Modern Identity - Crisis and Continuity

by Peter Berger

Recently, moved by the desire to escape the New York Times, I started to reread Thucydides' Great War. The escapist motive, as I should have known, was emphatically frustrated. Instead, I was plunged right back into just the sort of "relevant" material that I had wanted to get away from - down to Pericles expounding the domino theory to the Athenian assembly prior to its declaration of war against Sparta and, after the desecration of the Hermes statues on the eve of the expedition to Sicily, the great patriotic purge that only by an oversight failed to be called the "Honor Athens" campaign. In the light of these disagreeable relevancies I returned, with more discomfort than on previous occasions, to the famous passage in Thucydides' own introduction to his book - I quote in Rex Warner's translation:

> "It will be enough for me...if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future". -

Why the discomfort? In the event, to be sure, because of my frustrated escapism. There is also, however, a theoretical discomfort. It is the discomfort felt upon encountering a viewpoint that flies directly in the face of one of the most cherished notions of modernity - that of the ever-changing, ever-innovating character of historical reality - a notion conceived in the secularization of Biblical eschatology, born in the revolutionary turmoil of the modern era, theoretically baptized by Hegel, and today part and parcel of the cognitive instrumentarium of almost everyone from Barry Goldwater to the New Left intelligentsia. I like to think that my own Weltanschauung is something less than completely modern, yet my modernity reveals itself in the discomfort I too feel upon being told that, when all is said and done, nothing in history is really new. On top of that, I'm, as it were, professionally obligated to be uncomfortable with such a notion. Let me repeat the key phrase in the passage from Thucydides: "Human nature being what it is" - a moment's reflection about this statement is liable to make any sociologist acutely nervous, as it seems to threaten the very foundations of his discipline.

Historians, of course, feel differently about this. Except for those contaminated by too much interdisciplinary contact with the social sciences, historians generally react with positive glee to any suggestion that, say, contemporary America is just like Periclean Athens - plus a couple of minor addenda, such as helicopters and television. Sociologists, by

contrast, have a deep vested interest in the minor addenda. Their entire professional ideology leads them to the position that the addenda of modernity constitute startling nova, profound transformations in the very texture of human existence and human consciousness. Spiritually, almost all sociologists are Hegelians, in that they tend to look upon human nature either as a myth or as itself the product of socio-historical processes. This basic discrepancy in viewpoint between historians and sociologists is likely to come to the fore very quickly in any discussion of the present topic. The sociologist is likely to take the so-called identity crisis of our time with deadly seriousness and to seek explanations in terms of this or that alleged novum of modernity (television, if not helicopters, being a case in point). The historian, on the other hand, is apt to fish out some ancient text (how ancient, of course, will depend on his sub-specialty), which is supposed to demonstrate conclusively that all of this has happened before in very much the same way.

Who is right? Thucydides or Hegel? Sociologists are also known for a tendency to make rash judgments - I would have to be not only rash but downright deranged, were I to suggest that I can resolve this question here (or, for that matter, elsewhere). A good case can be made for the statement that modern thought has discovered history (and thus society) as against nature - a discovery contained in Giambattista Vico's classic formulation of the difference between history and nature (we have made the former, but not the latter). But it would be rash indeed to maintain that modern thought has also discovered just where the one ends and the other begins. The only sane attitude in these matters is one of great caution. I would like to approach the present topic in such an attitude of caution, thus disappointing from the beginning all those who expect the sociologist to engage in fiery culture-prophecy. There can be no doubt that what is currently called the crisis of modern identity is a real phenomenon - minimally real in the sense of W. I. Thomas, that anything defined by people as real is real in its consequences. All I can do, then, is to look at this phenomenon in the perspective of sociology and to reflect, however tentatively, as to which of its elements are genuinely new and which are in continuity with the past. -

Permit me to begin on a fairly abstract theoretical level: What, in the perspective of sociology, is identity as a phenomenon? I think I'm correct in thinking that the current vogue of the concept of identity and of various theories about its alleged permutations was begun by Erik Erikson. This is not the place for a discussion of Erikson's highly intriguing work, but it should be emphasized that Erikson's theoretical frame of reference comes from psychoanalysis rather than from any social science. I don't think that this frame of reference can simply be taken over by the sociologist. Minimally, it will have to be considerably modified in order to be useful for purposes of sociological analysis; maximally (which is my preference), the sociologist will try to generate his own frame of reference for the phenomena in question, an enterprise for which the conceptual tools are available in a tradition of

sociologically oriented psychology derived from George Herbert Mead. In what follows I'll try to sketch this frame of reference in very broad outline (inevitably, this will entail coming out with axiomatic propositions that cannot be validated in the present context), and then to look at the current situation in this perspective. The perspectival aspect of this procedure ought to be stressed - in other words, it should be very clear that the sociologist is in no position to produce a metaphysic that will answer the philosophical questions of the ages - all he can do is to draw out the implications of his peculiar and necessarily limited insights into human reality.

