2

Needs, identity, normality

The needing self

The perception that we are lacking something seems to be one of the mainsprings of our behaviour. The human species ceased to belong entirely to nature as only one animal species among many when, through developed language, it learned to give a symbolic representation to such a perception of lack and absence and the accompanying urge to overcome it. A culture is a symbolic universe which contains the gestures, the actions, and the words with which the fundamental experience of absence – as limit, death, and otherness – can be expressed.

Of this expressive ability were born meaningful action, the capacity to produce (harnessing forces of nature to overcome the constraints imposed by nature and to transform it), and the will to reproduce culturally. When children no longer represent just the biological perpetuation of the species but, instead, are invested with affections, expectations, and tasks intended to ensure the survival of the group, reproduction becomes culture. Hunger ceases to be a biological need when the gathering and the preparing of food is given a name, organized by group relations and regulated by codes. Even our basic physiological functions respond to a cultural code which decides what is clean and what is dirty, what is pure and what is impure.

If, then, there is no biological need that has not already been organized by language and social relations, it is impossible to talk of needs exclusively in natural terms. Every human need is an interpersonal and therefore social construct which uses language to express the perceived lack and the urge to overcome it.

In our everyday lives, common sense tends to treat needs as natural and immediate phenomena to which a person responds spontaneously. Although the process of responding to needs appears to be wholly subjective, it nevertheless involves a cultural construction which extends even

to the most trivial of acts. We always move within a shared domain of language. Whenever we name a feeling, whenever we utter a need, we establish a bridge between deep, subjective, primarily sensory experience, on the one hand, and the network of social relations to which we belong and from which we draw the words to describe our experiences, on the other.

For example, if we are thirsty – if, that is, we feel the physiological stimulus to drink – and respond by drinking water rather than fruit juice, we are operating within a culturally organized field which enables us to give linguistic expression to our needs and to satisfy them within an already constructed social frame of reference. As inhabitants of a socially constructed reality, our capacity to elaborate needs in cultural terms has reached a point where even our most commonplace wants are directed towards objects with a highly symbolic connotation. We no longer simply feel thirsty, hungry, or unclothed; our feelings of lack have already been oriented towards specific objects that are constructed symbolically by information, the market, advertising, and the social networks to which we belong. So we are thirsty for A, we can only wear B, for breakfast we want C, and hence we actually define our needs within the specific codes of the everyday cultural field in which we live and communicate.

While, to be sure, the definition of needs has always been culturally produced, it is today more evident than before that needs are the result of social construction. At the same time, however, we are witnessing a paradoxical call for a return to the natural roots of needs. We have already begun to intervene in the biological structure of our species and to probe the delicate borderline between mind and body – a polarity which the language that we use to talk about our experience of lack, by separating needs from desires, also expresses.

On the one hand, we refer to needs as if they were natural. There is a tendency in scientific research, for example, to interpret human behavior as a mere functional translation into action of neurobiological messages. Seen this way, needs are reduced to biology. Elsewhere, through the cultural innovations promoted by the feminist, environmentalist, and youth movements of the last twenty years, a definition of needs has emerged which treats them as the expression of a nature that resists or rebels against the social. The spontaneity of primary needs is put to stand in opposition to a society which obstructs or represses them with its apparatuses of control. The media, too, especially through advertising, have joined in ringing the appeal to natural needs by broadcasting the message of a good nature to which we should all return: the natural goodness embodied in the products that are advertised has only to be bought in order for one to achieve

happiness, beauty, and well-being. Around this myth new markets have been developed and new styles of living and consumption created.

But the current notion of needs has also another and apparently contradictory side which assigns them to the relational systems' of which we are part. The culture of the big organizations on the one hand, and the educational, psycho-social, and therapeutic services on the other, are increasingly pervaded by a hypersocialized image of needs as an expression of social and communicative processes. According to this perspective, we can work, be informed, educated, and treated only as part of a system of social relationships (families, friendships, associations, organizations). Family therapy, group work, team building and communicative training are rapidly transforming into new myths and becoming binding social rules which govern our life in all its dimensions: affection, work, religion, schooling, leisure. As individuals, in order to be able to recognize our needs, we should be reintegrated into the communicative networks within which those needs are formed. The group becomes the obligatory ground rule to which we must adhere if we are to know who we are. This emphasis on the social dimension of needs is also evident in the many forms of social participation and activism which seek to provide assistance to the socially deprived (the poor, the old, the handicapped, drug addicts, those who are sick). Here society is accused of neglecting the social nature of needs, and the agencies of social regulation are criticized for reducing needs to their purely individual dimension and not taking care of their social roots in inequality and marginalization.

The fact that needs are represented in such antithetical ways is nevertheless not a contradiction. Rather, it expresses a profound redefinition of our cultural field. The words with which we define our needs conceal a void, even as these definitions invade public and private discourse. Behind them lies a multiplicity of meanings which expresses the ambivalence of the nature and the sociability which constitute us. We are no longer able to identify our needs univocally. They are part of a symbolic field charged with tensions: an arena where the feelings of lack, absence, and weakness which continue to fuel our search for answers clashes with the power we have acquired over ourselves and over our environment. Fragile and creative, agonized by our wants and tempted by omnipotence, we live with our needs as a domain sometimes clear, sometimes confused, now safe, now fraught with danger.

Appeal to nature is the strategy with which we resist external pressure, the logic of efficiency and calculation, and the obligation to communicate at any cost. When we define our needs as natural, they have for us the opacity and consistency of something already given. We use naturalness of

needs to counteract the pressures that seek to integrate us into social rhythms by coercion, and we believe we can use them to escape from the incessant communication that an information society requires of us. In a confused manner, the appeal to nature also expresses the idea of our natural existence as a field of action, as something that we can produce rather than something that is already given. We have begun to consider our bodies, our biological structure, and our sexuality as parts of ourselves – parts which can become domains of our personal freedom and intervention.

However, evoking the natural basis of our needs also feeds to the illusion that it is possible to withdraw from social relations. It induces us to reject – sometimes to a pathological extent – the constraints that we must respect as social actors. The first of these constraints is a consequence of the fact that the resources available to us are scarce and unequally distributed. Such inequality no longer concerns the material resources alone, for scarcity now increasingly involves other dimensions of experience as well: time, information, and affectivity. Furthermore, in order to act at all we still have to estimate the expediency of our actions, and in so doing we are compelled to respect, to some extent, the imperatives of efficiency and effectiveness. Finally, we live within power relations which remain impossible for us to ignore (although they can be modified) and which we must accept as a condition of our associative life.

A naturalistic conception of needs therefore tends to lure us into the false belief that these constraints can be evaded. It conjures up a transparent world where spontaneous needs can be satisfied, were it not for the repressive control of the society.

On the other hand, an appeal to the sociality of needs may become an instrument of social control as it easily lends itself to the purposes of forced integration of the individual into the group. However, it none the less expresses the profound need to communicate and to relate with others, a need so frequently denied us by the fragmented and atomized way of life of mass society. It declares, moreover, that our personal needs are also political: they are directed towards the *polis* and they must be recognized if we are to participate in civil life. Lastly, by proclaiming the social rootedness of our needs we seek to resist the process of individualistic reduction, the fragmentation, the bureaucratic-administrative specialization that those agencies which attend to our education, health, affective relations, and aging impose on them.

When we celebrate the assumed spontaneity of needs, or, alternatively, when we socialize them by force, we reduce them to just one of the two poles: we deny their inherent ambivalence as something stretched between

nature and society. Whether within or without us, nature has ceased to be the realm of obscure forces: it now responds to our conscious action. But none the less it continues to set limits on such action and it is still the arena where we resist external pressures. In turn, our cultural elaboration of needs circumscribes nature with social rules and language, and confines it within the constraints of our relations. It thus enables us to transform energy into information and to acculturate the nature that constitutes us.

We can no longer conceive of our needs as compelling and instinctual urges, or as transparent manifestations of a benevolent nature that guides us. But nor can we continue to labour under the illusion that nature can be substituted by a society to which we assign the task of instructing us or which we accuse of repression. Needs are a signal of something that we lack, and it is up to us to recognize these needs and to give them cultural expression. Thereby we are, moreover, called to assume a responsibility which we cannot evade: we must become able to respond consciously to the perception of the lack that constitutes us. In other words, we must learn to decide who we are and want to be.

