

### 3. EXCURSUS: ALTERNATION AND BIOGRAPHY (OR: HOW TO ACQUIRE A PREFABRICATED PAST)

In the preceding chapter we tried to show how sociological consciousness is particularly likely to arise in a cultural situation marked by what we have termed "alternation," that is, the possibility to choose between varying and sometimes contradictory systems of meaning. Before we proceed to the main part of our argument, which will be an attempt to delineate certain key features of the sociological perspective on human existence, we would like to stop for one further moment at this phenomenon of "alternation," going a little bit off our main course and asking what significance this phenomenon may have for the individual trying to understand his own biography. This excursus may make clearer that sociological consciousness is not only an intriguing historical apparition that one may profitably study, but is also a live option for the individual seeking to order the events of his own life in some meaningful fashion.

The commonsense view would have it that we live through a certain sequence of events, some more and some less important, the sum of which is our biography. To compile a biography, then, is to record these events in chronological order or in the order of their importance. But even a purely chronological record raises the problem of just what events should be included, since obviously not everything the subject of the record ever did could be covered. In other words, even a purely chronological record forces one to raise questions concerning the relative importance of certain events. This becomes especially clear in deciding on what historians call "periodization." Just when in the history of Western civilization should one consider the Middle Ages to have

alternation

compile  
biography

still  
raise  
questions

begun? And just when in the biography of an individual can one assume that his youth has come to an end? Typically, such decisions are made on the basis of events that the historian or the biographer considers to have been "turning points"—say, the coronation of Charlemagne, or the day on which Joe Blow decides to join the church and remain faithful to his wife. However, even the most optimistic historians and biographers (and, just as important, autobiographers) have moments of doubts as to the choice of these particular events as the truly decisive ones. Perhaps, they may say, it is not the coronation of Charlemagne but his conquest of the Saxons that should be taken as the great turning point. Or perhaps it was the point at which Joe gave up his ambition to become a writer that should mark the beginning of *his* middle age. The decision for one as against another event obviously depends on one's frame of reference.

This fact is not altogether hidden from commonsense thinking. It is taken care of by the notion that a certain maturity is required before one can really understand what one's life has been all about. The mature consciousness of oneself is then the one that has, so to speak, an epistemologically privileged position. The middle-aged Joe Blow, having accepted the fact that his wife will not get to be any prettier and that his job as assistant advertising manager will not become any more interesting, looks back on his past and decides that his earlier aspirations to possess many beautiful women or to write the definitive novel of the half-century were quite immature. Maturity is the state of mind that has settled down, come to terms with the *status quo*, given up the wilder dreams of adventure and fulfillment. It is not difficult to see that such a notion of maturity is psychologically functional in giving the individual a rationalization for having lowered his sights. Nor is it difficult to imagine how the young Joe, assuming the gift of augury, would have recoiled from his later self as from an image of defeat and desperation. In other words, we would contend that the notion of maturity

mature

maturity

really begs the question of what is important and what unimportant in one's biography. What may look like mellow maturity from one point of view may be interpreted as cowardly compromise from another. To become older, alas, is not necessarily to become wiser. And the perspective of today has no epistemological priority over the one of last year. Incidentally, it is this same recognition that makes most historians today wary of any notion of progress or evolution in human affairs. It is too easy to think that our own age is the epitome of what men have achieved so far, so that any past period can be judged on a scale of progress in terms of its closeness to or distance from the point at which we now stand. Perhaps the decisive event of man's history on this planet took place on a quiet afternoon in the year 2405 B.C. when an Egyptian priest woke up from his siesta and suddenly knew the final answer to the riddle of human existence—and promptly expired without telling anyone. Perhaps everything that has happened since is nothing but an inconsequential postlude. Nobody can possibly know, except perhaps the gods, and their communications appear to be regrettably ambiguous.

But to return from such metaphysical speculation to the problems of biography, it would seem, therefore, that the course of events that constitute one's life can be subjected to alternate interpretations. Nor can this be done only by the outside observer, so that after we're dead rival biographers may quarrel over the real significance of this or that thing we have done or said. We ourselves go on interpreting and reinterpreting our own life. As Henri Bergson has shown, memory itself is a reiterated act of interpretation. As we remember the past, we reconstruct it in accordance with our present ideas of what is important and what is not. This is what the psychologists call "selective perception," except that they usually apply this concept to the present. This means that in any situation, with its near-infinite number of things that could be noticed, we notice only those things that are important for our

