psychologies' and will include any theory about identity that claims to explain the empirical phenomenon in a comprehensive fashion, whether or not such an explanation is 'valid' for the contemporary scientific discipline of that name.

If theories about identity are always embedded in the more comprehensive theories about reality, this must be understood in terms of the logic underlying the latter. For example, a psychology interpreting certain empirical phenomena as possession by demoniacal beings has as its matrix a mythological theory of the cosmos, and it is inappropriate to interpret it in a non-mythological framework. Similarly, a psychology interpreting the same phenomena in terms of electrical disturbances

of the brain has as its background an overall scientific theory of reality, both human and non-human, and derives its consistency from the logic underlying this theory. Put simply, psychology always presupposes cosmology.

This point can be well illustrated by reference to the much used psychiatric term 'reality-oriented'.<sup>41</sup> A psychiatrist trying to diagnose an individual whose psychological status is in doubt asks him questions to determine the degree of his 'reality-orientedness'. This is quite logical; from a psychiatric viewpoint there is obviously something problematic about an individual who does not know what day of the week it is or who readily admits he has talked with departed spirits. Indeed, the term 'reality-oriented' itself can be useful in such a context. The sociologist, however, has to ask the additional question 'Which reality?' Incidentally, this addition is not irrelevant psychiatrically. The psychiatrist will certainly take it into account, when an individual does not know the day of the week, if he has just arrived by jet plane from another continent. He may not know the day of the week simply because he is still 'on another time' – Calcutta time, say, instead of Eastern Standard Time. If the psychiatrist has any sensitivity to the socio-cultural context of psychological conditions he will also arrive at different diagnoses of the individual who converses with the dead, depending on whether such an individual comes from, say, New York City or from rural Haiti. The individual could be 'on another reality' in the same socially objective sense that the previous one was 'on another time'. In other words, questions of psychological status cannot be decided without recognizing the reality-definitions that are taken for granted in the social situation of the individual. To put it more sharply, psychological status is relative to the social definitions of reality in general and is itself socially defined.<sup>42</sup>

The emergence of psychologies introduces a further dialectical relationship between identity and society – the relationship between psychological theory and those elements of subjective reality it purports to define and explain. The level of such theorizing may, of course, vary greatly, as in the case of all theoretical legitimations. What has been said previously about the origins and phases of legitimating theories applies here

with equal validity, but with one not unimportant difference. Psychologies pertain to a dimension of reality that is of the greatest and most continuous subjective relevance for all individuals. Therefore the dialectic between theory and reality affects the individual in a palpably direct and intensive manner.

When psychological theories attain a high degree of intellectual complexity they are likely to be administered by personnel specially trained in this body of knowledge. Whatever the social organization of these specialists may be, psychological theories re-enter everyday life by providing the interpretative schemes for disposing of problematic cases. Problems arising out of the dialectic between either subjective identity and social identity-assignments, or identity and its biological substratum (of which more later), can be classified according to theoretical categories – which is, of course, the presupposition for any therapy. The psychological theories then serve to legitimate the identity-maintenance and identity-repair procedures established in the society, providing the theoretical linkage between identity and world, as these are both socially defined and subjectively appropriated.

Psychological theories may be empirically adequate or inadequate, by which we do *not* mean their adequacy in terms of the procedural canons of empirical science, but rather, as interpretative schemes applicable by the expert or the layman to empirical phenomena in everyday life. For example, a psychological theory positing demoniacal possession is unlikely to be adequate in interpreting the identity problems of middle-class, Jewish intellectuals in New York City. These people simply do not have an identity capable of producing phenomena that could be so interpreted. The demons, if such there are, seem to avoid them. On the other hand, psychoanalysis is unlikely to be adequate for the interpretation of identity problems in rural Haiti, while some sort of Voudun psychology might supply interpretative schemes with a high degree of empirical accuracy. The two psychologies demonstrate their empirical adequacy by their applicability in therapy, but neither thereby demonstrates the ontological status of its categories. Neither the Voudun gods nor libidinal energy may exist outside the world defined in the respective social contexts. But in these contexts they do exist by virtue of social

definition and are internalized as realities in the course of socialization. Rural Haitians *are* possessed and New York intellectuals *are* neurotic. Possession and neurosis are thus constituents of both objective and subjective reality *in these contexts*. This reality is empirically available in everyday life. The respective psychological theories are empirically adequate in precisely the same sense. The problem of whether or how psychological theories could be developed to transcend this socio-historical relativity need not concern us here.

In so far as psychological theories are adequate in this sense, they are capable of empirical verification. Again, what is at issue is not verification in the scientific sense, but testing in the experience of everyday social life. For example, it may be proposed that individuals born on certain days of the month are likely to be possessed, or that individuals with domineering mothers are likely to be neurotic. Such propositions are empirically verifiable to the extent that they belong to adequate theories, in the afore-mentioned sense. Such verification may be undertaken by participants as well as by outside observers of the social situations in question. A Haitian ethnologist can empirically discover New York neurosis, just as an American ethnologist can empirically discover Voudun possession. The presupposition for such discoveries is simply that the outside observer is willing to employ the conceptual machinery of the indigenous psychology for the inquiry at hand. Whether he is also willing to accord that psychology a more general epistemological validity is irrelevant to the immediate empirical investigation.