Identity?

The experience of something lacking thus compels us to ask who we are; and any attempt for an answer leads us to probe the question of our identity. Although in everyday language the term 'identity' accommodates a variety of meanings, it is most commonly used to refer to three phenomena: the permanence over time of a subject unaffected by environmental changes below a certain threshold level; the notion of unity, which establishes the limits of a subject and enables us to distinguish it from all others; and a relation between two elements which enables us to recognize them as identical.

We may talk of the identity of a person or of a group, but in both cases we make a reference to those three features – namely, continuity of the subject over and beyond variations in time and its adaptations to the environment; the delimitation of this subject with respect to others; and the ability to recognize and to be recognized.

It is difficult to talk of our identity without at the same time referring to its relational and social roots. This is a problem which has been central to the recent debates in the neurological and cognitive sciences examining what is innate to human behavior and what are its acquired elements. Extreme positions have been developed, but as a whole the prevailing trend seems to be to adopt the intermediate view that the relational and social

aspects of identity are embedded within its biological constitution itself. As regards the brain, for instance, heredity would transmit a neuronal programme which governs the growth of an individual's nervous system. The programme creates conditions under which individual differentiation unfolds as a result of interaction with the environment. Selection mechanisms shape every development process, and the brain 'forms' itself (in the literal sense of the word) until it has acquired a stable capacity to respond and adapt to environmental stimuli. At the end of this maturation phase, the brain has learned to respond consistently to same kinds of stimuli. Simultaneously, it develops a plasticity to shape itself to new circumstances and to perform new functions.

Psychological and sociological research confirms that individual identity develops in a circular relationship with a system of constraints. Individuals are able to identify themselves when they have acquired the ability to distinguish between themselves and the environment. Studies in genetic psychology and symbolic interactionism which investigate the early structuring of identity have demonstrated the crucial role of primary interactions – the processes of recognizing and being recognized – in the most deep-seated formative experiences of the life of an infant. Moreover, one need not accept the entire edifice of Freudian metapsychology in order to acknowledge the decisive contribution of psychoanalysis in revealing the relational bases of identity. In addition, the advances in both clinical theory and modern theories of communication have shown that while relations structure identity, relational breakdowns destructure it. Thus, modern social sciences have forcefully advanced the idea that the individual and the system reciprocally constitute each other, and that a subject only becomes aware of itself as a subject through her/his active interchanges with an external environment and through the resources/constraints offered by it.

Identity thus defines our capacity to speak and to act autonomously – the differentiation of our selves from those of others while continuing to be the same person. However, self-identification must still gain intersubjective recognition if it is to provide the basis for identity. Our ability to distinguish ourselves from others must be acknowledged by those very same 'others'. Therefore our personal unity, which is produced and maintained by self-identification, rests on our membership in a group and on our ability to locate ourselves within a system of relations. No one can construct her/his identity independently of its recognition by others. Every individual must assume that her/his otherness and uniqueness is constantly acknowledged by everyone else and that this recognition is based on intersubjective reciprocity ('I am for You the You that You are for Me').

Hence it is impossible to draw a rigid distinction between the individual aspects of identity on the one hand, and its relational and social aspects on the other. In a person's life-history, identity is a learning process which is consummated in the emergence of the autonomous subject. As we pass through the various stages of our life, we develop a capacity to resolve the problems posed by the environment and become increasingly independent in constituting our relationships. The internalization of the cultural universe of our society together with our capacity to give a cultural interpretation of our needs substitutes our 'natural' dependence on the environment: first as an integration with this symbolic universe, then as a process of individuation whereby we acquire sufficient independence from the system so as to be able to produce autonomously what we formerly had to obtain from others. Adult identity can therefore be described as the ability to produce new identities by integrating the past and the choices available in the present into the unity and continuity of the individual life-history. Learning does not end with adolescence: as we pass through the various stages of life that follow it, we continue to question and reformulate our identities.

It is above all in situations of crisis that our identity and its weaknesses are revealed – as for instance when we are subjected to contradictory expectations, or when we lose our traditional bonds of belonging, when we join a new system of norms. These conflicts constitute a severe test for our identity, and they may also damage it. In such situations, we can respond by restructuring our action according to new orientations. Or, alternatively, we can compartmentalize our spheres of life so that we can still preserve a degree (sometimes only an appearance) of coherence – if only internally in the case of each of these separate spheres in isolation. The most serious crises may provoke a breakdown, a fragmentation of the self, or a breach of its confines. This triggers a pathology; that is, an incapacity to produce and maintain a definition of the self which could exhibit a certain stability; or, vice versa, a forced assumption of a rigid identity from which it is impossible to escape.

'Identity' is therefore above all the autonomous ability to produce and to recognize the self. Such a definition, however, is paradoxical, for it implies that we both perceive ourselves as similar to others (and are therefore able to recognize ourselves and be recognized at the same time) and also affirm our differences as individuals. The paradox of identity is that difference, in order to be affirmed and experienced as such, presupposes a degree of equality and reciprocity.

We can also talk of collective identity as the identity which ensures the continuity and permanence of the group or the society to which we belong.

Over time, identity establishes the limits of a group with respect to its natural and social environment. It determines the membership of the individuals, it defines the requirements for joining the group, and the criteria by which its members recognize themselves and are recognized. The content of this identity and its temporal duration vary according to the type of the group or the society concerned. We know today that in the transition from traditional to modern industrial society the site of the identification processes gradually shifted from outside of society to its interior, from gods and ancestors to actual social relationships. The foundations of identity in traditional societies were always metasocial; they lay in the mythical time of origin or coincided with the holy figure of the chief. The desacralization of the roots of identity has relocated the sources of identification processes inside the society itself, within the networks of associative human action. As identity has been progressively recognized as socially produced, so have also the conditions been created for the individuation of the processes of attribution and recognition. It is we as individuals who increasingly are offered the chance to acquire the autonomous capacity to define ourselves as individuals.

Notions like coherence, limit maintenance, recognition, and reciprocity describe identity in static terms; but in its dynamic connotation our identity is a process of individuation and increasing autonomy. Today, identity is the product of our conscious action and the outcome of self-reflection more than a set of given or inherited characteristics. It is we ourselves who construct our coherence and recognize ourselves within the limits set by the environment and social relations. Our identity tends to coincide with conscious processes of individuation; we experience it not so much as a situation as an action. The word 'identity' itself is inadequate to express this change; we should instead talk of *identization* to express the processual, self-reflexive, and constructed manner in which we define ourselves.

Continuing however to use the term in its customary sense, we may speak of identity as the ability to recognize as ours the effects of our actions, and therefore as the ability to attribute these effects to ourselves. Thus defined, identity presupposes, first, that we are able to reflect on ourselves. Our action is not simply a reaction to biological and environmental constraints; it produces symbolic orientations and meanings which we are able to recognize. Secondly, it entails that we have a notion of causality and belonging; that, in other words, we are able to attribute the effects of our actions to ourselves, establishing a link between the actor and her/his action. This recognition underpins our ability to appropriate the outcomes of our actions, to exchange them with others, and to decide how they should be

allocated. It is therefore the foundation of our responsibility. Thirdly, identity entails an ability to perceive duration, an ability which enables us to establish a relationship between past and future and to connect action to its effects. Only if these conditions are met are we able to talk about ourselves as constituting a self that endures over time.

If it is true that our identity is formed only within a set of social relations, and if it is true that identity can develop only in interaction and through reciprocal recognition between us and others, then identity contains an unresolved and unresolvable tension between the definition we give of ourselves and the recognition accorded to us by others. Identity thus entails a gap between self-identification and identification by others.