Identity is a notion obviously related to that of the self. As a concept, it seeks to circumvent the ontological problems suggested by the latter term, yet it clearly has something to do with the question "who am I?". Sociology is an empirical science. As such, it cannot deal with this question in its ultimate philosophical or even religious dimensions; it can only deal with it insofar as it refers to phenomena available to empirical methods of inquiry. Empirically, there are two such referents - the objective social structure within which the questioner exists, and his own subjective consciousness. In other words, sociology cannot deal with the question "who am I <u>really</u>?" - as before the face of God, or in the realm of things-in-themselves, or in any realm that is sheltered from the vicissitudes of collective or individual definitions of reality. Consequently, a sociological approach to these matters will have to distinguish between objective and subjective identity, between who I am <u>to others</u> and who I am <u>to myself</u>. Both aspects of identity are empirically available; neither refers to the self as a metaphysical entity.

Society <u>assigns</u> identities. That is, society tells me who I am. This process of identity assignment begins at birth and continues through life. It is an essential element of all so-called socialization processes, not only in infancy and childhood, but in adult life as well, It may be graphically represented as society pinning identification tags on everyone who is part of the societal <u>dramatis personae</u> - from then on, or until further notice, everyone will be systematically treated as whatever the tag says he or she is - what is more, everyone will also be expected to take this assigned identity seriously, to play its appropriate role with inner conviction, or at the very least to pretend doing so. It should be stressed that this process of identification is essential to any human society. Without it, we literally wouldn't know from one moment to the next who it is that we're dealing with in our everyday life with others, and society as an ongoing experience would be impossible.

This may sound rather mechanical, as if the individual were stamped out of a mint. Anyone who has ever dealt with small children knows that this is not how the process works. While Margaret Mead is regrettably correct in her description of socialization as a game in which, almost always, the adults win in the end, the child is not a passive victim in all

of this. While the adults are indeed the stronger party, they are far from omnipotent, and the game ends not so much in a victory as in the successful conclusion of a series of compromises. Thus socialization may be viewed as a bargaining process between society and individual (a fancier term for this is "dialectic"). Society assigns identities - individuals appropriate identities. Most of the time, indeed, they appropriate, with greater or lesser modifications, precisely the identities that have been assigned to them - in other words, they inwardly identify with their tags - but there is no complete certainty about this and there are enough cases of non-cooperation to make things interesting.

The distinction between objective and subjective identity may now have become clearer. It is probably also clear that the process is much more complicated than sketched here and than we can possibly discuss in the present context. But let us go on: Implied in the above is the possibility of conflict between objective and subjective identities. Society tags me as female, but I experience myself as male, or would like to. Society assigns me the identity of organization man, but I know that I'm an artist. Society calls me a nigger, but I assert myself as a black man. And so on. In such conflicts, of course, there is an inner as well as an external contestation: If I'm to resist a certain tag, I must not only fight all those others who want to keep it pinned to my chest, but I must also fight myself - or, more accurately, that part of myself that still believes in the tag. How much conflict of this kind there is in a society will depend on historical circumstances that cannot be laid down a priori. There will always be some conflict, if only because socialization cannot completely or conclusively mold the biological constitution of the individual - in other words, if nothing else, the probability of "maladjusted" individuals is biologically given. At the same time, any society that functions fairly efficiently will have a high degree of symmetry between objective and subjective identities - that is, most individuals will have inwardly identified with most of their tags - put differently, most actors in the societal drama will, more or less, perform with conviction. Since, even in the best of theaters, the management can never be completely sure of this, there are always certain standard operating procedures for those actors who forget their lines, who adlib wilfully, or who go berserk and threaten to explode the whole show. These procedures are what sociologists call "social control", the details of which do not concern us here.

