THE CONSTRUCTION
OF A MULTICULTURALLY CHANGING SELF

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JULY 1996

In this article I will attempt to briefly analyze the notion of the Self throughout the history of Philosophy, Psychology, through Postmodernism. Thereafter I will demonstrate how Modernism, with its use of objective analysis, systematic knowledge and scientific language, led up to a far more subjective, changing, fragmented, and multidimensional concept of the Self. I will also try to cover how society and culture have changed in the past decades, and how this has had an effect on the formation of one s Identity or one's Self.

Introduction

Recently, I have been reflecting on the notion of the *Self*, a concern which I had really not had during my childhood or early adult years. I started to take a special interest in the subject matter when my daughter was born in 1993, after years of having felt like a melting pot of different "cultures", *Selves* and identities. And it is this spirit of multiformity which continues to live in me.

Born in Belgium in 1961, I was automatically exposed to a culturally bilingual environment. I was brought up in Flemish, but was equally exposed to the French language as an infant by my grandmother. This linguistic animosity in Belgium was very strong when I was young and had a strong impact on me, one of confusion and incredulity.

When my parents left Belgium for the first time, I was six years old. I remember thoroughly enjoying my experience in Florida, which was to last one year. As little as I was, however, I still felt "Belgian", or "foreign", whatever that meant at the time. I did learn English, but I had not had enough contact with the culture at that early age. My family was still the most important reference point for me, and I did not much wander outside the parental nucleus.

When we left Belgium for the second time I was twelve. Washington DC was an enlightening place for me, and with time, much of my European past seemed to fade. Eventually, the shy, reserved little Belgian "me" was transformed into an American, assertive teenager. My sister, Petra and I spoke the Dutch language (Flemish) at home, and even had a governess to instruct us the European value and educational system, but the American culture and schooling had gotten a stronger hold of us. The apparently fluctuating identity did not seem to bother me in the slightest back then; in fact, I considered this blending of cultures to be a natural, expected process.

From there on we moved to communist Rumania in 1975, where I continued to evolve, yet this time in a completely multicultural environment because of the specific circumstances we were subject to at the time. Still under Ceaucescu's regime, the Rumanians had very little contact with "capitalists". We were sent to a German school there, the only alternative available to us. Although I had a few Rumanian friends and did learn their language also, most of the people I was in contact with were foreigners, mostly diplomats and their relatives. This multicultural exposure was a fascinating experience for a fourteen year old. I felt I "knew" South America, Italy and Egypt, for instance, long before ever having been there. My previous American feelings were gradually being superimposed by a variety of other cultural experiences and sensations. In retrospect, my best memories still belong to Rumania, which had really nothing to do with the country as such.

The next phase of my life was spent in Canada. The most memorable part about Ottawa was the educational experience I received there. I obtained my Undergraduate in Psychology in a record time, since I spent all my energy and time to my studies. On a social and emotional level I was still too nostalgic for all my "exotic" and unusual cultural experiences of the past, so I clung to my undergraduate work. I still cannot pinpoint exactly what it was that made my stay there difficult. I do remember finding everything irritatingly over-organized and dull. Yet, in retrospect, I do feel my identity has in part been shaped by my Canadian experience. Or rather, the country itself reactivated latent feelings of linguistic ambivalence I had "inherited" from my Belgian ancestors, Canada being just as bilingually split as my "own" country.

The day I graduated I got on a plane and came to Argentina, where my parents had been living for a year. I did not yet know then it would be to stay. I remember getting off the plane, and thinking, "how wonderful, chaos again!", leaving the extreme rigidity of Canada behind. I immediately felt at ease with myself and my new environment.

After three years my father was transferred to Mexico. At first, I did not find this change too traumatic, considering my Latin American experience thus far had been "positive". Maybe that was precisely the problem, going there with some sort of preconception of what I expected it to be, because I cannot say I enjoyed it in a general sense. Rather, I had terribly ambivalent feelings about the country, a sensation which at the time was extremely uncomfortable and bothersome to me. Many aspects of the Mexican culture did fascinate me enormously, and I did incorporate them into

my "identity", such as the magic, the occult, the unpredictable. Yet I felt that their xenophobia, bloodthirstiness and hostility had at the same time alienated me. These strong feelings, however, made my graduate work in Psychology all the more interesting, and my "understanding" of the country subjectively richer.