When we find ourselves involved in an exchange, this discrepancy and the tension provoked by it are partly kept under control by a certain level of reciprocity of recognition. The exchange is based on the recognition in ourselves of that which we recognize in the (equal/different) other, and vice versa, at least within certain limits which never imply a total reciprocity and transparency. However, there are situations where this may become impossible: individual differences, diversity or inequality of social positions, the timing of giving and receiving in exchange relations, may increase the distance between us and others. Reciprocity proves impossible, competition for scarce resources begins, and a situation of conflict arises.

The tension between auto-identification and hetero-identification by the Other erupts into conflict when both of the subjects involved deny each other their identities. Each of them is part of the relationship but refuses to grant the other the recognition s/he demands. The conflict disrupts the reciprocity of the interaction; the opponents clash over something which is common to both of them but which each withholds from the other. Beyond the concrete or symbolic objects at stake in a conflict, what people struggle for is always the possibility to recognize themselves and be recognized as subjects of their own action. We enter a conflict to affirm the identity that our opponent has denied us, to reappropriate something which belongs to us because we are able to recognize it as our own.

When during a conflict we secure solidarity from others, when we feel ourselves part of a group, identity is reinforced and guaranteed. We feel a bond with others not chiefly because we share the same interests, but because we need this bond in order to make sense of what we are doing. The solidarity that ties us to others enables us to affirm ourselves as subjects of our action and to withstand the propensity for breakdown in social relations induced by conflict. Moreover, we learn how to gather and focus our resources in order to reappropriate that which we recognize as ours. Participation in forms of collective mobilization or in social movements,

involvement in modes of cultural innovation, voluntary action inspired by altruism – all these are grounded in the need for securing our identity and facilitate its satisfaction.

Today's collective conflicts increasingly express a public concern for recognition, making manifest a group-based social struggle to secure recognition of identity at the societal level: they transfer into the public arena a definition of needs and identity which is originally built in everyday life experiences and networks. In so doing, they transform identity issues into visible political stakes and they bring into the field of decision-making and rights the tension mentioned above between auto-identification and hetero-identification (recognition). On the one hand, through their claims they disclose the new potential for autonomous identification that is made available at the societal level by highly differentiated and complex systems. In this respect, the collective conflicts in the contemporary society address the societal field as such and they name it openly also for the rest of the society. On the other hand, by the particularism of their auto-identification process they expose themselves to the constant risk of a segregated identity, unable to cope with the responsibility that recognition implies – namely, the fact that we need to be recognized by others in order to affirm ourselves.

Field and process

To sum up, we cannot treat our identity as a 'thing', as the monolithic unity of a subject; instead, it should be conceived as a system of relations and representations. We possess several different identities of varying degrees of complexity – personal, family, social, and so on – the difference being the particular system of relationships to which we refer: the system which conveys to us the recognition.

In every case identity is a relation which embraces both our ability to recognize ourselves and the possibility of being recognized by others. This polarity between auto-recognition and hetero-recognition falls along the two dimensions which were previously indicated as constitutive of identity: unity and difference. On the one hand, we proclaim who we are; that is, we affirm 'I am X or Y'. By so doing, we declare the continuity and the permanence of our being, expecting it moreover to be recognized by others. This dimension we may call 'identification'. On the other hand, we distinguish ourselves from others and we seek recognition of such diversity. This we may call 'the affirmation of difference'.

Our identity therefore takes the form of a quadripolar field containing a system of vectors in tension. These vectors constantly seek to establish an

equilibrium between the identification that we declare of ourselves and the identification that is accorded by others, or the difference we ourselves affirm and the difference that is recognized by others.

Our identity in its concrete everyday form depends on how successfully and consistently this set of relations is held together: how we recognize ourselves and affirm our diversity, how we internalize the recognition granted by others, and how they define our difference. This system is never a definitive datum; it is instead a laborious process where unity and equilibrium are reestablished in reaction to shifts and changes in the elements internal and external to the field. Our identity therefore takes its particular form according to the presence and relative strength of each of its constitutive dimensions. We may imagine it as a field which expands and contracts, with its borders changing in accordance with the varying intensity and direction of the forces that constitute it.

Some vectors may be weaker or stronger than others, and some of them may be entirely absent. For example, when we identify ourselves and affirm our difference without this being recognized by others, or when such recognition is only half-hearted, our identity is severed from the relation and becomes a _segregated_ identity. In its normal form, this occurs in certain phases of adolescence when rebellion against the adult world aggravates the need for separate identification. Examples of a similar pattern at the collective level are to be found in the formative stage of movements, in marginal countercultures, and in sects. In individual pathology, the hypertrophic development of a narcissistic ego or exaggerated withdrawal into the self are further examples of such a pattern of behaviour.

In other cases, we are identified and recognized as different by others, but our own ability to recognize ourselves as such is weak. Here identity is _other-directed_ and manifests itself in deferential conduct, crowd behaviour, and certain forms of gregarious tendencies, as well as in the exaggerated tendency to embrace the opinions and expectations of others. Other-direction in its normal form is characteristic of certain phases of child development, and is gradually left behind as the personality develops. In its pathological form, it degenerates into a morbid symbiosis or attachment which hinders the growth of an autonomous capacity for identification.

Yet another pattern is provided by the situation in which we are capable of identifying ourselves autonomously, while our diversity is fixed by others. This we could term _labelled_ identity, with the processes of social labelling exemplifying the most evident ways in which it is produced. Our sexual, racial, and cultural differences and our physical or behavioural handicaps are stigmatized as non-social attributes. This stunts our

autonomous capacity for identification as we internalize the label that has been socially imposed on us.

When we lack the capacity to create our own definition, we take on a _deviant_ identity, and thus define ourselves solely in terms of our diversity. Here the norms and models of behaviour are lived as if they were entirely assigned to us by others. Our inability to adopt and internalize them owing to some failure of the socialization process, however, forces us to reject them by exaggerating our diversity. We are in reality what others tell us we are; indeed, the model they provide for us is our only identification but only one external, that we are unable to transform in autonomous personal values. Since it is impossible to realize this model positively, we do it by negation. Shoplifting is the reverse side of consumerism, just as self-destructive drug abuse or alcoholism shows the reverse side of the over-ambitious expectations we are unable to fulfil.

Conflicts always express the opposition between the two poles of auto-recognition and hetero-recognition, between the way we define ourselves and the way others define us. As I argued before, every conflict (even when a concrete object, like a material good is at stake) also involves a conflict of identity. The poles of identity disconnect; the equilibrium breaks down between the definition we give of ourselves and the definition attributed to us by others. Our opposition to, and clash with, the 'other' is an attempt to affirm the relation, a means to reestablish the nexus between the different poles of identity – a way to rebuild the conditions of exchange necessitating reciprocal recognition. In sum, it is then within and through conflict that we realize that our identity is relational and that the tensions between the self and the other cannot be overcome.

Living in a differentiated and rapidly changing society, we belong to numerous systems of relations and perpetually move among them in time and space during our life course. Establishing an equilibrium between the different vectors along which our identity is constructed becomes progressively more difficult, and there is an increased likelihood of 'identity crisis', as a result of the inability to maintain a coherent spatio-temporal pattern of the definition of our selves. As a consequence, conflicts – both interpersonal and those between groups (generations, genders, cultures) – also become more probable. To meet these challenges, identity tends to lose its stable contents and to transform itself into a purely symbolic capacity to recognize oneself.

The discontinuity and fragmentation of experience engendered by complexity dissolves the 'subject', understood as an essence with permanent characteristics. The phenomenon of the 'homeless mind', the rootlessness of personality which has been pointed to as typical of contemporary

societies, not only signals a crisis but also signifies that identity is in the process of being redefined as a pure self-reflexive capacity or self-awareness. We can progressively fill with mutable contents the empty form that this capacity in effect is, and live our continuity in the present through the symbolic capacity to recognize ourselves as being the 'actors' and 'authors' of our action, in the original sense of these terms. Subject to the increasingly diversified flow of experience, we can preserve our 'substance' – the continuity between the past and the present and between the many social fields which constantly force us to define ourselves in different ways – only if we recognize in ourselves that formal and unique capacity for action which identifies us as distinct individuals in relation to other people. And this recognition can only emerge as a conscious experience of being present to ourselves and to the world: that presentness which makes us feel simultaneously unique and connected to the others and to the cosmos.