Another way of saying that psychological theories are adequate is to say that they reflect the psychological reality they purport to explain. But if this were the whole story, the relationship between theory and reality here would not be a dialectical one. A genuine dialectic is involved because of the *realizing* potency of psychological theories. In so far as psychological theories are elements of the social definition of reality, their reality-generating capacity is a characteristic they share with other legitimating theories; however, their realizing potency is particularly great because it is actualized by emotionally charged processes of identity-formation. If a psychology becomes socially established (that is, becomes generally

recognized as an adequate interpretation of objective reality), it tends to realize itself forcefully in the phenomena it purports to interpret. Its internalization is accelerated by the fact that it pertains to internal reality, so that the individual realizes it in the very act of internalizing it. Again, since a psychology by definition pertains to identity, its internalization is likely to be accompanied by identification, hence is *ipso facto* likely to be identity-forming. In this close nexus between internalization and identification, psychological theories differ considerably from other types of theory. Not surprisingly, since problems of unsuccessful socialization are most conducive to this kind of theorizing, psychological theories are more apt to have socializing effects. This is not the same thing as saying that psychologies are self-verifying. As we have indicated, verification comes by confronting psychological theories and psychological reality as empirically available. Psychologies produce a reality, which in turn serves as the basis for their verification. In other words, we are dealing here with dialectics, not tautology.

The rural Haitian who internalizes Voudun psychology will become possessed as soon as he discovers certain well-defined signs. Similarly, the New York intellectual who internalizes Freudian psychology will become neurotic as soon as he diagnoses certain well-known symptoms. Indeed, it is possible that, given a certain biographical context, signs or symptoms will be produced by the individual himself. The Haitian will, in that case, produce not symptoms of neurosis but signs of possession, while the New Yorker will construct his neurosis in conformity with the recognized symptomatology. This has nothing to do with 'mass hysteria', much less with malingering, but with the imprint of societal identity types upon the individual subjective reality of ordinary people with common sense. The degree of identification will vary with the conditions of internalization, as previously discussed, depending, for instance, on whether it takes place in primary or secondary socialization. The social establishment of a psychology, which also entails the accordance of certain social roles to the personnel administering the theory and its therapeutic application, will naturally depend upon a variety of socio-historical circumstances.<sup>43</sup> But the more socially established it becomes,

the more abundant will be the phenomena it serves to interpret.

If we posit the possibility that certain psychologies come to be adequate in the course of a realizing process, we imply the question of why as-yet-inadequate theories (as they would have to be in the earlier stages of this process) arise in the first place. Put more simply, why should one psychology replace another in history? The general answer is that such change occurs when identity appears as a problem, for whatever reasons. The problem may arise out of the dialectic of psychological reality and social structure. Radical changes in the social structure (such as, for instance, the changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution) may result in concomitant changes in the psychological reality. In that case, new psychological theories may arise because the old ones no longer adequately explain the empirical phenomena at hand. Theorizing about identity will then seek to take cognizance of the transformations of identity that have actually occurred, and will be itself transformed in the process. On the other hand, identity may become problematic on the level of theory itself, that is, as a result of intrinsic theoretical developments. In that case, psychological theories will be concocted 'before the fact', so to speak. Their *subsequent* social establishment, and concomitant reality-generating potency, may be brought about by any number of affinities between the theorizing personnel and various social interests. Deliberate ideological manipulation by politically interested groups is one historical possibility.

---

#### 4. Organism and Identity

---

We discussed much earlier the organismic presuppositions and limitations of the social construction of reality. It is important to stress now that the organism continues to affect each phase of man's reality-constructing activity and that the organism, in turn, is itself affected by this activity. Put crudely, man's animality is transformed in socialization, but it is not abolished. Thus man's stomach keeps grumbling away even as he is about his business of world-building. Conversely, events in this, his product, may make his stomach grumble more, or less, or differently. Man is even capable of eating and theorizing at the same time. The continuing coexistence of man's animality and his sociality may be profitably observed at any conversation over dinner.

It is possible to speak of a dialectic between nature and society.<sup>44</sup> This dialectic is given in the human condition and manifests itself anew in each human individual. For the individual, of course, it unfolds itself in an already structured socio-historical situation. There is an ongoing dialectic, which comes into being with the very first phases of socialization and continues to unfold throughout the individual's existence in society, between each human animal and its socio-historical situation. Externally, it is a dialectic between the individual animal and the social world. Internally, it is a dialectic between the individual's biological substratum and his socially produced identity.

In the external aspect, it is still possible to say that the organism posits limits to what is socially possible. As English constitutional lawyers have said, Parliament can do anything except make men bear children. If Parliament tried, its project would founder on the hard facts of human biology. Biological factors limit the range of social possibilities open to any