When I came back to Argentina in 1987 it was to stay and settle down, at least that was the way I perceived it to be at the time. I was still at a point in my life where I needed certainty and a fair amount of predictability to make "sense" out of my life and existence, despite my uncertain and unpredictable past. I wanted to be "sure" once and for all that I would not be forced to leave again. And henceforth it has been that way. At this stage, however, I am no longer obsessed with the idea of permanence.

As mentioned previously, it was not until the birth of my daughter Arianna, in October 1993, that I became preoccupied with matters related to my identity and my *Self*. Why this sudden emergence at that point in time? I then felt that having an offspring somehow caused me to have to "hand over" and identity, or at least offer her some kind of cultural belonging.

In retrospect, I probably see things differently than they "really" were at the time. In my life, the events and experiences I was subject to happened rather unexpectedly and sometimes suddenly, and, in many cases, it was only afterwards that I began to "make sense" of them. And the "sense" I attribute to them has changed and will probably continue to change over time. This is my story today. It could be different next year, and it was certainly not the same last year.

I will try to analyze the complexities and diversities involved in the construction of the *Self*, as experienced through my own history.

I find this multicultural approach to identity especially interesting, not only because it is of personal relevance to me, but also because in the available literature the matter has not really been tackled all that much. What has as yet been more popular, on the other hand, is the "study" of the identity of people belonging to ethnic minority groups, who have been segregated in larger, more "advanced" cultures, and not as much the effects on the *Self* of being subject to constant cultural change.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE *SELF*

Definition

But what exactly is the *Self*? Throughout all of history, it has been, and to a certain extent still is, an extremely complex issue. Looking up the word in the dictionary does not clarify matters much either.

In *Webster s Third New International Dictionary* the definition goes as follows:

> **1 a:** the entire person of an individual ...... **b:** the realization or embodiment of and abstract quality ...... **2 a:** a personality or mode of behavior regarded as typical of a particular

individual ...... **b:** an aspect of one's personality predominant at a certain time or under certain conditions ...... **c:** a person in his normal state of health or best physical or mental condition ...... **3 a:** the integrated unity of subjective experience specifically including those characteristics and attributes of the experiencing organism of which it is reflexively aware **b:** the internal regulatory system of response and activity tendencies within the organism: the source of social adaptation and growth of the individual personality **c:** the dynamic organization of patterns of behavior acquired through social frustration **4:** personal interest or advantage: SELF-INTEREST... **5 a:** usually capitalized, objective idealism: the Supreme Self: ABSOLUTE **b:** (1) Hinduism: ATMAN; (2) Buddhism: a dynamic unstable agglomerate of skandhas that itself possesses no inherent substantially or enduring quality and that continues in constant flux until final dissolution at death...." (1)

But what exactly is the "entire person of an individual" (1a)? Is it an entity that can it be observed? What is the difference between a "person" and an "individual" (2a)? Or how can one precisely know what is regarded as "typical" (2a) or "predominant" (2b) in a person? Furthermore, what is "normal" (2c) as far as one's "physical" or "mental" health or condition is concerned? The remaining definitions are a little more descriptive, but still present serious problems as to the complexities of the *Self*.

The Soul, the Predecessor of the *Self*.

Before the *Self* became popular in modern psychology, it was generally called the Soul. A number of different cultures, religions and philosophies have developed various theories as regards the nature of the Soul, its relationship to the body, its origin and its "mortality".

The Egyptians and the Ancient Chinese conceived of a "dual" Soul. For the Early Hebrews the Soul did exist as a concept, but they did not believe it to be separate from the body.

The Christian theology took into consideration the Body-Soul dichotomy. St. Augustine, for instance, believed the Soul to be sort of a "rider" on the body, with the Soul being the only "true" man. Although the Soul was clearly superior to the body, it was impossible to conceive of the former without the latter.

In the seventeenth century, Ren Descartes analyzed the unity of the Body and the Soul, each one being distinct, but acting upon one another.

At the turn of the twentieth century, authors like American philosopher/psychologist William James claimed that the Soul simply did not exist, instead being but a collection of psychic phenomena: the Soul "is at all events needless for expressing the actual subjective phenomena of consciousness as they appear" (2), or as he stated later:

> "The states of consciousness are all that psychology needs to do her work with. Metaphysics or theology may prove the Soul to exist; but for psychology the hypothesis of such a substantial principle of unity is superfluous." (3)

The *Self*, a Historical Perspective.