Identity breakdowns

If the delicate balance among the poles of identity is upset, if the process of continuous adjustment falters, we suffer anguish and the loss of self. In highly differentiated and mutable social systems, the self is exposed to a number of pressures; the reverse side of a broader potential for autonomy and freedom is the risk of identity breakdowns. We may not be able to meet the challenge of constructing an autonomous definition of ourselves or in trying to do so may be pushed to the border of what is considered to be socially acceptable behaviour. Never before has society been so concerned with defining normality and pathology. The issue features prominently in contemporary medicine, psychiatry and psychology, but it concerns a far broader area of social behaviour. At stake is essentially a question of deciding what makes individuals autonomous agents of their own action. Or, conversely, of what prevents them from recognizing themselves, and being recognized as subjects, and from acting autonomously. Madness represents a kind of reversed mirror of our relationship with identity.

More than ever before, madness interrogates our culture and the ways 'normality' is defined. The history of madness is a history of this interrogation, but today the answers we give for its disquieting presence are beginning to develop radically new connotations. When the content and confines of individual identity increasingly depend on our capacity to define them, rather than on external social rules, the borderline between what is 'normal' and what is 'pathological', instead of indexing a clinical/nosographic demarcation of naturally existing categories, becomes blurred and thus a subject matter of societal debates and confrontations.

In the eighteenth century, the introduction of the lunatic asylum flanking the prison system marked the birth of mental illness as a distinct condition monitored and treated by a team of specialists. The medical profession separated 'illness' from criminality, isolating it as a specific form of misbehaviour within the general category of poverty. Poverty was considered a culpable condition, a mark of those individuals who were unable to commit themselves to the 'industrious classes' and had consequently gravitated towards the 'dangerous classes'. Along with criminal behaviour, but set apart from it, mental illness became one of the visible signs of this corrupt condition, and it was relegated to the jurisdiction of a specialized sector of health care profession. Bourgeois sanity had to be safeguarded against the underclasses, whose handling called for various different measures: the prison and charity were now accompanied by the lunatic asylum that combined the features of both its predecessors. By establishing a norm which satisfied the criteria of the bourgeois rationality, early psychiatry constructed a scientific edifice which defined and classified mental illness, while segregating off the institutions where it was treated.

The history of psychiatry is of course not wholly coterminous with the rise of bourgeois mental hygiene and its accompanying notion of rationality, nor can it be simply identified with the emergence of the lunatic asylum as an institution. Psychoanalysis brought significant changes to psychiatric methods, and the insights of neurology clarified a number of organic aspects of mental illness. However, up until the 1940s the lunatic asylum was the central pillar of the social treatment of madness, as well as the principal tool of psychiatry as a 'scientific' discipline assigned for the task of treating the mentally ill.

After the Second World War, the spread of welfare models brought about a major change in the treatment of madness (as well as many other social problems, such as sickness, old age, criminality). The reorganization of health care provision dispensed with the institutions of total segregation, and now took upon itself to treat deviance by seeking to integrate the patient into the social fabric. Pathological behaviour was no longer seen as an individual problem, and treatment shifted its focus on to the network of social relations in which the fountainhead of the disorder could be diagnosed. Attention thus moved from intrapersonal factors to the social and relational causes of deviant behaviour.

Psychiatric treatment, or care in the broad sense, has subsequently expanded in scope and multiplied. It is now finely interwoven with the whole fabric of everyday public and private life. We have largely – even if not completely – left behind the violence of the institutions of segregation, but as clients of the service apparatus we have now become tightly inte-

grated into a circuit of welfare dependence. The range of the administrative powers of the welfare services covers the entire span of our day-to-day existence. Deviance is treated through administrative channels, and social problems are reduced to a myriad of 'files' and 'cases' circulating through the network of the various specialists concerned.

Among the factors that contributed to these changes was also the critique of the psychiatric institution in modern psychiatry that sought to renew the very bases of psychiatric treatment by recasting the scientific and institutional definition of mental illness. During the 1960s and 1970s a part of institutional psychiatry fought against the violence of the asylum and tried to humanize the treatment of the patients, putting at the same time into question the scientific basis on which the old model was based. With regard to the closedness, rigidity, and archaic management patterns of the lunatic asylum, its critics denounced the inhumanity of the psychiatric institution and disclosed the connection between mental illness and social organization. The most advanced experiences for deinstitutionalization changed the criteria governing confinement and therapy in lunatic asylums: the inmates had their civil rights partly restored and were gradually returned to a form of civil life. The redefinition of mental health care enlarged not only the autonomy of its recipients but also lent a new professional identity to its practitioners. The treatment of suffering therefore became identical and contemporaneous with the restitution to the individual of her/his social autonomy. With the removal of the codified definition of illness imposed by traditional psychiatric theory, it became possible to consider the 'sick person' as a full person instead of just a 'case' (it is worth noting that the same word indicates both a medical case and a box to be filled for the classification according to nosographic categories).

These changes that were brought about by innovative psychiatric techniques and accompanied by debate and large-scale mobilization, made possible the reform of the lunatic asylum in many countries. However, the abandonment (or humanization) of the lunatic asylum – although a major step forward in the civil rights situation – did not eliminate the contradictions in the relationship between society and madness. In complex societies, also as a consequence of the reforms promoted by critical psychiatry, confinement to asylums is substituted by a widespread tendency to absorb an individual's adaptation problems into a network of social and medical services, and to assign treatment to a highly differentiated range of agencies which split pathology up along a variety of specializations. This in turn sets in motion an ambivalent process which may increasingly medicalize and fragment mental illness, and which could terminate in a disregard for

the relational and social dimension of mental disorder and the actual suffering of the individual.

A widespread network of specialized services may provide a more effective and focused care, but it might adversely affect a ready labelling of any behaviour which does not conform to the dominant social rules. It may substitute the sick person's real social bonds as a member of the community with medical and professionalized relations internal to the system of welfare services: it may transfer psychological malaise and emotional trouble away from the realm of ordinary human experience to the domain of medical care. All the problems that the relationship between normality and pathology raises remain thus unsolved.

In light of this ambivalent development of mental health policies, what can madness tell us about our identity? How can we safeguard our right to look after ourselves against a medical practice which treats us as sheer objects? What is the place of therapy in a society which shows a tendency to 'cure' everything that it sees as different? Today, it is generally recognized that the social conditions of pathology and the individual difficulties connected with developing and maintaining an autonomous identity stand in a circular relationship. The conscious construction of identity (auto-identification) is recognized as necessary for an individual to be able to establish a social bond and to take up a position as one of the poles of interaction in such a relation. However, deep personal obstacles to auto-identification persist (genetic and related to primary affective experiences) which may cause the individual to be cut off from any relationship with reality. The social causes of psychiatric illness (marginalization, inadequate socialization, stigmatization or labelling) also raise obstacles for auto-identification. The breakdown of exchange relations that they precipitate isolates the individual in a phantasm world to the extent that s/he is withheld recognition by others. The lack of reciprocity in identification (I recognize myself and am recognized/I recognize myself and recognize the other) is therefore an outcome which always depends on the meeting of both of the twin poles of the self-other relation.

Madness is thus a multiple phenomenon, and it always stands at the intersection of the two vectors on the individual/society axis. We know nowadays a great deal more about the personal obstacles to the assumption and maintenance of identity. Research in biology, clinical psychology, and the neurosciences has shed light on the processes governing breakdown in the deep structure of the personality. We have also acquired new knowledge on the pathology induced by disturbances in family relations, by exclusion processes, and by the social labelling of those who are different. The two extreme cases represented by this axis are manifested as a pure individual

inability to construct an identity on the one hand, and pure social stigma-tization of socially unacceptable behaviour on the other. Actual cases of mental disorder always lie somewhere in between.

Every form of therapy therefore proceeds as an irreducible dialectic between emancipation and control. Therapy responds to individual needs on a mandate given to it by society. In setting out to relieve an individual's suffering, therapy invariably applies, to a greater or lesser extent, the code of normality which predominates in the particular culture. The ambiva-lence of its status is irremediable. Opting for the emancipation of the patient (user/sick person/deviant) does not in fact free therapy from the logic of control.