Subjective identities differ in stability. There are many individual reasons for this, from physiological pecularities to the biographical accidents that psychoanalysts are interested in. But there are also social conditions for stability or instability. Once one has grasped the dialectical process in which identity is generated, one cay say a priori that the stability of subjective identity is determined by the stability of objective identity assignment. Put more simply, I will be certain of who I am to the extent

that society is consistent in its treatment of me. Such consistency in turn depends upon the cohesiveness and continuity of the institutions within which the identity assignments take place. For example, a class of people that is secure in its position in society, and has been so secure for a long time, is likely to produce individuals who are calmly certain of who they are. Such is the proverbial case with aristocrats, but very much the same inner certainty regarding identity can be observed in primitive or peasant societies, or among the members of highly cohesive, closely knit minority groups. Such certainty should not be confused with happiness: I may know exactly who I am, and be quite unhappy about this; but in this case, unhappy or not, I will at any rate by spared the particular miseries of what we call identity crises. Conversely, unstable institutional contexts are likely to produce individuals who are uncertainly nervous about just who they are. For example, classes of people that are undergoing either a sharp rise or a sharp decline in social position are unlikely to be blessed with stable subjective identities. Naturally, this instability will manifest itself in social action as well as in consciousness.

An episode from the 19th century illustrates this point economically. On the occasion of a state visit to England the Empress Eugénie (upstart royalty if ever there was one) went to the opera with Queen Victoria. Both women cut rather magnificent figures. Majestically, and with perfect aplomb, they went up to the royal box. Eugénie came in first, graciously bowed, graciously looked behind her, and sat down on the chair that a lackey was pushing under her posterior. Then Victoria followed, graciously bowed, and sat down. Victoria did not look behind her. She knew that the chair would be there. -

Identity is grounded in socialization. That socialization takes place within an institutional context, which has a particular history. Thus identity is finally grounded in history, has a history or , if one prefers, is a historical product. Psychoanalysis has made us aware of the importance of biography for identity. But every individual biography only makes sense as part of a larger chronology, which is the history of a particular society (and,, incidentally, it has been the great merit of Erikson's work that he has elaborated, within his own theoretical frame of reference that is quite different from the one presented here, the inter-connections between biography and history). For example, it was the children of the bourgeoisie who brought forth the luxurious psychic complications that so intrigued Freud - and, at least in principle, he was probably correct in ascribing this or that complication to this or that Herr Papa (not to mention this or that Frau Mama). But all these individuals shared a common bourgeois context, were the inheritors of a long history that lay back of that context, indeed (whatever their individual eccentricities in the administration of the incest drama) participated in a common bourgeois identity. If you like, that was the large box out of which all the individual identity tags were pulled. But this bourgeois identity did not fall from

heaven - neither was it contained in the nether depths of the unconscious from the start of time. Rather, bourgeois identity emerged as the product of the very specific history of the bourgeoisie in modern Europe. Norbert Elias, in his monumental work Der Prozess der Zivilisation, has traced this history to its roots in the minutiae of manners and morals. It was a long and painful history, during which, for example, individuals were first taught to stop spitting on other people's plates, then not to spit into their own, then to refrain from any public spitting - a process of terroristic socialization also extending to the regimentation of eating, defacation, sexuality and speech, finally placing on the stage of history individuals sufficiently "repressed" to be capable of Freudian neuroses in the first place.

It may seem that, so far, our theoretical considerations have led us to a position diametrically opposed to Thucydides'. What place could possibly be occupied by a "human nature" in this scheme of identity productions? Frankly, I don't know; in any case, I'm not able to present a philosophical anthropology that will, among other ingredients, contain the aforementioned sociological angles. However, the anti-Thucydidean character of the aforementioned perspective is modified as soon as we are willing to concede (as, I think, we must) that the variety of ways in which identity has been historically defined and produced, vast though it is, yet is bound by certain parameters. In other words, man does indeed (as Marx put it, in his version of Hegelianism) produce himself - but there are limits to the range of possible products, and these limits may be viewed as trans-historical and cross-societal constants. Some of these constants are given in man's biological (and, possibly, psychic) constitution. I don't think that either human biology or psychology have reached the stage where they can tell us what these constants are with any degree of assurance, though the work now being done by, for instance, Konrad Lorenz and his school in comparative ethology and by Noam Chomsky and others in structural linguistics is highly suggestive of the directions in which answers to this problem might lie. However, even at this stage of our knowledge about man's constitution, when we do not as yet know very much about the instinctual parameters of his behavior or about the putatively necessary structures of his consciousness, it is clear that this constitution sets limits to the possibilities of man's reality- and self-construction. Take only such basic constitutional factors as man's mortality, his sexuality, or his very limited capacity to pay attention to what is before him. To return to Vico's dictum, man is indeed the great world-builder - but all the worlds of man are located in an encompassing world, that of nature, which is not of man's making. Man's own organism and the constitution it imposes on all his activity is one part of this encompassing world; the other, of course, is the natural environment and its structures. Thus, for instance, man's world-building takes place in an environment that has a specific climate and in which specific resources are scarce.