Past → Important  
Present

immediate purposes. The rest we ignore. But in the present these things that we have ignored may be thrust upon our consciousness by someone who points them out to us. Unless we are literally mad we shall have to admit that they are there, although we may emphasize that we are not interested in them very much. But the things in the past that we have decided to ignore are much more helpless against our annihilating nonremembrance. They are not here to be pointed out to us against our will, and only in rare instances (as, for example, in criminal proceedings) are we confronted with evidence that we cannot dispute. This means that common sense is quite wrong in thinking that the past is fixed, immutable, invariable, as against the ever-changing flux of the present. On the contrary, at least within our own consciousness, the past is malleable and flexible, constantly changing as our recollection reinterprets and re-explains what has happened. Thus we have as many lives as we have points of views. We keep reinterpreting our biography very much as the Stalinists kept rewriting the Soviet Encyclopedia, calling forth some events into decisive importance as others were banished to ignominious oblivion.

We can safely assume that this process of reshaping the past (which probably is inherent in the very fact of language itself) is as old as *homo sapiens*, if not his hominoid ancestors, and that it helped to while away the long millennia in which men did little but dully bang away with their fist-axes. Every rite of passage is an act of historical interpretation and every wise old man is a theorist of historical development. But what is distinctively modern is the frequency and rapidity with which such reinterpretation often occurs in the lives of many individuals, and the increasingly common situation in which different systems of interpretation can be chosen in this game of re-creating the world. As we have already pointed out in the previous chapter, the great intensification of both geographical and social mobility is a major cause of this. A few examples might

People on the move physically are frequently people who are also on the move in their self-understanding. Take the amazing transformations of identity and self-image that can be the result of a simple change of residence. Certain places have served as the classic locations in which such transformations are produced almost as on an assembly line. One cannot, for example, understand Greenwich Village without understanding Kansas City. Since its inception as a gathering place of those interested in changing their identity, it has served as a sociopsychological apparatus through which men and women pass as through a magical retort, going in as nice Midwesterners and coming out as nasty deviants. What was proper before is improper after, and vice versa. What used to be tabu becomes *de rigueur*, what used to be obvious becomes laughable, and what used to be one's world becomes that which must be overcome. Obviously going through such a transformation involves a reinterpretation of one's past, and a radical one at that. One now realizes that the great emotional upheavals of the past were but puerile titillations, that those whom one thought important people in one's life were but limited provincials all along. The events of which one used to be proud are now embarrassing episodes in one's prehistory. They may even be repressed from memory if they are too much at variance with the way in which one wants to think of oneself now. Thus the glowing day when one was class valedictorian makes room in one's reconstructed biography for a then unimportant-seeming evening when one first tried to paint, and instead of reckoning an era from the date when one accepted Jesus at a church summer camp one does so from that other date, previously one of anxious shame but now one of decisive self-legitimation, when one lost one's virginity in the back of a parked automobile. We go through life refashioning our calendar of holy days, raising up and tearing down again the signposts that mark our progress through time toward ever newly defined fulfillments. For it will be clear by now that no magic is so strong that it may

not be overcome by a newer brand. Greenwich Village may later become but another phase in one's life, another experiment, another mistake even. Old markers may be retrieved from the debris of discarded chronologies. For example, the conversion experience in the church camp may later turn out to have been the first uncertain groping towards the truth one has now realized fully in becoming a Catholic. And completely new ordering categories may be imposed on the same past. Thus, for example, one may discover in one's psychoanalysis that both conversion and sexual initiation, both those things of which one was proud and those of which one was ashamed, and both one's earlier and one's later interpretations of these events, were part and parcel of the same neurotic syndrome. And so on *ad infinitum*—and *ad nauseam*.

To avoid giving the preceding paragraphs the appearance of a Victorian novel we have been miserly in the use of quotation marks. All the same, it should be clear now that it was with tongue in cheek that we spoke of this being "realized" or that being "discovered." The "true" understanding of our past is a matter of our viewpoint. And, obviously, our viewpoint may change. "Truth," then, is not only a matter of geography but of the time of day. Today's "insight" becomes tomorrow's "rationalization," and the other way around.