Whether or not contact can be maintained between the poles of the ambivalence without their becoming neutralized in the process depends on the theory and practice of therapy. The more violent and heteronomous the therapy, the greater the exercise of control and repression, and the more evident the normalization of the subject back to a social code (regardless of whether or not the therapy is ideologically described as 'liberation'). Therapeutic treatment which is not governed by respect for the patient and her/his own responsibility for a better-being becomes an orthopaedic operation on social relations – the bending of the individual to the social norm. Conversely, respect for the patient's individuality, for her/his responsibility in following one's own path, may help to promote individual autonomy.

Modern psychiatry has to make practical decisions in a very close rela-tion to these issues. It must choose between, on the one hand, the increas-ing use of psychotropic medication, the direct or indirect manipulation of the cerebral nerve centres, as the more or less explicit conditioning of behaviour; and, on the other hand, the search for new therapeutic instru-ments which make patients responsible for healing themselves and con-structing an autonomous identity. The issues raised by madness thus cast revealing light on those numerous sectors of social life, medical and other-wise, where our needs are addressed and instruments of normalization applied.

The ambivalence of therapy derives from the way that our culture defines normality and pathology. Emancipation and control, sanity and madness, are in reality contrasting definitions of the same phenomenon; they are the cultural codes which our language uses to speak of the capacity to make sense of action. The categories 'sanity' and 'normality' indicate that there exists a social order which imposes its rules, but also the fact that we have an autonomous ability to give meaning to what we do. 'Madness' and 'pathology' express the loss of such meaning, but at the same time they also

serve as witness to the fact that there is an alternative to the dominant form of sanity, a difference which cannot be reduced to the rules of social con-formity.

Normality is therefore the responsible exercise of our capacity for action and the conscious construction of our identity. Yet, it is also dependence on the rules that govern society. Madness reminds us that the meaning of the possible is never completely encapsulated by the social order. Hence, to speak of madness is always to speak of ourselves and of our ambivalence.

3

Metamorphosis of the multiple self

Nomads of the present

Ever since its advent, the modern world has offered individual action an open field of possibility. The myths of progress and liberty have fed the Promethean dream of freeing mankind from natural constraints, by submitting nature to the dominion of technological power. Moreover, the promise of freedom has been extended to regard also the life of the individual, for whom it envisages an irresistible progress towards autonomy and full realization of the personal potential.

These ideas have constituted the historical framework of modernity in all its variants, whether rationalist or utopian, and, in spite of the vicissitudes of its career, this inheritance still encompasses the entire gamut of our hopes and our fears.

The scenario of complexity, of a system which by now irreversibly incorporates the whole planet and, to an equal measure, faces a future jeopardized by prospects of catastrophe, has deeply eroded the optimism of the myths of salvation. None the less, we still hold on to the most exalting and dramatic legacy of modernity: our need and duty to *exist as individuals*. We, namely, can think of ourselves as subjects of action capable of purposive and meaningful behavior, but at the same time we also function as the coordinates in a network of communality and communication.

Yet new dilemmas have arrived to beset the everyday lives of the children of disenchantment. In information societies our consciousness attains new levels of reflexivity. What matters today is no longer mere learning, but rather learning *how* to learn – how to control our cognitive and motivational processes and to adapt them to new problems. Technological power has been accompanied by an exponential growth of symbolic possibilities, by an increase in self-reflective activity: by the heightened capacity to reflect and represent reality through a multitude of languages. This capacity seems to be gradually replacing reality itself, so that we are in the process of coming to inhabit a world constructed out of the images that we ourselves have created, a world where we no longer can distinguish reality from the reality of the image.

We find ourselves enmeshed in multiple bonds of belonging created by the proliferation of social positions, associative networks, and reference groups. In simply conducting our lives, we enter and leave such systems far more frequently and in a far more rapid sequence than we did in the past. We have become migrant animals in the labyrinths of the metropolis, travellers of the planet, nomads of the present. In reality or in the imagination, we participate in an infinity of worlds. Each of these worlds, moreover, has a culture, a language, and a set of roles and rules to which we must adapt whenever we migrate from one of them to another. Thus we are subjected to mounting pressures to change, to transfer, to translate what we were just a moment ago into new codes and new forms of relation.

We transform ourselves into sensitive terminals, transmitting and receiving a quantity of information which far exceeds that seen in any previous culture. Our means of communication, our work environment, our interpersonal relationships, and even our leisure generate information addressed to individuals who must receive, analyze, and store that information in memory and almost always respond to it by producing further information.

The rhythm of change accelerates at an immense pace. The multiplication of our social memberships and the incessant surge of possibilities and messages flood the field of our experience. The traditional coordinates of personal identity (family, church, party, race, class) weaken. It becomes difficult to state with certainty that 'I am X or Y': the question 'Who am I?' presses with constant urgency for an answer. We are plagued by the fragility of a presentness which calls for a firm foundation where none exists; we search for permanent anchors, and we question our own life histories. Are we still who we were in the past? Can we still stay the same when we respond to what will be asked of us even tomorrow? We scan our pasts and our futures through different lenses as we move from one region of experience to another. In the age of speed, we no longer possess a home; we are repeatedly called upon to build and then rebuild one, like the three little pigs of the fairy tale, or we have to carry it along with us on our backs like snails.

Everyday time is multiple and discontinuous, for it entails the neverending wandering from one universe of experience to another: from one membership network to another, from the language and codes of one social sphere to those of another, semantically and affectively very different from it. Time loses its formerly characteristic uniformity and begins to follow a

variable rhythm imposed by the amount and the quality of the information we receive and transmit. Our perception alternatingly shrinks and expands, relaxes and intensifies, as we set off on our erratic migrations or are dragged along in them. We can no longer rely on the certainty of the end-directedness of time – the notion that modernity fed with its myths of progress and revolution. We, the bewildered witnesses of the demise of the great stories of salvation, are haunted by our new destiny of *choice*. To cope with the possible both seductive and threatening to us, we are compelled to assume all the risks that go with decision-making (of which catastrophe, nuclear or environmental, is the extreme image and metaphor).

The paradox of choice

Choosing is the inescapable fate of our time. Wherever it is we may physically reside, we are always and at the same time inhabitants of New York or Paris, London, San Francisco or Tokyo, of those real or imagined metropolises which constitute the terminals of an interdependent and highly complex planetary system. We cannot escape our symbolic inclusion in a cosmopolitan culture which expands and multiplies the possible worlds of our experience, while at the same time confronting us with their complexity and the necessity to make choices. Complexity signifies differentiation, high speed and frequency of change, and broadening of opportunities for action.

If the various fields of our experience become progressively differentiated and specialized, we shall not be able to transfer the patterns of action developed for one of them over to another. Whenever we move from one setting or system of relations to another, we know that experience gained elsewhere cannot be transposed as such to the new context, and that we must learn from the beginning again to cope with the new system's particular languages and rules. Variability, as another feature of complex systems, implies a frequency and an intensity of change unparalleled in any other society of the past. The difficulty of transferring the same pattern of action from one time to another is thus all the more pronounced, and we find ourselves unable to rely on our previously acquired abilities of problem-solving. Lastly, complexity provides opportunities that in their scope far exceed the effective capacity for action of individuals or groups. We are constantly reminded that the field of action laid out before us remains far wider than what can be conquered of it through the opportunities that we are actually able to seize.

In terms of everyday experience, the outcome of these processes is that *uncertainty* has become a stable component of our behaviour. We cannot

move from one context to another and draw on what we have already acquired elsewhere; we cannot pass from one time to another and carry over for implementation what we already are or know from the past; we cannot act without choosing from the vast array of possible options without thereby letting some of them fall by the roadside and electing instead others for realization. We live with an increasingly large quota of uncertainty and we are often overwhelmed. What are we to do in a *different* context? How can we tackle a *new* problem? Or, more simply and generally, *what* are we to do, which choice should we make? Many of our routine tasks become exercises in problem-solving, compelling us to acquire information, study the instructions, and, in the end, make a choice.