Whatever one might in the end be able to say about constants generated by a "human nature", there certainly are constants that spring from the "human condition". In the language of phenomenology, man is always in a situation - his history and his social activity, including its identity productions, are likewise situated. The aforementioned constants derive from this fundamental fact. They have sociological implications. To wit, these constants eventuate in some general mandates for the social process in which identities can be produced and maintained (the term "mandate" is, of course, not meant to suggest some sort of hidden teleology in society, but in the sense of general conditions or, if you will, recipes for social activity). Before turning to the topic of modern identity it makes sense to look briefly at three of these mandates - not necessarily the only ones, but very relevant for this topic. The mandates are those of order, of continuity, and of triviality.

One of the fundamental mandates, probably the fundamental mandate, for any human society is order. American sociology, having been strongly influenced by the democratic ideology of the "American Creed", tended to lose sight of this in a theoretically misleading dichotomization of "consensus" and "control"; recent incursions of New Left ideology into sociology, with a tendency to equate all order with "repression", haven't helped to clarify matters either. It was, above all, the great achievement of Emile Durkheim and the French school of sociology to have understood that the underlying unity of society is provided by an order of consciousness, an order that Durkheim called "collective consciousness" and (unfortunately, I think) "religion". I would prefer the term "symbolic universe" (as Thomas Luckmann and I have elaborated it in our book The Social Construction of Reality), but this terminological change doesn't affect the basic Durkheimian insight. Orderly social processes are only possible through collective participation in symbols (Mead, of course, understood this in a very profound way). The final order of a society is provided by a coherent, over-arching organization of symbols, providing a meaningful world for individual biographies to unroll in. The term "symbolic universe" refers to this fundamental fact about society - that every society must provide a world for its members to live in. In this world, the individual can orient himself, understand his fellow-men, undertake projects - in sum, can make sense of his life.

It is important to understand that identity, too, is always located, situated, in a socially constructed world or "symbolic universe". Society assigns identities within the coordinates of its specific world. Thus, I'm assigned the tag "male" in a world that ascribes very specific meanings to maleness, the tag "teenager" in a world that has inserted the biographical stage of "youth" between childhood and maturity, the tag "with it" in a world (or, in this case, sub-world) that bifurcates in terms of "swingers"

and "straights" - and, of course, each identity assignment places me in a particular sector of this world's inhabitants, since I'm not the only male, teenage swinger. Conversely, the individual appropriates identities within the coordinates of the same socially constructed world, even when he rebels against the identities he has been assigned. Thus, I can decide to reject the behavioral, emotional and ideological elements of my assigned maleness, and I can try to re-define myself sexually in deviant terms, but even in this process of rejection and re-definition I must reckon with the encompassing world of my society, which remains my situational starting-point, my powerful enemy and, in all likelihood, my persistent frame of reference. What is more, if I'm to have any hope of successfully carrying off my deviant identity definition, I must find at least a few other individuals to give me social support; that is, I must go about the job of rounding up fellow-inhabitants of what will then become a sub-world, a counter-society, a social shield against all those others who fail to see the justice of my claims.

The mandate of continuity is grounded in the fact that every society has a history, must have a history, since it is impossible for one generation to construct in toto the world in which it is to live. We come into the world as children, presented with an endless number of accomplished facts bequeathed to us by our parents, and most of us face the problem of having to hand on some sort of viable world for our children to inhabit. To be sure, we can engage in some dismantling of the parental world and we can try to inflict on our children some favorite improvisations of our own making, but there are, I'm afraid, rather severe limits to what is feasible at either end. A moment's reflection about language, which is the most basic ingredient of any social world, will make this clear. We are born into one, continuing stream of language, which contains the sedimented constructions of the past and very largely determines what we or our successors can re-construct in the future. Maurice Halbwachs, probably Durkheim's greatest disciple, summed this up succinctly if a little offensively when he proposed (in his Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire) that "society is a memory". Mead (without knowing Halbwachs, I should think) links this insight with identity when he suggests that the "I" (the spontaneous, appropriating aspect of the self) is a "figure of memory". In other words, identity (both as objectively assigned and as subjectively appropriated) not only locates the individual in society but also in history. It links him to others so identified in the past and, usually, in the future as well.