This leads us to Modern Psychology, in which the notion of the *Self* has been central to the Personality Theories of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, Carl Rogers, Abraham H. Maslow, Karen Horney, just to mention a few.

The experimental psychologists of the nineteenth century had avoided the issue of the *Self*, bothered by the fact that one could not obtain empirical knowledge of it. William James had called it "the most puzzling puzzle with which psychology has to deal" (4), although he later did make an attempt at converting it into something "researchable".

According to Carl Jung, for instance, the *Self* is the new center of personality that results from individuation (the unfolding of one s unique and inherent personality). It unifies the various opposites and lies between consciousness and unconsciousness[1].

Carl Rogers, on the other hand, considered the *Self* to be a learned, conscious sense of one *Self* as being separate and distinct from other people and things, and he maintains that people should strive to actualize that portion of experience represented by the *Self*. In a similar vein, Abraham Maslow s "*Self*-Actualization Theory" contemplates that what all individuals should strive for is the development and fulfillment of one's inherent capacities and potentials.

Similarly, for Karen Horney the "real" *Self* can be achieved when one develops one's true innate capacities, feelings and interests, in contrast to "*Self*-Contempt" or "*Self* Hate" where one actually "hates" one's inherent capacities and desires because they are so far removed from the idealized "*Self*-Image".

H.S. Sullivan sees the *Self* as consisting of the desirable "good me" and the undesirable "bad me", which results from experiences with one's body and the reflected opinions of significant others. The *Self*-System, therefore, has the primary goal of reducing anxiety.

Moreover, some of the early Social Psychologists also focused on the way social interactions specifically affect one's *Self*-Concept, emphasizing interactions in early childhood experiences. They also looked at physical attributes, like being thin or fat, short or tall, attractive or unattractive, and the way these can determine the way one is perceived by significant others and how it affect one's *Self*-Concept, similar to Sullivan's theory, but with a more of a social emphasis. Yet these traditional psychologies mainly aimed at finding generalities and tendencies.

Harold Goolishian and Harlene Anderson point out the epistemological and theoretical difficulties in asking the question "What is the *Self*?" (5). They maintain that by asking ourselves this apparently innocent question, we are implying the existence of a discrete entity, separate from the *no-Self*,

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[1] There is also a Self Archetype within the Collective Unconscious.

something which is inherent to the human condition. They find that this question insinuates that all one has to do to "know" the *Self* it is to examine its nature, as if it could be observed, measured and quantified (6), when in fact this is impossible.

Moving Away from the Traditional Concepts of the *Self.*

The appearance of Prozac:

The appearance of Prozac (Fluoxetine) in the late eighties, ironically, has brought about immense changes in the notion of the *Self* and has created various interrogatives in the areas of Psychiatry and even Psychology. Prozac is now the most widely prescribed psychoactive drug in the US. It is said to be able to alter personality very suddenly, and even transform the lives of people with no psychiatric or clinical disorders.

In a rather sudden manner, psychiatrists were faced with the possible co-existence of two *Selves*. In his bestseller *Listening to Prozac, A Psychiatrist Explores Antidepressant Drugs and the Remaking of the Self*, Dr. Peter D. Kramer mentions several of his patients who were faced with the dilemma of not feeling "them*selves*" after interrupting their treatment of Prozac. In other words, if a patient who has had a positive reaction to the drug stops taking the drug, he/she may possibly start to experience the same discomforts (e.g. depression) as before taking the medication, probably an ailment which he/she had experienced for the greater part of his/her life. The drug may have actually altered the "personality" of the person, so that when off the medication, he/she may in fact claim that he/she is not feeling him-/her*self.*

Kramer's first patient to be put on the medication and to display this phenomenon was called Tess. She had been subject to abuse in childhood, and later by married men she was romantically involved with. Professionally, she was fairly well adjusted, but on the social front she was extremely unhappy. When Kramer considered her ready to be taken off the medication, she had a relapse and claimed not be "feeling her*Self*" (7). But who was the "real" Tess? The depressed woman whom she had been for the greater part of her life, or the "new" and assertive Tess, who had apparently nothing in common with the old one? Kramer states:

> "She [Tess] said, 'I am not myself'. I found this statement remarkable. After all, Tess had existed in one mental state for twenty or thirty years; she then briefly felt different on medication. Now that the old mental state was threatening to re-emerge - the one she had experienced almost all her adult life - her response was 'I am not myself'. But who had she been all those years if not herself? Had medication somehow replaced it with the true one? Might Tess, absent the invention of the modern antidepressant, have lived her whole life - a successful life, perhaps, by external standards - and never been herself?" (8)

What are the implications of this? They are innumerable. For one thing, the ethical question is whether we can actually tamper with the *Self.* But what is more pertinent to the purposes of this

paper is whether the *Self* can be so dramatically altered by the mere ingestion of Fluoxetine as to radically "transform" or alter it? And what about people with no real psychiatric disorders, who react in the same rash manner to the medication? Can we really know what our "true" *Self* is, when Prozac can in fact "erase" the former so-called "predominant" *Self* of certain people?

<u>Postmodernism</u>:

From a rather different perspective, William D. Lax states that Postmodernism focuses on text and narration, stressing the importance of dialogue and multiplicity, and that it pays special attention to process, as opposed to objectives (9).

The *Self*, as seen by Postmodernists, is a narrative entity, its text being a process and not something to be interpreted. The individual is no longer seen as an intra-psychic entity, but is instead approached from a perspective of "social significance", where it is conceived in social context (10).

<u>Changes in Society</u>:

Equally relevant is the broad change society and culture in general have experienced in the last decades. In his book Culture and *Truth, The Remaking of Social Analysis*, Renato Rosaldo, a Mexican-American ethnologist, points out that the traditional cultural and social norms first started to disintegrate at the end of the sixties. This rapid change in social thinking has been a result of conflict, change, variableness and social inequality. Social analysts do no longer look for harmony, consensus and objectivity, thereby excluding so-called unexplainable differences and inconsistencies (11). The emphasis is now precisely on those cultural differences, and they play a central role in the formation of one's identity.

CULTURAL ASPECTS

Until not so long ago, white was practically considered to be the "predominant" skin-color, Christianity the "predominant" religion, upper middle class the "predominant" class. Most Personality Theories based their principles on this group, and the majority of social analysts, anthropologists and ethnologists, when studying other cultures, based their theories and results on the value system of said group. In other words, the white, Christian, upper middle class people were usually the ones to study" and "observe" other cultures, from a removed, "objective", "neutral" perspective, and thereafter "analyzed" these cultures from their own cultural and moral points of view.

This, however, no longer holds valid, considering that the majority of large cities in the world now consist of different minority groups with their own "cultures", languages, religions, etc. (12). The idea of a "predominant" culture is quickly disintegrating.

Moreover, many people now have direct contact with other cultures, they are influenced by them and in turn influence them, and different belief systems are readily available to everyone. Christians can now become Buddhists as they please, ethnic foods are in style mostly everywhere and are

consumed by many, and afro-dancing is in vogue in various places. We are no longer subject to just one culture or one predominant system.

Cultural Analysis and "Second Order Cybernetics", Multidimensionality and Diversity

Renato Rosaldo in his book maintains that a specific culture, in the same way as any social "system", can never be analyzed "objectively", and that one cannot impose universal Truths onto it. One needs to look at it from different perspectives, from various angles, and be actively and subjectively involved in it. It is impossible to ever get a full, objective picture of the culture we are "studying". Rosaldo also points out that ethnographers should not observe other cultures as "neutral", "objective" and removed bystanders, but that they instead should be immersed in the culture subjectively to get a real grasp of what is going on (13).

This is Second Order Cybernetics, as applied to anthropology. The observer becomes part of what he/she is observing, thereby at the same time affecting what he/she is observing, i.e., he/she is no longer a removed spectator. So in a way, the resulting descriptions or narratives of what he/she has been observing is necessarily also a description *about* the person who generated the description. In other words, the anthropologist does not describe the tribe "out there", as was popular in the past; instead he/she describes the tribe as affected by his/her own presence, i.e., the anthropologist - observing - the - tribe - being - in - turn - observed - by - the anthropologist (14). And by doing so, he/se actively uses his/her *Self*, as well as his/her positive *and* negative feelings in the process (15).

In the introduction of his book (16), Renato uses an anecdote of his own experience as an ethnologist with the Ilongot tribe of the Philippines. These people were described by him as on the outside being very friendly and hospitable people. At the same time, however, they were known to be savage headhunters, especially after experiencing the death of a loved one. According to Rosaldo, killing innocent people was their way to ward off the intense rage they felt, and in a way, to facilitate their mourning process.