The imperative that immediately arises from uncertainty is therefore the necessity to choose. We thus find ourselves caught up in the paradox in which choice becomes destiny: it is impossible not to choose among the options available in any situation. In order to act in the first place, we are forced to make choices – whenever we move from one system to another, whenever we pass from one time to another, whenever we simply act at all. The paradox lies in the fact that the extension of our actual life-chances – that is, of the range of individual autonomy expressed in the act of choosing associated with the idea of will and freedom – also entails the unavoidable *obligation* to choose. Even non-choice constitutes a choice, for it signifies rejecting an opportunity, which no less is one choice among the many.

This situation heightens the ambivalence intrinsic to every experience of change. Whenever we consider whether or not to introduce change, there is something in the present that we deem inadequate, something that does not satisfy us or that restricts us. Change, in other words, is a goal we find desirable and towards which our search for the new and the different is directed. But at the same time, change poses a threat to our security and to our established and habitual rules. Thus, when contemplating change, we are always torn between desire and fear, between anticipation and uncertainty. This highly risky and unpredictable game has no guaranteed success as its outcome; we may succeed, we may fail, but we are always exposed to the danger of losing ourselves in the process.

Consequently, the paradox of choice creates a new kind of psychological pressure, confronting us with new problems. Choosing among the multitude of possibilities is a difficult undertaking, and what we discard is always more than what we eventually choose. It is always accompanied by an inevitable sense of loss which itself stands in the background of numerous forms of depressive pathology. The endogenous depression of the

psychiatry manuals is really the pure experience of loss without a distinct object.

A different but complementary reaction to the pressure of choice can be observed in the attempt to secure all the options simultaneously. On one hand, the self may split as it seeks to deny the partial nature of every choice; disconnecting the fragments and recreating each of them in a separate totality allows the illusion of not having to choose – and lose – at all. One can pass from one fragment to another, denying the mutual exclusiveness of the alternatives present at any moment, all of them by definition partial.

Or, on the other hand, we may come to know the manic syndrome manifested in the multiplication of our efforts to answer every call, forming into an endless spiral which eventually exhausts us.

The multiple self and responsibility

Even when our anxiety falls short of the extreme stage of psychic malaise, our self undergoes a profound process of transformation which multiplies its faces. Descriptions of the multiplicity of the self usually stress the variations of the self over time and the discontinuities among the identifications forced upon us by rapid change. Equally important, at least, is the multiplicity that derives from uncertainty and the paradox of choice. Our self simultaneously comprises a number of components, and the innermost aspect of uncertainty is structured precisely by the difficulty we experience in identifying with just one of them, and by the requirement that we must nevertheless do so in order to be able to act. Hence, not only it is difficult to maintain our identity over time and to state that we still are what and who we used to be; it is also, and possibly even more so, hard to decide at any particular moment which self among the many possible is the one that is ours.

It becomes thus understandable that identity should coalesce into a central problem of contemporary social life, and that the general processes I have noted also have repercussions on organized social practices and even on legal systems, the final level at which social change crystallizes into norms and institutions. For example, notions such as responsibility and punishability, which necessarily depend on the establishment or non-existence of identity, are today at the centre of intense socio-political debate, raising enormous issues for jurisprudence. This issue also opens up a whole new field for the definition of rights.

The multiple nature of the self forces us to abandon any static view of the idea of identity and examine instead the dynamic processes of identification. The concept of identity is a substantialist notion which

refers to a permanent essence as the foundation of identification. Rather than conceiving a subject that is endowed with an essential nucleus defined quasi-metaphysically, we must direct our attention to the processes by which individuals construct their identities. Identity as a multiple self then becomes *identization*.

Secondly, the multiplication of the self calls for a recognition of the place of individual action in social life. In contemporary systems, the site where the meaning of action is constructed shifts to the individual, who thus becomes a social actor in the true sense of the word. In the societies of the past, the meaning of individual behaviour was always sought on some plane or other of reality lying above or below the individual – gods, nature, the kinship system, the state, class, or Society itself as a metaphysical entity. Today, individuals are endowed with greater resources with which to construct their own individuality, and social action involves us precisely as individuals because we have become capable of producing autonomously and recognizing the meaning of what we are doing. From the metaphysical notion of the individual subject, we then shift our attention to the processes that make individuals individuals, to the processes which enable each one of us to become an autonomous subject of action. The individuality of a multiple self thus becomes *individuation*.

Thus characterized, the identity of a self emerges more as a field than as an essence: no longer a metaphysical reality but a dynamic system defined by recognizable opportunities and constraints. Identity is both a system and a process, because the field is defined by a set of relations and is simultaneously able to intervene on itself and to restructure itself. Subsequently, two crucial and perplexing problems arise here: the continuity of the self, and the boundaries of the self. Synchronically, the problem is one of deciding where the subject of action begins and where it ends; diachronically, we must establish how this subject persists through time. If we continue to think in terms of states and essences, the continuing advance of differentiation processes, the frequency and intensity of change, and the excess of opportunities that characterize a global society render it impossible to pose these two key problems in a manner that permits their solution.

Within the framework of the traditional categories, the only way out of such an impasse is to dissolve the self and to eliminate the social actor. This way, identity acquires the character of the mere presentation of the self, of a masquerade, in effect a play acted out on the public stage which disguises a void behind the guise of each participant. Alternatively, we must once again attach ourselves to any guarantor of a stable nucleus at hand in the desperate attempt to reconstitute the lost essence – for example, by

reviving primary bonds of belonging like kinship or local and geographical affinities. Such a reawakening of primary identities, the need to anchor oneself to something essential which shows permanency and has tangible referents, lies at the basis of many contemporary collective phenomena. Ethnic or geographical identification, the attachment to traditional culture, express the attempt to resist the dissolution of identity conceived as an essence.

These reactions, nevertheless, cannot counter the decline of an essentialist idea of identity, even if they apparently reawaken the strength of primary bonds. In fact, the cultural, territorial or ethnic legacy is symbolically reinterpreted and the search for a 'traditional' identity relies upon the resources of an information society. The very emergence of these collective phenomena confirms the dissolution of identity as an essence and calls for a new analytical frame: we should begin to conceive identity as a relational field comprising both freedoms and constraints. Only then can the problem of its boundaries and its permanence be recast. The boundaries of identity can be conceived of as the recognition of constraints and the interplay between their opening and closing. The problem of the continuity of identity can be recast as that of the continuity of forms; continuity or discontinuity is not detected in the comparison of contents, as if they were 'ontological states', but in the process-bound organization of various systems of relations.

This perspective leads us directly to the topic of responsibility. If identity is a process of identization, and if the individual coincides with her/his action of self-identification, the problem becomes that of defining who chooses how the field is to be organized, synchronically (who am I at this moment?) and diachronically (who am I compared with yesterday or tomorrow, compared with memory or my project?). The topic of responsibility becomes a crucial issue, and the term 'responsibility' itself should be taken in its most literal and profound sense as the *capacity to respond.*

If identity is no longer an essential nucleus or a metaphysical continuity, definition of its borders and maintenance of its continuity are entrusted to our capacity to respond – that is, to our ability to recognize and choose among the possibilities and constraints present in the field of relations that constitute us at any given moment. The very definition of the capacity to respond has a dual meaning: it comprehends *responding for* (answering for) and *responding to* (recognizing what we are and locating ourselves in our relations).

My responsibility towards that field of opportunities and constraints which constitutes 'I myself' is, on the one hand, a capacity to respond *for*,

by assuming limitation, memory, biological structure, and personal history; on the other, it is the capacity to respond *to*, by choosing among opportunities and grasping them, by positioning myself in my relations with others and by taking my place in the world.

Metamorphosis and individuation

Identity, then, is a process involving constant negotiation among different parts of the self, among different times of the self, and among the different settings or systems to which each of us belongs. In its various components, identity considered as negotiation involves the capacity to respond to the multiplicity and contradictoriness of the elements of which we are composed at any given moment. As I act, my being never completely coincides with what I am doing. I choose and discard, I assign priority to some parts of myself over others, I remain partly unaware. My identity is the ability to bind all of this together, and my identity will be more conscious of itself the better it is able to negotiate among these various components and to bring them into existence in togetherness.