The mandate of triviality is rooted in man's deplorable inability to pay attention to too many things at once - which, in turn, must be seen in the light of his biological constitution as an "instinctually under-privileged being" (to use a phrase by Arnold Gehlen, who systemitized this insight in his theory of institutions, especially in his book Urmensch und Spaetkultur). Because man's instinctual equipment is too impoverished to provide a stable context for his behavior, institutions have to do this for him - that is, they have to provide programs of action that the individual can follow without expending

much energy in reflection. This can only be done by trivializing the meanings embodied in social activity - that is, making these meanings routine, taken-for-granted, undeserving of profound attention. Only when this stable "background" is established for his social activity, can the individual gain the necessary leeway, from time to time, to have extraordinary, astonishing, attention-provoking experiences. This is true of identity as much as of any other socially constructed symbol or meaning. In order for social life to proceed with any degree of efficiency, identities must be trivialized - "there goes another male - so what else is new?" - "oh yes, he's also a sociology professor." No raised eyebrows provoked by either announcement. The same trivialization is reiterated subjectively - that is, most of the time, the individual carries his identity easily, without strain, and definitely without reflection. This trivialization of identity is operative (in Alfred Schutz's phrase) "until further notice" - that is, until, for some reason, its taken-for-granted character is put in question and it becomes "a problem", a surprise, an occasion for reflection or even re-definition. Then, possibly, some admiring female might decide that I'm the most routine-shattering male in sight - or, in a more unhappy moment, I might question whether my being a sociology professor makes any sense at all. -

We have spent some time on these general theoretical considerations, because they provide a frame of reference within which the particular problems of modern identity can be more successfully negotiated. We can now turn to the question of the peculiarities of this modern identity, as these have emerged in the perspective of sociology. We shall limit ourselves here to four features that we consider to be important, without pretending that these exhaustively cover the phenomenon: -

Modern identity is peculiarly open. - This is the quality that David Riesman has pointed to with his category of "other-direction", which Daniel Lerner (in his The Passing of Traditional Society) has very ingeniously applied to the personality changes that accompany modernization. The openness of modern identity can best be seen in comparison with pre-modern antecedents. Take the type of peasant society that Lerner was studying in the Middle East. Here, the subjective world of the individual is linked to his immediate social situation in a very narrow and constraining way. This, of course, is true of his range of experience and knowledge. But, more importantly, it is true of his subjective identity. The individual is, as it were, fully encased in his identity; put more theoretically, there is very high symmetry between objective and subjective identity. As a result, as Lerner found, the individual finds it very difficult to put himself in another's position: He is what he is, where he is, and even his imagination is strongly immobilized by this location. By contrast, modernization entails a "mobilization" of identity. The individual becomes much more open to new experiences, including new experiences of himself. His horizons expand and he becomes able, first in the imagination, to place himself in quite novel situations. Looked at from the viewpoint of pre-modern values, this means a weakening of character, a disintegration of the stable structures of the self - and, valuations apart, that is an empirically viable description. As a result, the individual can no longer rely on his original identity, on what he used to consider as his "true self", must instead rely increasingly on the shifting identity assignments of others in his immediate (and, to boot, continually changing) social milieu - that is, he must shift from "inner-direction"

to "other-direction". Viewed positively, what we see here is an open, adventurous, "creative" personality - which, viewed with a more jaundiced eye, could also be described as shiftless, opportunistic and lacking in integrity.

But (perhaps fortunately) we are not dealing in ethics here. Rather, we are concerned with empirical causes and consequences. The former we would seek, in the main, in the macrosocial processes of mobility and pluralism, both endemic to modern social structures. Modern societies introduce "movement" of all sorts. People begin to move in space, quite a lot of them physically, most of the others in the imagination. People also begin to move in society, "up" and "down" in terms of status, but also horizontally through increasingly variegated societal spheres. With all this mobility, it becomes increasingly difficult to find closed, self-assured, undisturbed social milieus. Society becomes increasingly pluralistic, in the sense of becoming hospitable to competing and highly discrepant definitions of reality. If we now recall what was said earlier about the conditions for stable identity, it will be clear that what are produced here are precisely the conditions for unstable identity. The macrosocial processes of mobility and pluralism are experienced by the individual in his own biography as constant change, uncertainty and conflict in the definitions of world and self presented to him. More and more, this is true of even very early socialization - just think of the variety of stimuli and expectations that even very young children are exposed to today. This means that the question "who am I?" can increasingly be answered only hic et nunc - "I am such-and-such - right now, in this social situation, in this phase of my career" - and, by implication, I may be something vastly different tomorrow or as soon as I switch to another circle of Meadian "significant others".

