Beyond the Postmodern Self

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Reflection on the historical forms of selfhood—past, present, or future ways of experiencing life—is an essential but frustrating endeavor. Part of the frustration stems from the fact that even in the most comprehensive philosophical anthropologies, one never achieves more than a broad gloss on the chaos created by the infinitely variegated lives of actual individuals and the institutions in which they are entangled. Scholars can easily trace the ebbs and tides of concepts of selfhood through the centuries, but the degree of correlation between these concepts and the lived experience of individuals is probably slight. Thus, before we issue proclamations about the changing nature of selfhood, we must determine whether we are describing merely a change in the predominant scholarly concept of self or whether the actual structures or forms of selfhood are also changing (Broughton, 1986). If the latter, we must still wonder how we manage to perceive such changes and conceptualize them adequately. The analytic task is further complicated because scholarly concepts of self or personhood sometimes gradually work their way toward expression in institutions such as families, schools, courts, and the media and thereby mediate the actual experiences of individuals. This trend accounts partially for the tendency of many scholars, particularly in the discipline of psychology, to treat concepts of self as if they represented actual selves. Confronted with these considerations alone, the empirical social scientist would say that we are dealing with far too many variables and too little data.

Why bother to proceed then? Justification for this sort of inquiry can be grounded in two plausible assumptions. First, one can assume that concepts of the self matter because they can serve ideological and, occasionally, emancipatory interests. Visions of selfhood function as discourses within which individuals and institutions justify their practices and understand their experience. They can thus have a direct impact on the quality of social life. Second, analyses of actual forms of selfhood are among the best sources of information we have about the success of collective and individual efforts to improve the quality of social life. In other words, as we evaluate socioeconomic forms from a psychological perspective, we tend to take feelings into account; and wherever feelings are involved, selves are involved. Yet, since perceptions of feelings are necessarily filtered through culturally-provided concepts of self, our best strategy will be to work at the problem dialectically to see how far we can
leverage our way toward a useful perspective on the matter. In this spirit, I examine dominant discourses regarding modern and postmodern selfhood in light of empirical observation and also venture a few speculations about likely trends in post-postmodern conceptualizations of the self and post-postmodern selfhood as it might be lived.

For the purposes of this essay, it will not be necessary to enter into the usual definitional arguments about when the modern period began or ended, or when the postmodern phase began. From the point of view of the social scientist, the modern and postmodern “periods” permeate social institutions and lifestyles to varying degrees depending on factors such as social class, proximity to centers of cultural production, and generational differences, just as the premodern and modern mingle in more traditional institutions. In analyses of selfhood, the situation is especially complicated, for in contrast to the interpretive practice in the arts, it is nearly impossible to isolate an exemplar of the first “postmodern” person.

We can begin by describing central aspects of the concepts of selfhood developed to describe the majority of subjects in industrialized societies. Throughout the modern period, which perhaps began to dissipate at the macrosocial level in the 1960s, the self was generally assumed to consist of a relatively unified and autonomous mind operating rationally in a body, disrupted occasionally by the emotions. As the observations of psychoanalysts and psychiatrists became more widely available, this view of the self as coherent could no longer be affirmed. We became all too aware of the fissures, contradictions, fragments, and splits within the psyche. Furthermore, the fields of cultural anthropology and linguistics joined psychoanalysis in demonstrating that the psyche is hardly autonomous but rather a socioculturally and linguistically constituted entity. While numerous other factors played a role in this conceptual transition, considerations such as these planted the seeds for a variety of current postmodern visions of the self that emphasize its incoherence and cultural situatedness. This new awareness is currently evolving through all its logical permutations across the human sciences and finding expression in a multitude of artistic and other cultural expressions.