Social mobility (the movement from one level of society to another) has very similar consequences in terms of the reinterpretation of one's life as geographical mobility. Take the way in which a man's self-image changes as he moves up the social ladder. Perhaps the saddest aspect of this change is the way in which he now reinterprets his relationships to the people and events that used to be closest to him. For example, everything connected with the Little Italy of one's childhood undergoes a malevolent mutation when viewed from the vantage point of the suburban home that one has finally clawed one's way to. The girl of one's teenage daydreams is transmuted into an ignorant though pretty peasant. Boyhood friendships become irritating

reminders of an embarrassing former self, long left behind, together with old ideas of honor, magic and street-corner patriotism. Even Mamma, who used to be the orb around which the universe revolved, has become a silly old Italian woman one must pacify occasionally with the fraudulent display of an old self that no longer exists. Again, there are elements in this picture that are probably as old as mankind, since presumably the end of childhood has always meant an eclipse of gods. What is new is that so many children in our kind of society not only grow into adulthood but, in doing so, move into social worlds utterly beyond the comprehension of their parents. This is an inevitable consequence of massive social mobility. American society having been one of high mobility for quite some time, many Americans seemingly spend years of their life reinterpreting their own background, retelling over and over again (to themselves *and* to others) the story of what they have been and what they have become—and in this process killing their parents in a sacrificial ritual of the mind. Needless to add, the phrases “what they have been” and “what they have become” belong in quotation marks! It is no wonder, incidentally, that the Freudian mythology of parricide has found ready credence in American society and especially in those recently middle-class segments of it to whom such re-writing of biographies is a social necessity of legitimating one's hard-won status.

Instances of geographical and social mobility merely illustrate more sharply a process that goes on throughout society and in many different social situations. The confessing husband who reinterprets the love affairs of his past to bring them into a line of ascent culminating in his marriage, the newly divorced wife who reinterprets her marriage *ab initio* in such a way that each stage of it serves to explain the final fiasco, the inveterate gossip who reinterprets his various relationships in each new gossiping group he enters (explaining his relationship to A in a certain way to B, making it appear that B is his real intimate, then turning around and

3/20/22  
 mame!  
 re-tell  
 story

sacrificing this supposed intimacy by gossiping about B to A, and so on), the man who has discovered deceit in one he trusted and now pretends that he had always been suspicious of him (pretending this to himself as much as to others)—all these are engaged in the same perennial pastime of correcting fortune by remaking history. Now, in most of these cases, the process of reinterpretation is partial and at best half-conscious. One rectifies the past where one has to, leaving untouched what one can incorporate into one's present self-image. And these continuous modifications and adjustments in one's biographical *tableau* are rarely integrated in a clear, consistent definition of oneself. Most of us do not set out deliberately to paint a grand portrait of ourselves. Rather we stumble like drunkards over the sprawling canvas of our self-conception, throwing a little paint here, erasing some lines there, never really stopping to obtain a view of the likeness we have produced. In other words, we might accept the existentialist notion that we create ourselves if we add the observation that most of this creation occurs haphazardly and at best in half-awareness.

There are some cases, however, where the reinterpretation of the past is part of a deliberate, fully conscious and intellectually integrated activity. This happens when the reinterpretation of one's biography is one aspect of conversion to a new religious or ideological *Weltanschauung*, that is, a universal meaning system *within which* one's biography can be located. Thus the convert to a religious faith can now understand his entire previous life as a providential movement towards the moment when the mist lifted from before his eyes. Classic statements of this would be Augustine's *Confessions* or Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. Conversion introduces a new periodization in one's biography—B.C. and A.D., pre-Christian and Christian, pre-Catholic and Catholic. Inevitably the period coming before the event now designated as decisive is interpreted as a preparation. The prophets of the old dispensation are designated as forerunners and forecasters of the new. In

other words, conversion is an act in which *the past* is dramatically transformed.

*ori*  
*seeing*  
*things*  
*eyes*  
*new*

*Satori*, the experience of illumination sought in Zen Buddhism, is described as "seeing things with new eyes." While this is manifestly apt with regard to religious conversions and mystic metamorphoses, the modern secular faiths provide very similar experiences for their adherents. The process of becoming a Communist, for instance, involves a drastic reassessment of one's past life. Just as the new Christian now understands his previous life as a long night of sin and alienation from the saving truth, so the young Communist understands his past as a captivity in the "false consciousness" of a bourgeois mentality. Past events must be reinterpreted radically. What used to be carefree joy is now classified under the sin of pride, or what used to be personal integrity is now seen as bourgeois sentimentality. Consequently, past relationships must be reappraised too. Even the love of one's parents may have to be discarded as a temptation to apostasy or as treason to the party.

Psychoanalysis provides for many people in our society a similar method of ordering the discrepant fragments of their biography in a meaningful scheme. This method is particularly functional in a comfortable middle-class society, too "mature" for the courageous commitment demanded by religion or revolution. Containing within its system an elaborate and supposedly scientific means of explaining all human behavior, psychoanalysis gives its adherents the luxury of a convincing picture of themselves without making any moral demands on them and without upsetting their socioeconomic applecart. This is evidently a technological improvement in conversion management as compared with Christianity or Communism. Apart from that, the reinterpretation of the past proceeds in analogous fashion. Fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, wives and children are thrown one by one into the conceptual cauldron and emerge as metamorphosed figures of the Freudian pantheon. Oedipus takes Jocasta to the movies

and beholds the Primal Father over the breakfast table. And, once more, everything makes sense now.

