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3 Selves @ Y2K

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The ethnographer's eye seeks the specific and the contingent, the fleeting moment that reveals broader cultural patterns. This instinct informs Clifford Geertz's portrait of a Balinese cockfight or the memorable camera work of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, who exposed the emotional fabric of entire cultures by documenting how mothers bathed their children. In trying to grasp a subject as vast as the self, the ethnographer—this ethnographer, at any rate—experiences a form of analytical vertigo compounded by the suspicion that William Blake may have been right when he claimed that only idiots generalize.

But generalizations have their uses, and here I will offer several in the hope that they provoke broader discussion about the kinds of selves that have emerged at this juncture in human history. One kind of self will, I suspect, be familiar to readers, who may or may not recognize elements of it in themselves. The other two are less well known but nonetheless important in the world that we have made for ourselves.

I came upon a trace of the first self in 1997 while traveling in southern Australia. A local newspaper, the *Advertiser of Adelaide*, published an article warning its readership of an alarming new threat to the nation's children: the "virtual pet" known as the *tamagotchi*. A *tamagotchi* acts like a real pet by begging for food and attention, relieving itself at regular intervals, and expiring if neglected. Psychologists interviewed by the newspaper worried that young children lack emotional preparation for the responsibilities associated with the care of their electronic companions. When a *tamagotchi* flatlines, as it inevitably does, its owner may experience emotional trauma. An expert insisted that "imaginative, sensitive, and often gifted children were the personalities most at risk from the toys." In the face of a virtual pet's death, parents were instructed to look for "obsessive behavior" and "grief reactions, including crying, confusion, and despondency"—emotional pathologies, one presumes, that call for the intervention of a mental health professional.[1]

Although the story invites an ironic touch, its author reveals none—a conspicuous absence in light of the Australian cult of levelheadedness. Iden-

tical therapeutic solemnity informed American television coverage of the death of the Princess of Wales. On a morning news program, for instance, one of the major networks wheeled out a consultant to discuss the flood of calls to grief hot-lines occasioned by the event. Rather than an expert in popular culture or even crowd psychology, this was a *medical* consultant who ponderously advised viewers to shield their young children from harmful emotions that might be evoked by Diana's televised funeral.

The self envisioned here is startlingly vulnerable, subject to collapse at the slightest insult to its precarious sense of order. How is it, public commentators seemed to be asking, that the Princess of Wales could die in a common drunk-driving accident while riding in a Mercedes, one of the safest automobiles in the world? Nothing is more threatening to bourgeois experience than death. That the deaths considered here are experienced iconically—in one instance, as the *tamagotchi's* blocks of liquid crystal, in the other, as the luminous pixels by which millions came to "know" Diana—makes them no less affecting in an era when simulation may seem more real than human entanglements, with their ambiguities and demanding complications. Virtual emotions, like virtual sex, are preferable to selves who are, to use one of the therapeutic idioms of the moment, deeply involved in their own process.

And what a process it is. Wherever one turns in America, people talk about healing themselves, their communities, their culture. In government and law, the preservation of self-esteem has become a central concern. At least eight state legislatures have funded self- esteem taskforces designed to improve the way citizens think about themselves.[2] Therapeutic imagery envelopes even the nation's colleges and universities, once temples of rationalism. Disgruntled students have successfully sued Boston University on the grounds that they were denied the grades that they deserved. BU and other colleges, it seems, are insufficiently attentive to newly defined learning disabilities—including dyscalculia (difficulty with mathematics), dysgraphia (difficulty expressing oneself in writing), and dysrationalia (the inability to reason at a level commensurate with one's innate intelligence). No detail of character or temperament is too minute to become a diagnostic category and, by extension, a condition that merits remedial consideration.

The spread of such views of the self, and of the perceived need to transform society into a network for the self's care and feeding, are themes

explored in Christopher Lasch's prophetic *The Culture of Narcissism*. By narcissism, Lasch refers not to simple vanity or selfishness but to a profoundly insecure personality founded on impression management and self-mirroring in others. The narcissistic self evinces "protective shallowness, a fear of binding commitments...a dislike of depending on anyone...a feeling of inauthenticity and inner emptiness."[3] Lasch saw the narcissistic personality emerging in response to material wealth and the banality of middle-class order. Other observers blame the utilitarian currents of capitalism, which downsize the moral order until it applies only to the inner life of individuals.