This, as we may call it, "convertible" quality of modern identity has been aptly caught in Robert Merton's phrase "anticipatory socialization" - the modern individual, Merton suggests, is not only socialized into one particular group but, in anticipation, into other groups that he is later expected to move into. But Merton's phrase is too attached to the special case of social mobility in an American-type class system; it doesn't do full justice to the scope of the phenomenon. Modern identity is not only open, it is peculiarly open-ended. Modern man, it seems, has an intrinsically unstable identity, never knows for sure just who he is, thus is ever in search of himself. And the reasons for this are not at all mysterious, but are fully available to sociological analysis: They are to be sought, not in some strange fall from grace of modern consciousness, but in the social structures of modern society that this consciousness refers to. Modern identity is open-ended, "convertible", inherently unstable - that is to say, it is guaranteed to be in ongoing crisis. This brings us to a key proposition: The contemporary identity crisis is not an accidental or transitory phenomenon. Rather, it is to be seen as an intrinsic feature of modern social life. - Some further considerations of modern identity may help to flesh out this proposition: -

Modern identity is peculiarly differentiated. - To some extent, this is already implied in the foregoing feature - the pluralization of social structure will inevitably be reflected by a pluralization of identity. But there is more to it than that: There takes place a great expansion and increase in importance of the entire realm of subjectivity. Arnold Gehlen

has called this process "subjectivization" and has traced it, for example, in the rise of the novel as a peculiarly modern literary form. Modern society brings about a far-reaching reality-loss on the part of the institutional order and, conversely, a reality-gain for subjectivity. Modern institutions, for the reasons just mentioned, lack stability. Consequently, they fail to present themselves to the individual as a firm, reliable context for his activity. Modern institutions are experienced as ever-changing, opaque, unsafe - in the final case, as devoid of reality. In terms of our previous theoretical considerations, indeed, we may say that the underlying reason for this is a consistent violation in modern society of the three mandates of order, continuity, and triviality. The violation of order and continuity should be clear by now; the violation of triviality is just as important. We have suggested that the trivialization of social experience is necessary so as to protect the individual from being ongoingly surprised and thus paralyzed from acting. It is precisely this process of trivialization that is impeded by the instability of modern institutions. They fail to protect the individual from all those surprises. They constantly put him in situations in which he faces astonishing, and at least potentially paralyzing, innovations in the fabric of social experience. They flood him with stimuli (as Gehlen puts it), and with contradictory expectations. One result of this is that the individual becomes extremely nervous; psychiatrically, it can be said that modern institutions are highly pathogenic. But another result is that, inevitably, the individual is thrown back upon his own subjective resources for the stability he needs to live, as these resources are less and less available to him in the objective institutional order. In the extreme case, nothing is reliable or real except the self.

The reality-loss of the institutional order, and the concomitant reality-gain of subjectivity, have brought about a curious reversal in the traditional relation between subjective identity and its institutionally assigned roles. Traditionally, these roles expressed most fully what the individual conceived to be his "true self". Institutions, institutional roles and the identity that objectively belonged with them - these were the realissima of subjective consciousness as well. Thus, a primitive putting on the mask of his assigned part in the societal drama was not hiding himself; on the contrary, he was putting on his real self. Modern man, by contrast, views his institutional roles and thus his objectively assigned identity, precisely as a mask that hides what he "really" is - as, if you will, "alienation","false consciousness" or "bad faith". The realissimum now is his own subjectivity and whatever identity he can make plausible to himself using the resources of that subjectivity. It may be added that these resources are typically meager, so that the consciousness in question is typically not a very happy one. Needless to say, we have only touched here on an exceedingly complex phenomenon, which requires much greater elaboration. However, hopefully, enough has been said to indicate a shattering transformation in the construction of identity.

Modern identity is, therefore, peculiarly differentiated, stratified, "interesting". Because the real self is no longer readily at hand in the institutional order of society, the individual is forever inclined to stare with fascination into his own subjectivity and into that of others. Subjectivity is credited with hitherto unsuspected depths and complications. We can do no more than mention here the consistently subjectivity-enhancing trend of modern philosophy and literature, eventuating in the flowering of an intellectual discipline that aptly enough called itself "depth psychology" ("what depths?", a pre-modern observer would probably exclaim). Similarly, we can only mention the implications of all this for the phenomenology of modern emotional life - as in the development of the idea of romantic love, in the new ethics of education, and in the proliferation of "self-discovery" cults and ideologies. It is very important to stress the parallelism between this new interest in the alleged depths of the self and the "flattening out" of institutions in consciousness. The self becomes "interesting" as the institutional order fades in plausibility. Put differently, "alienation" is not only the price but the necessary condition for "self-discovery". -