The experience of conversion to a meaning system that is capable of ordering the scattered data of one's biography is liberating and profoundly satisfying. Perhaps this has its roots in a deep human need for order, purpose and intelligibility. However, the dawning recognition that this or any other conversion is not necessarily final, that one could be reconverted and re-reconverted, is one of the most terrifying ideas the mind can have. The experience of what we have called "alternation" (which is precisely the perception of oneself in front of an infinite series of mirrors, each one transforming one's image in a different potential conversion) leads to a feeling of vertigo, a metaphysical agoraphobia before the endlessly overlapping horizons of one's possible being. It would be most gratifying if we could now produce sociology as the magic pill that can be swallowed so that all these horizons promptly fall into place. If we did that, we would simply be adding one more mythology to all the others that promise relief from the epistemological anxieties of the "alternation" sickness. The sociologist, *qua* sociologist, cannot offer any such salvation (he may be a *guru* in his extracurricular activities, but that need not concern us here). He is just like any other man in that he must exist in a situation where information about the ultimate meaning of things is sparse, often clearly spurious and probably never overwhelming. He has no epistemological miracles for sale. Indeed, the sociological frame of reference is but another system of interpretation that can be applied to existence and that can be superseded again in other attempts at biographical hermeneutics.

Nevertheless, the sociologist can provide a very simple and therefore all the more useful insight to men trying to find their way through the jungle of competing world views. That is the insight that every one of these world views is *socially grounded*. To put this a little differently, every *Weltanschauung* is a conspiracy. The conspirators are those who construct a social situa-

tion in which the particular world view is taken for granted. The individual who finds himself in this situation becomes more prone every day to share its basic assumptions. That is, we change our world views (and thus our interpretations and reinterpretations of our biography) as we move from one social world to another. Only the madman or the rare case of genius can inhabit a world of meaning all by himself. Most of us acquire our meanings from other men and require their constant support so that these meanings may continue to be believable. Churches are agencies for the mutual reinforcement of meaningful interpretations. The beatnik must have a beatnik subculture, as must the pacifist, the vegetarian and the Christian Scientist. But the fully adjusted, mature, middle-of-the-road, sane and sensible suburbanite also requires a specific social context that will approve and sustain his way of life. Indeed, every one of these terms—"adjustment," "maturity," "sanity," and so on—refers to socially relative situations and becomes meaningless when divorced from these. One adjusts to a particular society. One matures by becoming habituated to it. One is sane if one shares its cognitive and normative assumptions.

Individuals who change their meaning systems must, therefore, change their social relationships. The man who redefines himself by marrying a certain woman must drop the friends that do not fit this self-definition. The Catholic marries a non-Catholic at the peril of his Catholicism, just as the beatnik endangers his ideology by having lunch too often with his uptown agent. Meaning systems are socially constructed. The Chinese "brainwasher" conspires with his victim in fabricating a new life-story for the latter, just as does the psychoanalyst with his patient. Of course, in both situations the victim/patient comes to believe that he is "discovering" truths about himself that were there long before this particular conspiracy got under way. The sociologist will be, at the very least, skeptical about this conviction. He will strongly suspect that what appears as discovery is really invention. And he will know that

change  
social  
relationships

\*

the plausibility of what is thus invented is in direct relation to the strength of the social situation within which the invention is concocted.

In a later chapter we shall enlarge further on this vexing connection between what we think and who we sup with. In this excursus we have merely tried to show that the experience of relativity and "alternation" is not only a global historical phenomenon but a real existential problem in the life of the individual. The insight of sociology into the social roots of this experience may be slight comfort to those who would find a philosophical or theological answer to the agonizing problem thus posed. But in this world of painfully rationed revelations one ought to be grateful for small favors. The sociological perspective, with its irritating interjection of the question "*Says who?*" into the grand debate of *Weltanschauungen*, introduces an element of sober skepticism that has an immediate utility in giving some protection at least against converting too readily. Sociological consciousness moves in a frame of reference that allows one to perceive one's biography as a movement within and through specific social worlds, to which specific meaning systems are attached. This by no means solves the problem of truth. But it makes us a little less likely to be trapped by every missionary band we encounter on the way.