The Boston University case illustrates the contradictory ideas about society held by the therapeutic self. Psychotherapy, at least as popularly understood, has become indispensable because it serves to uncover a real self that can replace the false and "disempowering" selves constructed by family life and social conventions. Within this vision, society constrains and distorts the self but cannot enable it. We are encouraged to become self-actualizing, compelled to become self-reliant. By implementing therapeutic policies, we try to prevent social institutions from threatening the self-regard of a diverse citizenry. Paradoxically, however, the procedures designed to protect us from distress and to affirm our personal worth only serve to expand the dehumanizing web of bureaucratic control that contributes to individual anxiety. Hence the erratic swings between one form of rhetoric that insists on the centrality of emotions ("Our kids need to feel good about themselves if we're going to have a society that's worth anything") and another that appeals to rationality and utilitarian principles ("Bottom line, we need policies that work").

In a variation on this theme, the contemporary bourgeois self demands increased control and security—of the workplace, the natural environment, urban spaces—while at the same time actively seeking out new forms of risk, illustrated by the growing popularity of so-called extreme sports. In an afterword to the 1991 edition of *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch puzzles over this oscillation between rationalism and the quest for authentic emotions. "Both take root in the feelings of homelessness and displacement that afflict so many men and women today," he observes.[4]

As is often the case, the cultural fringe offers a clearer view of ideas that the cultural mainstream domesticates for general consumption. In self-help seminars and New Age workshops across the country, men and women

give voice to their belief that social institutions must be subordinated to personal needs. In Santa Fe, New Mexico, I interviewed a woman who had carved out successful careers in two worlds that are less incompatible than they might seem: real estate and spiritual counseling. While fielding incoming business calls, she talked about the indifference of her New Age clients to public issues and civic life in general. "These fragmented parts of ourselves—our fears, our frustrations, our feeling not good enough about ourselves—all of these dictate our actions," she said. "All you need to do is go to some of these city council meetings where you can see the projection of people's fear or inadequacy. We have to have inner communication to figure out who we are. Unless our personal goals are met first, there's dissension." This claim, which was repeated in countless variations during my months as an ethnographer of the New Age, reaches its apotheosis in the assertion that individuals "create their own reality," a belief that Lasch would see as further evidence of the self's nostalgic quest for a return to the bliss of infancy.

At a weekend relationships seminar in Santa Monica, California, I wandered the strange borderland between New Age therapy and middle-class convention. The seminar organizer, a charismatic psychologist, instructed 200 affluent clients in techniques to recover their authentic selves and, in the words of a seminar handout, "to become your own hero." If such a task requires us to abandon jobs or hometowns or significant others, so be it. Many of my fellow participants worked in fields involving the manipulation of symbols: sales, advertising, consulting, management. All were there to search for (or perhaps to construct) an authentic self—no small matter when their everyday experience required them to manufacture personal and institutional identities to suit the circumstances of the moment.

Sherry Turkle found similar preoccupations among people drawn to the world of online communication and Internet role-playing.[5] At first it might seem that the celebration of self-multiplicity and simulation is directly at odds with a quest for personal truth. But her informants maintain that the development of virtual identities lets them discover identities suppressed by the demands of the offline world. Some even find the virtual more real than the real. None of these reactions would be possible if we were not already dislocated from our inner life and the life of the communities that shelter us.

As experienced by the affluent, modernity has made dislocation commonplace. Cultural boundaries seem increasingly arbitrary to selves restless

for fresh ways to express or heal or reinvent themselves. At local health resorts, middle-class Americans and Europeans can experience Tibetan meditation, American Indian sweat lodges, and the latest technique of deep-tissue massage. It seems petty to worry about how this aggressive borrowing may affect the peoples who have sustained these practices for centuries. After all, if society and culture serve mostly to distort or stunt self-expression, then we owe it to ourselves to range across cultures, picking and choosing the practices that best meet personal needs. Again, the clearest expression of this impulse is found among the "detraditionalized selves" drawn to new religious movements, including the New Age, but it plays itself out with different metaphors among sophisticated cosmopolitans. The state of being at once nowhere and everywhere is assessed by the essayist Pico Iyer:

> Even as we fret about the changes our progress wreaks in the air and on the airwaves, in forests and on streets, we hardly worry about the change it is working in ourselves, the new kind of soul that is being born out of a new kind of life...We become, in fact, strangers to belief itself, unable to comprehend many of the rages and dogmas that animate (and unite) people. I could not begin to fathom why some Muslims could think of murder after hearing about *The Satanic Verses*, yet sometimes I force myself to recall that it is we, in our floating skepticism, who are the exceptions, that in China or Iran, in Korea or Peru, it is not so strange to give up one's life for a cause.[6]