Modern identity is peculiarly reflective. - Helmut Schelsky, who was strongly influenced by Gehlen, called this featuer "permanent reflectiveness" (Dauerreflektion). It means a pervasive propensity to reflect about everything one is doing and, finally, about what one is. Put differently, modern subjectivity is peculiarly reflective and self-reflective. Everything, including identity, is ongoingly scrutinized, explained, brought into full awareness. The phenomenon that Max Weber called "rationalization" is, of course, related to this, though not quite co-extensive with it. The macrosocial roots of this are generally sought in the necessary rationality of modern science and technology on the one hand, and of modern bureaucracy on the other. I'm quite sure that this linkage makes sense. However, I think that pluralism is, once again, an important additional factor - pluralism in the sense used above, of the pluralization of social worlds in which the modern individual lives. Why? For the simple reason that the individual is compelled to become reflective when he is confronted with discrepant definitions of reality. As long as it is possible to live in closed, highly coherent worlds, it is only on rare occasions and in case of rather few individuals that the official definitions of reality (including the officially assigned identities) become problematic. When, however, conflicting and competing worlds co-exist in the experience of the individual, and force him to make certain choices between them, he must willy-nilly start giving some attention to the definitions of reality at issue. In terms of identity, as long as every significant fellow-man I encounter agrees that I'm A, I can afford to take my A-ness happily for granted - unless I'm an intellectual or otherwise maladjusted. But when some significant others treat me as A, some as B, and perhaps even some as C, it will be hard for me to refrain from devoting some thought to the topic of my identity, however uncongenial such reflection may be to my (let us assume) robust temperament.

This self-critical propensity of modern man has led to a luxuriant growth of therapeutic agencies, whose mission it is to assist the individual in his efforts at self-examination. These are not our concern here. But the same feature adds to the intrinsic instability we have just discussed, and must therefore be seen as an additional cause of the permanent identity crisis of modern man. Although this insight is deeply offensive to all intellectuals, it is, I believe, a simple truth that happiness is commonly associated with unreflecting certitude. A man who, say, is calmly certain that he loves his wife feels little inclination to reflect about this. It is when, for whatever reason, this happy tranquillity is disturbed that he begins to raise questions - "why do I love her?", "do I love her now as I once did?", "do I really love her?", and so forth. Conversely, raising such questions is very likely to disturb whatever tranquillity there was before. The same, of course, applies to thinking about oneself - "am I really A?", "have I perhaps been kidding myself, hiding my B-ness from myself?", "do I like being A?", and so on. Reflection is dangerous to either individual or collective tranquillity (another way of reiterating the old adage that thinking hurts). Further, reflection is likely to paralyze spontaneous action - as Hamlet knew, and as is illustrated in the classical joke about the man who suffered from insomnia as of the day on which he was asked whether he slept with his beard above or below the blanket. Thus the contemporary identity crisis is kept going by a large, probably growing, number of people who are chronically addicted to examining themselves.

Modern identity is peculiarly individuated. - There can be little doubt that, whatever else it has done, modern society has produced a pervasive ethos of individuality and individual rights. Thomas Luckmann (The Invisible Religion) has plausibly suggested that the notion of individual autonomy occupies a preëminent place in the value system (or, as he would say, the "religion") of modernity. It should be emphasized, however, that this individualism has a strongly humanitarian and ethical tinge to it; it is not, for instance, the individualism of the social Darwinist or the Nietzschean loner; rather, it is an individualism in which the emphasis is on respect for the individual and his imputed rights. Further, while all ethical notions have but a tentative relation to social reality, modern individualism is not a Weltanschauung floating around in some Platonic vacuum; rather, it refers to an empirical social-psychological fact, that of an identity that is hightly individuated in comparison with most previous historical societies. This individuation, of course, can be positively viewed in terms of emancipation, progressive liberation, achievement of "authenticity" (that, once again, would be the properly modern way of looking at it, à la Hegel). It can also be viewed as progressive isolation and despair, à la Kierkegaard, or, in sociological terms, as a progressive entrapment in what Durkheim called anomie - rootlessness, normlessness, separation from meaningful ties with others. We are not called upon here to choose between these two perspectives; descriptively, both are correct to a great degree.

The macrosocial sources of this individuation are, in all likelihood, the ones commonly cited - urbanization, capitalism, democracy - negatively, the breakdown of all the old solidarities given in feudalism and still largely retained in the ancien règime that followed it. The aforementioned forces of mobility and pluralism, as well as the deeply running current of secularization tearing man out of the security of a divinely ordered universe, must also be considered in this connection. However, the dimension of what one might call (not at all pejoratively) the "softness" of this new individualism, namely its humanitarian-ethical character, requires the introduction of another causal factor. This, in my opinion, is the revolution in the structure of childhood.