At first, Rosaldo could not understand this phenomenon, because he would analyze it from his own value system and moral background. Initially, he could not comprehend how such amicable and cordial people could at the same time be so bloodthirsty and barbaric. It took him many years and several personal experiences to finally "understand" this behavior (this does not mean that he thereby justified it; he could merely comprehend it).

It was not until his own experience with death (his first wife, Michelle, died tragically in an accident while in the Philippines, also working as an ethnologist). At the time of the incident, he had felt an enormous amount of rage, disbelief and impotence that had suddenly made him "understand" at a subjective level the headhunting tradition, or rather the fury and anger it could provoke.

Another incident that had an impact on his "discernment" of this ritual was a dialogue he had with

his local "brother" Tukbaw concerning war. In the late sixties, Rosaldo, in order to avoid fighting in the Vietnam war, was offered to hide in the homes of his Ilongot friends. He was completely startled by this proposal, as he had expected his local companions to act in the exact opposite way, i.e., he had imagined the Ilongots to encourage him to go to war, considering their own headhunting habits. Their response, however, astounded him. They told him that they considered soldiers to be men who sold their bodies. They could not grasp how a man could do what soldiers do, and order their fellow-men to the firing line.

This totally different and unexpected way of perceiving the same reality therefore had an impact on Rosaldo with respect his "understanding" of their customs, which had seemed so incomprehensible to him at the start. Moreover, from that moment onward, he felt a new type of relationship had begun between himself and the Ilongots, one of "reciprocal critical perceptions" (17). It made him realize the way that ethnographers should be open to how their own descriptions of others will be interpreted, but also what they themselves can learn about the descriptions of other people about themselves, the ethnographers.

In the same vein, without ever having been determined to do so, my own cultural and ethnic experiences have necessarily predisposed me to get to "know" the different cultures I have been exposed to in a similar fashion, i.e., by positioning myself right inside the culture wherever I was. I lived in the various countries we were stationed, learned the languages, interacted with the people and gained "knowledge" from them through my own subjective feelings and experiences, positive as well as negative ones, and in turn, my own "cultural" *Self* was enriched by a diversity of new cultural facets. It was also interesting to see how other people would react to my own personal experiences, or to the anecdotes of other newcomers in similar situations. After all, foreigners who are stationed abroad are sometimes involved in the most unusual dialogues with other people.

A Belgian Ambassador's wife to an African country told me that she had organized an official dinner for some Belgian Ministers. The Ambassador and his wife were relatively new and did not yet know their local personnel very well. The main course was to be fish, served in its entirety. Before dishing it up, the lady of the house told her butler to put some parsley in the nose for decoration. When the butler later entered the dining room, he had not put parsley in the nose of the fish, but in his own nose. This too is an example of taking another person from another culture's understanding of what one is saying for granted, based on one's own perception and background.

The opposite, however, can also occur. A personal experience can flabbergast people from other cultures as much as we are astounded by their accounts. One anecdote I can remember is when in 1988, my safe with all my jewels and other valuables was stolen from my apartment while I was abroad. It contained jewelry given to me by my grandmother, which had belonged to her own mother, as well as other precious items of great sentimental value. When I returned to find it missing, I was completely beside myself and was greatly affected by this loss. I felt rage and impotence at the same

time. A Pakistani friend of mine, however, could not understand my reaction. She basically insinuated that I should in fact be relieved because having something stolen, she claimed, saves one from a greater evil.

Dialogues and active interactions are therefore very important aspects in this process of "discernment". According to Kenneth Gergen and Lynn Hoffman, as we move through our lives, we construct ideas about it through our conversations or dialogues with other people. In other words, our perceptions and beliefs are "social inventions", and not an actual copy of the world around us (18). Harold Goolishian and Lee Winderman also point out that reality is a social construction (19). The world is described through the descriptions we make of our experiences. This is the way we represent our*selves,* and these representation characterizations are based on language. We live and act, they say, in a world that we define by our descriptive language. This is also a product of our attempts to make sense of things and to "understand". This comprehension is neither subjective nor objective, but "inter-subjective" (20).