* * * * *

Consider a Peruvian voice as brutal and incandescent as Iyer's is muted and urbane:

> The people rear up, arm themselves, and rise in revolution to put the noose around the neck of imperialism and the reactionaries, seizing and garrotting them by the throat. They are strangled, necessarily, necessarily. The flesh of the reactionaries will rot away, converted into ragged threads, and this black filth will sink into the mud.[7]

Thus writes Abimael Guzmán, "Fourth Sword of Marxism" and

founder of the Communist Party of Peru-Shining Path, now held in solitary confinement at a Peruvian naval base. Guzmán's vision of a socialist utopia emerging from a tidal wave of purifying violence strikes us as atavistic in an era when socialism has been declared dead. Ironically, Guzmán's totalizing ideology has not arisen from a disenchanted peasantry or the urban poor. Instead, it is the product of provincial intellectuals, young men and women whose middle-class aspirations were stunted by the bitter realities of a nation largely run by a tiny group of plutocrats. As with any social or political movement, the motives of those who joined the Shining Path were varied. But we know that for ideologues such as Guzmán, the party offered the means of advancing a history that, paradoxically, had already been written in the sacred texts of dialectical materialism. "We are entering the great rupture," Guzmán insists. "The hour has sounded. The battle will be hard, arduous, cruel, long, and difficult. But the triumph is ours."

These are the metaphors of fundamentalism. They partake of fundamentalism's militancy, its comprehensiveness, its appeals to scriptural truth and universal law. The self that inhabits this world could hardly differ more from the therapeutic self. For the therapeutic self, truth morphs constantly to meet changing personal needs, whereas fundamentalist truths are immutable. Therapeutic blame-shifting becomes fundamentalist self-flagellation and the dehumanization of nonbelievers. The constantly renegotiated social relations of the therapeutic vision contrast with the solidarity of a fundamentalist community of believers. According to James L. Peacock and Tim Pettyjohn, fundamentalist narratives depict "cosmological selves...[at the] intersection of opposing forces, God and the Devil, Allah and the spirits, or more abstract negotiations between one's formulation of God's will and one's own life, the ego and the ultimate."[8]

Both the therapeutic and fundamentalist selves are creatures of our time. Modernity fragments the unity of local communities by dissolving locality itself. The urban life that is one of modernity's hallmarks offers limitless opportunities to take on alternative identities and explore alien social worlds. Although many revel in the possibilities afforded by social pluralism, others find the task of maintaining a stable self difficult in the face of such fragmenting experience. This sentiment is most likely to arise when the moral order under pressure is that of traditional communities in marginalized precincts of the developed and developing worlds. There fundamentalism becomes inextricably bound up with nationalism and cultural resistance.

Charles Strozier, who has written about the psychology of Christian fundamentalism, finds qualities both admirable and troubling in the fundamentalists he came to know. Although moved by their enthusiasm and the intimacy of their relationship to God, he worries about the destructive imagery central to their vision of the Last Days. He also notes a "psychological closing down" that comes from the hermetic tendencies of fundamentalist groups, which shut themselves off from an external world suffused with evil.[9] Strozier carefully insists that symbolic violence need not lead to destructive acts. Yet recent cases of homicidal or suicidal aggression in places as diverse as Tokyo, Kabul, and Rancho Santa Fe remind us that the fundamentalist self, whether committed to a major world religion or to some new version of ultimate truth, is likely to see violence as necessary for individual renewal and collective purification.

* * * * *

There is a third self about which we still know little, a self that eludes Lasch's indictments of American narcissism, Turkle's speculations about the selves spawned by the Internet, or Strozier's portraits of Christian zeal. It is most evident in parts of the world where there is only one telephone line for every 300 people, where the solace of therapy—*any* therapy—is scarce or altogether absent. I refer, of course, to the values and emotional valences shaped by scarcity. For lack of a better term, I'll call it the "Self of Limits."

Scarcity alone tells us little about ways of being in the world. Many of the world's tribal peoples possess few material goods, yet they succeed in maintaining a distinctive emotional style that steadfastly resists incorporation into models of a "culture of poverty." Nevertheless, in those rare accounts that probe beneath the surface of everyday life in situations of extreme deprivation, one can see glimmerings of a radically different self that transcends cultural boundaries.