To my knowledge, the best scholarly work on this subject is Philippe Ariès' Centuries of Childhood. Ariès has masterfully drawn for us the stages in this process of transformation, at least for French society. Beginning with the bourgeoisie, a startlingly new ethos of childhood came to be diffused throughout western societies. Its macrosocial roots are the same as those of the bourgeoisie that was its original "carrier", specifically, the separation of the family from the processes of economic production and its institutionalization as a protected enclave of "private" life. More recently, though, the revolution of childhood has been powerfully accelerated by the additional factor of modern medicine, which has brought about a historically unprecedented decline in child mortality and morbidity. The end result of all this can, I think, be described quite simply: Modern childhood is happier than childhood has ever been before. We, along with only very few generations before us (how many depends on which country one is talking about), are the first human beings since the beginning of history who, when we become parents, can have a reasonable expectation that our children will grow up to adulthood. I think that this is a fact of staggering importance, which, strangely enough, has barely been commented on in social-scientific literature. Its major psychological effect has been that modern parents are emotionally free to invest love in their children from the moment of birth, without having to expect realistically that their imminent grief is going to be all the more bitter in consequence. No wonder, then, that we live in a "child-centered" age! Some paedagogues and psychologists have deplored this fact, and I'm not interested in making a defense here of the whole childhood ideology as described, for instance, in John Seeley's studies of suburbia. At the same time, it is important to become acquainted with the physical and social brutality of childhood in earlier periods of western history or, for that matter, in many non-western societies today, if one is to appreciate the revolution that

has taken place - and I will permit myself the one non-value-free observation that one will then find it very difficult to deplore this revolution too seriously - especially if one is a parent!

The individuation of modern identity accentuated the latter's crisis in obvious ways, insofar as it makes much more difficult the smooth integration of the individual in the institutional programs to which he is assigned. The "softness" of this same identity, its high expectations of love and of humanitarian concern, accentuate the crisis especially in the biographical stage of youth. I think that this, again, is an exceedingly important fact, and I regret that I can only refer to it here with utmost brevity. Suffice it to say the following: Youth, as we know it today, is a matter of social definition rather than biological fact. Modern society "invented" youth, as an interstitial phase between childhood and maturity; it did so for reasons that we cannot go into here, which are not at all mysterious, but which are fully susceptible to sociological comprehension. Youth has become the locus of intense identity crisis because it is the biographical phase of transition between the "softness" of modern childhood and the(inevitable) "hardness" of the major institutions of adult life. Specifically, the crisis habitually explodes at the point where the young individual first confronts this or that institutional manifestation of bureaucracy (usually, of course, within the institutions of the educational establishment). We raise children in an atmosphere of intense affection and of respect for their individual rights (emotional rights, if one can speak of such, being emphatically included). We then hand over the same children to large, bureaucraticlly administered, educational institutions, in which, no matter how benevolent these institutions may be, they are "treated as numbers". The predictable result is an eruption of rage. It is very important to understand that the very facts of bureaucratic rationality, anonymity and utilitarian orientation, will provoke this rage, even if these aspects are unaccompanied by this or that offence against humanitarian morality. The quasi-Freudian interpretations of the contemporary youth rebellion (I might cite Lewis Feuer as an example) are thus, in my opinion, far off the mark. Contemporary youth is precisely <u>not</u> rebelling against parental figures; on the contrary, it is rebelling against the absence of parental solicitude in the institutional order of society. There are, then, specific features of modern identity that not only ensure a continuing crisis, but make it very probable that this crisis will above all manifest itself among the young. -

What prognoses are possible as a result of this analysis? If our analysis is correct in tracing the contemporary identity crisis to deep-seated structures of modern society, we will be hesitant to predict any sharp reversal. More likely, we will be faced for a long time to come with the essential features delineated above. On the other hand, especially among the youth, there have been significant signs recently of what can only be described as a massive uprising against modernity. To the extent that many of the structures of modern society may show themselves to be progressively incapable of survival (a far from impossible scenario), this quest for alternatives to modernity may have certain chances of empirical realization, that is, chances of passing from utopianism to social reality. Ultimately, our prognoses will depend on how we answer the philosophical-anthropological question with which we began: Was Thucydides right or wrong in his idea that there is such a thing as a "human nature" and that all of history moves within its unavoidable parameters? If Thucydides was wrong, then we may expect (be it in hope or in terror) that the "liberation" of modern man from the order of institutions will proceed in a straight line. That is, our grandchildren will be more, not less, free of institutionally assigned identities - more open-ended, more "anomic", more reflective, and so on. If, however, Thucydides was right, then there are definite limits to this rupture in the symmetry between self and society, between subjective and objective identity. In that case, sooner or later, there will be a return to the haven of institutions, a return to the notion (and, empirically, the reality) of a society that will be not an "alienation" but a home of the self. In that case, the overriding question will be what sort of institutions these will be, an ethical and political question as well as a scientific one.