As I stated at the outset, it is difficult to see how this shift in the general concept of the self relates to any empirical changes in the nature of selfhood. Most obviously, the conceptual shift is the product of new ways of scrutinizing and experiencing one’s self: psychoanalysis, experimental literature, camera images, etc. Nevertheless, it could be argued that certain economic and sociocultural changes that parallel the conceptual shift also fostered sensitivity to the fragmentary aspects of the self and even stimulated the production of character structures more prone to fragmentation. Limiting our analysis to the middle class in advanced
industrial societies, we notice with Eli Zaretsky (1976) and Timothy Luke (1990), for example, that the rise of corporate capitalism in the place of entrepreneurial capitalism was accompanied by corresponding changes in the function of the family. The modern, bourgeois family had the task of producing disciplined and dedicated workers who were willing to delay gratification in the interest of efficiency and productivity. This required a basically neurotic character structure capable of advanced defensive maneuvers such as repression and rationalization. In contrast, the postmodern family, with its two-career or single-parent structure conjoined by preschool chaos and television as babysitter has generally fostered less integrated defensive structures that are less capable of delay of gratification and are more egotistic and impulsive. The postmodern family has not produced a generation of good workers. Instead, almost as if by design, the postmodern family serves primarily as a training ground for ideal consumers whose endless appetite for new goods stems from impulsivity, selfishness, an inability to concentrate, and hypersensitivity to peer expectations. Thus, the postmodern individual always needs a new toy and given to the power of commercials and peer pressure, it is usually clear which toy it must be, right down to the trademark. In light of this, one might hazard that actual postmodern selves are indeed as fragmented and subjected as the postmodern concept of self implies and that they seek their unity or identity through the consumption of or attachment to market-authorized goods and services (Frosh, 1991).

One can point to a number of other lifestyle factors that seem to be associated with postmodern selfhood: less actual time spent in the company of others, less time communicating, touching, less consistency of the persons who are involved in one’s life—all of which points not to a more inwardly living person as one might expect, but to a surface-living person, one less capable of long-term intimacy because conflict can be so easily evaded rather than resolved. Such persons tend to have shallow relations with people and intense relations with non-persons. We can thus anticipate rapid expansion of the psyche-techne interface foreshadowed so strikingly by videogames and the already dominant mode of world-relating among youth: television-watching.

Already we glimpse one of the possible traits of the post-postmodern self: a reduced capacity for empathy. Empathy is a trait that modernity proponents attribute to the philosophical relativism that accompanies the development of democratic institutions and secular education. Actually, relativism probably only leads to shallow tolerance, as evidenced by recent eruptions of ethnocentrism in universities and previously socialist countries. To the degree that the modern self was ever capable of real empathy, it was because at least certain strata of bourgeois society managed to provide children with consistently genuine and caring inter-
actions with their caretakers and fostered complex processes of communication that allowed children to know their own internal worlds and to intuit and to care about the feelings of others. Such experiences provide the moral-emotional foundations for democratic social relations among adults. In the postmodern phase, it is probable that certain classes of society will manage to sustain high quality of childrearing, but the continuing trend toward economic and political chaos leads one to be pessimistic. Current Third World conditions are especially harsh for children and not improving, and since increasing Third Worldization of the globe is foreseen, one should expect a generation or two of thick-skinned, impulsive youth with various sorts of personality disorders ranging from narcissistic and borderline in the upper classes to antisocial and depressive in the other strata of society. It thus appears that the postmodern self of the information age middle class, which can play non-seriously with its fragmentation, should probably be read as a failure to achieve the moral capacities of the ideal modern self that might have been possible were it not for the glorification of instrumental rationality by the institutions established in conjunction with capitalist modernization (Livesay, 1985).

Before speculating further on the nature of the post-postmodern self, we should consider the objective conditions in which post-postmodern society and culture are likely to develop. We know that there will be twice as many people, higher forms of technology in travel and communications to connect them, increased development of the networks of system interdependence (like a spider web linking already connected nodes in new directions to other nodes), small zones of total material comfort, massive zones of terror, horror, and social chaos. In short, for the middle class of the industrialized information societies, there will be plenty of reason to stay home or at least within the well-armored corridors that the better-off will have constructed for themselves. Psycho-environmentally, the scene will be much worse among the actual selves of the post-postmodern phase than in the postmodern period. As the colonization of the lifeworld by social steering mechanisms and an ever more stimulating culture industry proceeds, we should expect a greater fragmentation, lower levels of moral and emotional maturity, and continued high rates of levels of interpersonal violence.

This entire argument depends, of course, on a particular concept of selfhood which happens to be available at the intersection of two modern theoretical streams: neo-Marxism (Marcuse and Habermas) and psychoanalytic object relations theory (Kernberg and Lorenzer, in particular).