Negotiating among the various times of the self is assuredly a complicated project: here, too, different components of the whole must be held together. In this case, negotiation involves the constant adjustment of the temporal perspective and the ability to weave together memory and the project in the now-time. Lastly, our identity also comprises negotiation among different relational systems, or different levels of the self. What it is that we are depends not only on our intentions, but also on the social relations within which these intentions are set. Responsibility does not only concern the intentionality of the subject, but involves also the effects of our actions on the relational systems of which we are part, along with the restrictions that these place upon us. We are, therefore, also our relations, those which we accept and those which we reject, those that restrict us and those that enrich us.

Granting the emphasis on the aspect of negotiation, our identity appears to us as a process in which nothing is ever definitively lost and nothing ever definitively gained. It emerges as an experience of the self where the provisional and the reversible become constitutive of experience – not, however, in a sense that identity would be left precarious and fleeting as an achievement, but in the sense that it remains dependent on our choices. As social processes in today's society have increasingly shifted their centre towards the individual, a kind of subjectivization and interiorization of identity have taken place as a result. Yet this does not transform identity into a psychological construct, at least not in the reductive sense with which the

term is often used. The construction of identity today involves our inner being for reasons that are profoundly social. Identity can be negotiated because there exist subjects of action who are no longer externally or objectively defined, but who themselves possess the capacity to produce and define the meaning of what they do.

There exists also a striking unequal distribution among parts of the world, its different groups and individuals, of the chances to construct an autonomous subject of action: these are the new 'structural' inequalities, the new 'class' imbalances of our time. This is the point where the deep 'individual' and 'subjective' dimension of identity reveals its 'social' and 'collective' nature.

It is the paradox of possibility as both limitless and ineluctable (we are unable not to choose) that has now for the first time clearly revealed the uniqueness of individual experience, the irresistible summoning of individuation. If time is no longer end-directed, it by definition becomes an unrepeatable construct, with every moment of it expanding to infinity. In itself, time carries no other meaning than the one that each of us is able to produce for him/herself, a meaning, however, which can provide a context for action only if it is shared with others.

Yet this situation does not relax the requirement of unity; it does not absolve us from the necessity to seek permanence in change. However, the continuity of individual experience can no longer be entrusted to any stable identification with a model, a group, a culture, or, perhaps, with a life history. It may appear, therefore, that the only quality minimally required of the inhabitants of the disenchanted world is the aridity of cynicism and detachment.

But in fact, no one is more caught in immobility than the cynic, and there is no greater rigidity than that of the detachment deployed to defend our undeclared fragility. The inhabitants of complexity have no need for this kind of cold-bloodedness; what we need is a passionate capacity *to change form*, to redefine ourselves in the present, to render choices and decisions reversible.

Metamorphosis is a response to a world which compels us to multiply our faces, languages, and relations. It is fundamentally a warm response, one not lacking in fear and anxiety, but likewise never lacking in love. Without compassion for oneself and for others, without hope or humility, the possibility to change form remains unattainable. What is otherwise left to be changed is but masks, the reliance (but for how long?) on the vacuous game of self-representation.

Standing at the point where numerous circuits of information intersect, at the junction of complex relational networks, the individual is in danger

of being overwhelmed by noise, of being lacerated by the pressure of too many exchanges and too many desires. The threatened unity of the person can only be preserved by learning to *open up* and to *close down*, to move into and withdraw from the flow of messages, to resist the lure of the possible, to withstand the unhindered demands of the affections.

It subsequently becomes vital for each of us to find a rhythm to govern our entry to, and exit from, the relations that enable us to send and receive information, a rhythm with which we can resist losing the sense attached to the communication or the neutralization of its content.

Permanence and change

The very notion of identity reveals the weakness of our language when we deal with the critical changes of our time. Identity belongs to a constellation of concepts which are deeply embedded in the modern definition of the 'subject'. It is difficult to separate it from the idea of a substance or an essence of the self. Therefore this notion should be used very cautiously. While I do not find another, better term with which to substitute it, I am fully aware of the contradiction between the language I am using and what it is meant to address. Identity refers to continuity over time, to being equal to one's self and having definite boundaries, and it hardly applies to the processual dimension that an accelerated pace of change brings to the fore. In any case, the use of this concept helps to make clear that even in the conditions of an incessantly redefined process there is still the necessity of setting limits at any given time, a necessity felt by the individual and imposed or requested by the system.

There is therefore a permanent tension between the process of the continuous redefinition of oneself and the need to stabilize one's boundaries. Conceptually, it is important to shift from a consideration of identity in terms of either/or to a nonlinear perspective which includes the possibility of and/and. The back-and-forth between these perspectives depends on who asks the question of identity and from which point of view. The question can be asked by the individual, responding to the necessity of his/her internal unity; it can be raised by an external observer; it can convey the expectations of a system of relations to which the individual belongs and to which s/he has to respond. In all these cases the back-and-forth can take place, but with different stress on one side or another. For instance, when a system of relations is concerned (a family, a group, an organization) roles and reciprocal expectations delimit the possible definitions of one's identity, and the space available for negotiation and for change is limited by systemic boundaries. The more the system is structured and crystallized, the

more individuals are defined by what the others expect from them. A model in terms of either/or could not account for these differences, and what we define as identity depends on the perspective we adopt and the capacity to shift our point of view.

1. The main implication of a nonsubstantialist idea of identity is that there must be someone who asks the question. Without this question being asked there is no problem of identity. Precisely who asks the question, matters for the answer which will be different in many ways according to whom it is directed. To respond to or to respond for, are dimensions of identity whose importance can vary depending on where the question originates.

2. Another important implication of a nonsubstantialist idea of identity is that the more we shift towards a processual definition, the more we will face the problem of how the very capacity of defining one's identity can be maintained. When identity is not perceived as a substantial essence any more, how can we assume the permanence of a subject of action who is able to define and recognize her/himself? In order to be able to cope with the transformations of identity, individuals need a formal capacity which is increasingly self-reflective and self-feeding over time. But the outcome of the process is not guaranteed any more; individuals are no longer ensured that they will be able to fulfil the task of setting boundaries and they do not know whether their definition will still be socially acceptable.

The continuity of identity should therefore increasingly rely not on specific contents but on what I would call personal capacity: a formal and processual capacity which enables the individual to assume a situational identity without a loss of a deeper sense of continuity of her/his personal existence. Personal capacity becomes very important but does not imply a separation of the individual dimension from social bonds. We do not always choose our ties, we are already part of systems of relations in which resources and constraints are given for individual existence. Even if much stress must be placed on the aspect of choice, I am fully aware of the fact that the fields to which we belong are already structured. There are recognition circles, structured systems in which certain values are recognized or certain resources can be spent. The same resources or values cannot be spent in other fields. But these fields can be interpreted by the actors with an increasing degree of autonomy, for individuals are provided with capacities to make sense of the social structures to which they belong.

Individuals contribute to the activation of their recognition circles, so that new exchanges, relations, and rituals are created within them. Recognition does not work automatically and is increasingly interactive. Without a certain individual capacity for negotiation, and without the

establishment of certain procedures and rituals, the circle of recognition will not work by itself.

This opens a new field for identity entrepreneurs, social actors creating and selling the capacity for manoeuvring with identities; producing new opportunities for recognition, importing languages and codes from one field to another. This also explains why the definition of normality becomes a very critical matter for our society: who decides whether an identity is normal or pathological, and under which conditions? The issue is so critical because neither the individual alone, nor the society without individual participation and consent, can set the borders between normality and pathology. The sources of identity are increasingly individual, but for this very reason the social dimension of individual experience comes to the fore.

The boundaries of the present

Opening and closing become necessary capabilities if we are to preserve our unity in the flux of messages and in the interminable sequence of changes. In the alternation between noise and silence, we can create an inner space which persists even if languages and interlocutors change, and even when communication itself breaks down.