Theoretical Background vs. Subjectivity

By criticizing the use of the "objective" observer or spectator, and the employment of "objective" theoretical language, Renato makes it clear that this does not mean that one has to abandon all theoretical considerations and cultural norms altogether. In his book, he points out that people do need to make plans based on past experiences, and that many times these plans do amount to something, i.e., conventional wisdom is often necessary and useful (21). In other words, to a certain extent one needs to guide oneself by knowledge from the past, and the existing theories and cultural norms are valid. They have, after all been constructed on the basis of experience.

They are, however, not to be considered the one and only Truth. We live with uncertainty, and we therefore have to be able to step out of our theoretical framework, and be able to improvise, be spontaneous and have at our service many different *Selves*. One-sidedness and adhering to theories blindly and inflexibly limit our possibilities and alternatives. We can guide ourselves by theories and conventional wisdom, but we also have to see the multiple facets and unpredictability of everything we tackle. Diversity helps us have a more open vision about our*selves*, others and the world in general.

Chaos and Order, Two Sides of the Same Coin

Just like we should not abandon all theoretical considerations in favor of diversity, differences, and subjectivity, Rosaldo states that chaos should not be seen as the opposite of order, in a dichotomous sense. Rather, we should take it to mean "lack of order". As mentioned previously, "order" and "certainty" are necessary to "make sense" of our being, and at the same time we have to be able to live with chaos and uncertainty, because they are also necessary conditions of our existence (22), i.e.,

they can and should co-exist.

Likewise, unpredictability does not mean that predictability should not exist. Some events in life are predictable, whereas others are unpredictable. And some of these unpredictable events will be meaningful, whereas others will be meaningless; some will be constructive and still others destructive. In other words, we make plans while at the same time we undo them. So, we do not go through life aimlessly with no goal in mind. Rather, we have to be able to change our plans according to life's uncertainties, unpredictability and unexpectedness.

Change vs. Maintenance

Continuity and maintenance is what most human beings seem to strive for to give meaning to their being. Life, however, as mentioned previously, is by nature unpredictable and uncertain. It is not easy to live with the latter, but when taken with a positive attitude, it can give rise to novelty, discovery and creation. I have now reached a stage in my life where I can tolerate my own internal and external chaos, and take advantage of the many possibilities it offers. Being open to the unexpected can be enormously fruitful and offer endless possibilities.

In that context, Rosaldo claims that paradoxically, change, and not structure, becomes the permanent condition of life. In his book, he quotes a story of the literary theorist Kenneth Burke, and makes an analogy with the following narrative to the aforementioned "changing permanence". The parable goes as follows:

> Imagine you arrive late at a lounge. Everyone is engaged in a heated discussion, too heated for anyone to explain to you what has been going on as yet. In fact, the discussion had been going on before anyone else had arrived, so no one can be quite sure as to what had happened before. So you listen for a while until you are fairly aware of what has been going on, and then you begin to participate. However, it gets late and you must leave. When you go, the conversation is still in course. (23)

What he is implying is that society and the world are like an ongoing, never-ending conversation. Rosaldo compares this discussion, which is in fact more of a heated argument, to unrest and change, and this eternal debate is far more potent than the "structures" which shape it. He adds that it is interesting to see how the structures one is subject to mold human behavior and how, in turn, human behavior molds the structures it is subject to. People go through life like conversational actors, creating and changing structures. This conversation is predictable and unpredictable at the same time. I myself have always lived in a state of doubt, and in many cases with ambivalence and ambiguity every time I changed my location. Whenever I arrived in new city, I felt like our character in the above story who comes to a discussion which was already well in process. Initially, I would hold back for some time. Then, I would start participating, but in very a clumsy trial-and-error kind of a way, improvising a lot, until I would finally begin to "understand".

This constantly being subject to novel situations is said to create "paranoia" because of the initial lack of confidence and knowledge about a new culture. One does not know how people will react, and at times it does actually feel as if one is being "looked at" with suspicion and uncertainty. Yet past the initial stage of discomfort, it is also an excellent way of learning, discovering and even creating. It is a quite unpredictable process, and events happen in a rather random fashion. More than once it has made me feel very uncomfortable and panicky, because unpredictability and randomness produce fear. Yet I have learned to live with it and I have realized that it can be extremely enriching, and once accepted as a "way of life", it is in fact preferable.