Once we assume a basic telos of the developing self that moves one from the infant’s capacities for sensation and perception toward symbolized thought, feeling, and action, one can point to deformations of this process and the failure to achieve certain higher-level capacities.
(Postmodern theorists—even within psychology, a field that is always late to catch on to intellectual trends—challenge such teleologies, but my guess is that they have not paid much attention to children if they are able to assert that there is no such thing as development.) The primary distinction that is relevant to this discussion is that which can be made between symbolized and desymbolized experience and action (Lorenzer, 1976; Sloan, 1987). Symbolized experience includes relatively full and complex representations of self and others as well as associated complex affect-states. It might also be characterized as dialectical, flexible, three-dimensional, or ambivalent, depending on one’s orientation. In contrast, desymbolized experience is dominated by the two-dimensional, non-dialectic of the sign. Its dominant modes are constituted by splitting mechanisms that bypass complex affective states associated with relationships, thus idealizing or disqualifying major aspects of self and/or others. Many aspects of desymbolized modes of relatedness are already described handily under the rubrics of narcissistic and borderline pathologies (Kemper, 1975; Lasch, 1979).

My basic argument is that the predominant forms of socialization in postmodern society will hinder the development of the symbolic capacities of the self. The self is often conceived as that aspect of the personality that gives coherence to the various acts, feelings, moods, ideas, and images that a person is aware of and creates this coherence through a complex process of sense-making: narrative construction, story-telling, self-interpretation, rationalization, inner dialogue. With the continuing colonization of the lifeworld by technical mechanisms that replace symbolic processes of cultural reproduction and identity formation, the inner coherence of these voices in the experience of a continuous self will necessarily decrease in the general population. More and more, being alive will be a roller coaster ride of memories, images, perceptions and sensations taken by a subject without capacity to reflect upon, integrate, and synthesize these experiences for the purposes of value-based decision making. This will probably not be sensed as a loss. Judging from postmodern aesthetic forms, chaotic selfhood will be enjoyed and stimulated, just as people have adjusted to watching television by flipping through the channels. As corollary developments, one could point to the following possibilities: The ability to concentrate will be poor (perhaps already signalled by the epidemic of kids with attention deficit disorder). People will not be expected to behave consistently. The ones admired most will be those who are most radical in presenting different selves without disintegrating. Therapeutic centers will offer (and in a sense already do) training in recentering to those who cannot manage to hold themselves together. To modern old-fogeys, post-postmodern behavior will seem overdramatized and caricatured in a manner quite similar to the
way contemporary adolescents consciously try on roles: the buffoon, the mean guy, the sexy chick, the jock, and so on.

At the conceptual level, one can imagine that a post-postmodern ideological process will mask this degeneration by proposing a new notion of selfhood to replace the postmodern contextual-fragmented self. My best guess is that this concept will ride the wave of globalism, holism, and syncretism currently preferred by the deep ecology movement and expressed culturally in forms such as new age and worldbeat music. Its message might be that the individual self is a small, but important fragment of the global totality, that the task of selfhood is to express the disparate elements of humanity and nature as harmoniously as possible, a sort of prefiguring of the global peace and cooperation that will certainly not have been achieved. The post-postmodern emphasis on harmony and wholeness will stand in contrast to the punk aesthetic, for example, which sought to shock through juxtaposing elements: safety pin and nostril, cross and black brassiere, etc. So, at the conceptual level, one could show that the modern coherent-decontextualized self becomes the antithetic postmodern incoherent-contextualized self and that one could logically expect a post-postmodern self characterized by fragments harmonized to produce radical individuality in relation to the largest possible global context.

The power just went out as I sit in an apartment in San Jose, Costa Rica. Car after car after car goes by my window in the dark rainy evening, signs of ugly urban penetration into this tropical haven. Before the lights went out, I had been wondering how to end this essay: With a commentary on the possibility of a more pleasant outcome? I wish I could muster the necessary optimism. Most people I talk to about the issue admit that our course will only change if the crisis deepens dramatically and painfully. It is as if major sectors of humanity would have to be forced by something like a year-long power outage to sit in the dark night after night and reflect on what it is that really matters to them. Notable to foresee how such a situation might be brought about, I can only urge myself, my friends, and my colleagues to strive toward the realization of the humane ideals of modernity from which we were sidetracked by capitalist industrialism and to do so by employing the most innovative postmodern strategies we can devise.

References


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