In order to be able to live with the discontinuity and heterogeneity of times and spaces, we are called to develop a capacity to unify experience other than that provided by instrumental reason. The passage from one time to another, fragmentation, and unpredictability cannot be captured by causal reasoning, by criteria based on efficiency, by the logic of rational calculation. What is required before all is the instant perception, the intuitive awareness, and the imagination, qualities to which traditional cultures always paid respect. Contemporary interest in the wisdom of these cultures is, beyond any fad or fashion, a significant sign of the need to unify experience according to a pattern that radically differs from the one conforming to instrumental rationality.

In order to endure change and to pass through the metamorphoses that characterize the modern life-course, our identity must be rooted in the present. We must be able to open and close our channels of external communication to keep our relations alive, yet without becoming submerged by the flood of messages in the process. We need new capacities for immediate and intuitive contact with reality, capacities that can assimilate an ever-expanding field of experience which resists confinement within the narrow limits of rational knowledge. We must therefore redraw the boundaries between inner and outer reality, and we must pay closer attention to our own selves, building the awareness that we exist as individual

psycho-physical entities in relation with others and that we remain responsible for our choices. This self-reflective orientation would direct our personal quest towards a closer contact with inner experience.

We need multiple points of view to deal with the uncertainties of self-change, for without a capacity for perception and representation, without emotions, no new form of ourselves is possible. The rites of passage of traditional cultures ensured this change in the view of the self. But we can no longer rely on ritual protection as we confront the tests set for us by opportunity and constraint. The stages of the life-course, the great cadences of our biological and social cycles, are still there to remind us of the fact that regardless of how rich our possibilities may be, birth, growth, aging, and death are our inevitable destiny. It is our task, therefore, to find a form in which to pass through them.

The experience of transition, in the many passages of our daily lives or in the great passages of life, requires us to adopt a way of looking at ourselves which is not solely that established by Occidental reason. Art – which has always explored the avenues of change – can teach another way of looking at the self; it is not by chance that today creative activity is becoming for many a rewarding arena of personal inquiry. Also psychotherapy and other self-reflective and bodily practices related to the pursuit of a better-being represent today not just an answer to personal suffering: they often channel the need for a different rationality and represent a process through which to cope with the difficulties of transforming the self – another means by which form can be changed. What is common to these and other practices is the attempt to establish contact with an inner world detached from the fluctuating contents of experience.

The inner world of sensations, perceptions, and representations persists even though the sense impressions impinging upon it from the environment, along with the proprioceptive stimuli themselves, may change. This 'container' of personal experience, constituted by the pure awareness of our inner world and by our perceptual capacity, can assume different forms over time, but it is always perceivable in the here and now and can lend unity to different and contradictory elements of experience. The capacity of being present to oneself as a body, mind, and soul is the thread that stitches together the fragments of the individual life.

The body is the prime vehicle of presentness and of every communication. Opening and closing come about as the activation and disactivation of the senses in their contact with the outside. The body transmits and receives the basic messages (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) that give sense to communication. Closure, withdrawal from the world, or the cessation of communication, does not annul our presence to ourselves. The interior con-

tinues to be perceived, and this ensures our continuity and the possibility of further opening. Contact with the interior also leads to direct and intuitive perception, as the 'other' knowledge which integrates the disparate fragments of experience, the different times and the discontinuities between them. An awareness that also comprises information from the body, and which is as able to synchronize itself to the register of 'feeling' as it is to that of 'thinking', expands the field of consciousness. There are faculties and resources which operate naturally within the body as regulators of important biological functions. Their conscious activation shifts our entire perceptive experience into the field of consciousness and extends the range of possibilities available to us in our relationships with ourselves and the world.

An awareness which succeeds in incorporating in the now-time the broadest possible range of information without allowing itself to be submerged by it, an awareness that is able to 'see' without being dazzled, eases the passage from the outside to the inside, from the social time to the inner time, and vice versa. Fluency of the communication between these two dimensions of experience is certainly one condition for personal wholeness, whereas obstructions in the passage between them are commonly associated with a form of disorder or pathology. When our access to inner reality is impeded, we become trapped in the vacuous and repetitive game of social masks. On the other hand, the overtaxing labour of breaking out of the incommunicable circle of inner experiences may confine us into a prison of silence.

The definition and the perception of boundaries opens up two paths for us: one leading to communication with the outside (where the rules of social time must be respected); the other leading to our inner life that speaks our own secret language. In this coming and going, there is nothing of the necessary causal relation between the deep-lying level and the outer surface (or vice versa) which the determinism of nineteenth-century thought has rehearsed us to tacitly assume: determinism of the hidden world of instincts, or the determinism of the social order in its conditioning effect on individual consciousness. There is, instead, a circular pattern of relationships driving a dynamic process. Inner experience and social experience influence each other reciprocally. Human action does not come about as a consequence of the uncontrollable impact of internal forces (instincts, urges) on the normality of everyday time (as Freud would have put it). Rather, it is the result of the ongoing process of redefinition of innerness: the elements accumulated through social experience and the cultural data modify our perception and awareness of inner reality. Thus a cyclical pattern of opening and closure – the recurrent shuttling between

the two planes of experience and among the various times of which they are composed – forms in our personal level of experience. Each of us becomes increasingly an arbiter and a regulator of the rhythm of these passages; only we are able to establish the tempo of the switches which mark the dynamic evolution, the metamorphosis of personal life.

The delicate interface between inner and outer reality is the point of contact where internal and external signals meet. Each one of us must decode these signals to be able to position ourselves with respect to the change of self and its impact on the world. When the field of possibilities expands beyond a certain scope, the problem of boundaries becomes the crux of individual and collective life: it covers under its aspects the problem of choice, uncertainty, and risk which renews in the hypertechnological scenario of the complexity the human experience of limitation – and of freedom. Where to put our boundaries is still the challenge that human life has to meet, when social power reaches the capacity for self-destruction and individual life relies on choices without guarantees. Setting our boundaries becomes today a matter of conscious and free acceptance of our limits.

Changing form requires fluidity of transition, an ability to retain and to let go accepting the loss, the generosity of risk and the prudence of limitation. The cold calculating rationality that has conditioned the modern experience of the West is ill-suited to this requirement. New qualities are required which we are just beginning to learn. Passing from one form to another without bursting apart, binding together the fragments of the unpredictable, entails a capacity for intuition and imagination which has always been banished to segregated enclaves to which entry has only occasionally and grudgingly been allowed: the dream, the play, art, madness.

There is no metamorphosis without loss and without vision. People can only change form if they are willing to lose themselves, to wonder and imagine, to enter the undefined territories where the possible can be met with astonishment, yet without fear. The fairy tales for the inhabitants of a disenchanted world will no longer reproduce the phantasmic reality of the mythical lore, but they nevertheless still need to teach us to wonder.

4

The inner planet

Beyond an ecology of the symptom

Nan-in, a Japanese master of the Meiji era, received a visit from a university professor who had come to him to enquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He filled his guest's cup and then continued to pour. The professor watched his tea overflowing until he could contain himself no longer. 'The cup's full to the brim', he exclaimed, 'it can't take any more!' 'Like this cup', replied Nan-in, 'you're full to overflowing with your opinions and conjectures. How can I explain Zen to you unless you empty your cup?'

We treat the inner dimension of our experience like the professor in the parable. We believe that we know, that we already possess the required wisdom, that we are all experts on ourselves and have little left to learn. Introspection, we assume, requires no learning, and the expression of intimate feelings we leave to the poets, particularly now with the increasingly grave external problems competing for our attention. In recent years, the issue of nature has prominently captured the attention of the media and of the man in the street. In the form of the conservation and protection of our natural resources and the surrounding ecosystem, it has already established itself as the stock-in-trade of the political market and of the market *tout court*. But in the wake of the huge currency of the environmental issues (the ambivalence of which we nevertheless should not forget), the focus of our awareness of them has been restricted to the future of the planet as the physical-social habitat of the human species. It is the 'external planet' that preoccupies us behind the fears, appeals, and projects voiced by the environmentalists.

Yet there is another planet caught up in the radical process of transformation sweeping over us: the inner planet consisting of the biological, emotional, and cognitive structure that underlies the experience and relations of us all. We ought to concern ourselves with this inner planet as