Cultural Identity

My perception of the Argentines at the time of my arrival was that they seemed to have a very strong sense of identity (many did not agreed with me). I considered this to be reflected in what I then perceived as their strong passions: e.g., for politics, in everyone's identification with a favorite soccer team, in their strong idealization of national heroes, among other things. In a funny sort of way, I felt slightly envious, for it was something I myself had never experienced, or rather, I had never had the need to experience.

When identity started to become an issue for me, the only one I felt I could really "identify" with was my sister Petra, because she had more or less become who she was throughout the same experiences as myself, and across the same or similar relationships and social "dialogues". The contexts she had been exposed to have been similar to mine. In other words, if I then felt I did not belong to any culture in particular, I did feel I identified with hers, as if we belonged to a micro-culture all by ourselves.

In the same vein, instead of identifying with peoples or cultures, I subconsciously "identified" with objects, which I had taken along with me wherever I went: my books, which were my professional *Self*, my music and my photos, which were my sentimental *Self*, my typewriter or computer, which were my "narrative" *Self* (I like to write). All this gave me some "continuity" and permanence in my discontinuing identity.

I now realize, however, that in fact "culture" is something which is an internal process, i.e., we create our own culture. Even people who have lived in the same "culture" for most of their lives are subjective creators of their own, inner cultures. There is really no such thing as a generalized culture with fixed rules anymore.

This brings us to the question of what it means to be "normal". During my childhood I strived to be like everyone else, wanting to be as similar to people around me as possible, as if my differences were exotically unusual. Now I realize that what is considered "normal" is very relative and in fact rather dull. Why want to be a carbon copy of others, when it is precisely because of one's differences that one can stick out and excel? With time I have learned to exploit these differences and use them

in my favor. In a world where complexity and multidimensionality are the rule, these differences can be more than a contribution to one *self* and to the system around us.

The *Self* as Being in Constant Flux

The *Self* is something which is in constant flux, with certain "characteristics" which particularize it, but, paradoxically, it is mostly "characterized" by its permanently changing condition (Rosaldo). The formation of one s *Self* is a never-ending, dynamic process, which cannot be predicted because of the uncertain nature of the future. Nor does it develop in a lineal fashion, but through a complex fluctuating process, moving back and forth.

When I try to visualize the *Self*, clay creature comes to mind. It can be molded, remolded, parts can be added, and new colors can be superimposed by others. When two clay creatures are joined, they can take on a new structure, they can mold together and be separated again. Some new parts of clay will mold better than others. When the clay creature is overwhelmed (chaos) it can turn into a massive ball of unrecognizable parts, yet it also has the possibility of restoring parts of its former *Self,* or become a new *Self*.

I am that clay creature, a "melting pot", a plurality of languages, cultures and subjectivities that intersect in my *Self*. I shift from one language to the next, from one "culture" to another, from one *Self* to another, and yet it is always "me", the same mass of clay, but in different forms.

CONCLUSIONS

The *Self* is not the static entity as its definition in Webster's implies. Rather, it is in constant flux, formed through our personal experiences and dialogues with significant others, and many *Selves* can co-exist within one-*Self*. The human experience is multidimensional. It is impossible for me to say that I am a certain way, when I can actually be the exact opposite in different contexts. Nor should I claim that I was or have been X and that I now am Y, when X and Y can perfectly well co-exist, and need not be dichotomously opposed to one-another. They can in fact be regarded as different facets of one's *Self*. Like the actors previously mentioned in relation to Burke's parable, we can go in and out of roles as we chose, depending on the contexts, or simply, have various "parallel lives".

Afterword (2003)

I hope I have not given the false impression that I hold all views to be equal or that I don t support anything anymore at all. I am ready for a world of uncertainty, but at the same time I need beliefs to make sense out of my existence. The only thing I disapprove of is the unconditional adherence to the grand narratives or essential truths.

Nor am I against science and its discoveries , unless of course these are turned into preexisting, essential and rigid truths. There are views I m completely flexible about, which I will update and

revise regularly. Moreover, certain historical events will make me look at certain of my older views more critically again, or abandon them altogether. In the same vein, there are other views of mine which are more resistant to change, namely violence, fundamentalism and abuse.

Why am I against fundamentalism for instance? Because fundamentalists are completely unwilling to even consider negotiating their belief systems or even consider their views as anything but the essential truths . In short, I am for diversity, pluralism and above all the ability to choose.

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