Hints emerge in Nancy Scheper-Hughes' study of the emotional nexus of maternal care in a Brazilian shantytown where women lose a third of their young children to the ravages of malnutrition and epidemic disease. Scheper-Hughes makes the radically culturalist argument that these mothers feel little grief when infants die. They are not, she insists, repressing their feelings, as a universalizing Western psychology would have it. Instead, their

sorrow is blunted by cultural practices that encourage delayed attachment to infants and, in some cases, to forms of selective neglect that actually promote infant mortality. The result, Scheper-Hughes suggests, is a "lifeboat ethics" that valorizes group survival and deemphasizes the individual, a form of emotional triage adapted to the implicit violence of life in an impoverished slum.[10] In the face of such experience, both the inner-directedness of the therapeutic self and the passionate certainties of the fundamentalist become unsustainable. This is not to imply that her subjects are locked into fatalistic passivity. They reveal durable attachments and a surprising gusto for life. When circumstances require, they mobilize themselves for political ends. But a long history of betrayal by popular leaders breeds collective wariness of movements thought likely to provoke state repression. Abimael Guzmán's revolutionary call to arms holds few attractions for them, nor are they especially moved by fundamentalist enthusiasms.

Scheper-Hughes insists on the particularity of her account, but many of the conditions that she describes cannot be regarded as unique to Brazil's Northeast. They persist with local variations in sub-Saharan Africa's collapsing cities, on the fringes of Asian industrialization, in northern Mexico's border towns, and in the heart of urban America. They are, in other words, around us but not *of* us—or so we like to believe, perhaps because they remind us of our own vulnerability in precarious times. What E. M. Forster said of the poor remains as true today as it did in 1910: "They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet."

Yet a future of limits awaits even those fortunate enough to have escaped privation. Health care offers an example: in a world of finite resources, there are limits to how long life can be sustained without compromising the health of society as a whole. How many organ transplants or dialysis treatments are too many given their colossal cost? At what point do the infirm or the elderly become expendable? And how can decisions about these issues be encompassed emotionally by those in power, to say nothing of those whose survival hangs in the balance?

In these questions, which are being asked openly in some places and circumspectly in others, we witness the triage, the calculus of constraint, that Scheper-Hughes saw applied to sick infants among the Brazilian poor. Other such decisions wait in the wings, many of a larger scale. In an age of increasing demand for fresh water, for instance, how long can we tolerate

the growth of improbable megacities such as Phoenix, Los Angeles, or Las Vegas, which sustain themselves only by plundering the water resources of half a continent? On a still broader scale, when does the high living standard of developed nations begin to threaten the survival of the rest of humanity? We have succeeded in dodging these questions so far, but eventually they will press themselves on us, challenging therapeutic assumptions of the individual's unlimited possibilities and fundamentalist faith in imminent deliverance. When listening to the voice-over punditry that is sure to accompany our Y2K celebrations—solemn declarations, for instance, that feminism or digital media or global capitalism or the self-esteem movement are serving as midwife to the birth of new millennial identities—those truly interested in the forces that will define post-Y2K selves would be advised to keep one eye on their dripping kitchen faucet or on the sport-utility leviathan beached in the driveway.

Endnotes

1. Bronwyn Hurrell, "Beware of the pets' bite," *Advertiser*, Adelaide, S.A., Australia, 27 September 1997.

2. For an assessment of self-esteem taskforces and their implications for American civic values, see James N. Nolan, Jr., *The Therapeutic State: Justifying Government at Century's End* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

3. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1991 [originally 1979]), 239.

4. Ibid., 248.

5. Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

6. Pico Iyer, "Nowhere Man: Confessions of a Perpetual Foreigner," *Utne Reader*, May-June 1997, 78-79. On New Age detraditionalization, see Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: The Celebration of Self and the Sacralization of Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

7. Abimael Guzmán, "We are the initiators," in *The Peru Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. Orin Starn, Carlos Iván Degregori, and Robin Kirk (Durham, N.C..: Duke University Press, 1995), 310-15.

8. James L. Peacock and Tim Pettyjohn, "Fundamentalisms Narrated: Muslim, Christian, and Mystical," in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, The Fundamentalism Project, Vol. 5 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 133.

9. Charles B. Strozier, *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), n. 164.

10. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 405.