

# Liah Greenfeld

## **When the Sky Is the Limit: Busyness in Contemporary American Society**

HOW LONG AGO WAS IT THAT I WAS ASKED TO WRITE THIS ESSAY ON busyness for *Social Research*—a year, perhaps more? I agreed on the spot: the subject seemed interesting and had been bothering me for some time. But I couldn't do anything with it until a week before the deadline. I was too busy, of course. Now I have to drop everything else to write it, and it drives me mad. Perhaps, if I were better organized. . . . Still, there were too many things to do, it would have been impossible to add another. First, there were all those other articles which I committed myself to write earlier, along with several dissertations to read, edit, and pass, hopefully with a recommendation for distinction; there were classes to teach and students—half a score of them, at least—to see through depressions, break-ups with boyfriends/girlfriends, deaths in the family, assorted crises of identity. There were political conflicts to attend to and lectures to give on topics of the moment, across the Atlantic or just in Canada, which meant arranging travel, making sure that my courses were taught and nobody committed suicide while I was away; that the dog was not over-traumatized, my mother did not feel lonely, my son did not forget to get up and still got enough sleep.

The well-being of these latter three, of course, had to be assured even when I was here, on a daily basis, for there is always a possibility—a high probability, actually—that one's efforts in this respect

may lead to the opposite of what one wishes to achieve and have to be corrected the next day. Then, I had to spend some quality time with my husband—romantic dinners *tete-a-tete*, little signs of attention, relaxing by the fire, which must be kept burning—all usually squeezed into some late hour after all the panicked e-mails to clamoring editors (“Sorry, sorry, sorry—I promise the essay will be sent to you tomorrow!”) and soothing phone calls to desperate students, friends, or relatives (“There, there, the winter/summer/boss/overwork is not so bad, it can be, in fact, worse, and it certainly will get better”) and before falling into bed, dead for all intents and purposes. And then, of course, there were holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, celebrations of achievement, and all the shopping, and cooking (not that I cooked that much—with all the nice specialty places around), and thinking of presents, and dressing up, and the exhausting job of being joyful, and maybe even playful. . . .

Gosh, we lead busy lives. Most of the people I know no longer have the time, even occasionally, to stop and think. And yet, this is not because we accomplish or do so much. In fact, in comparison with other historical and some contemporary societies, we do not. Think, for instance, about the masses of itinerant agricultural laborers who participated in the gang system in early industrial England after 1834, so vividly described by Ivy Pinchbeck (Pinchbeck, 1969 [1930]: 86-87). This form of labor organization was an answer to the demand for an irregular work-force that arose with the development of large-scale commercial agriculture. Bands of workers of all ages and both sexes, under the direction of an overseer, moved from farm to farm as their services were required. They worked long hours for little pay, and most of them depended entirely on what they earned doing so. “One of the worst features of the system,” writes Pinchbeck, “was the physical hardship and unnecessary fatigue imposed on both old and young on their journeys to and from work in all seasons and all weathers. In winter if the task was fairly near, a two-journey day was worked; the gang set out at 7 a.m., returned at mid-day, and went again from 1 p.m. to dark; but

in summer the gang had sometimes to walk seven or eight miles each way, and work from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., making a day of intolerable length and hardship even for adults.”

Life before the Industrial Revolution was not better, and even affluence and higher status rarely translated into leisure. At the end of the eighteenth century it was still common for gentlewomen, mistresses of large dairy farms, to take an active part in production, not only as a manager, but as the most skilled, and therefore most involved manual worker. “The hours of labor in a cheese dairy were almost incredibly long; the work was never finished and ordinary routine filled the entire day. Milking began at 3 a.m. or 4 a.m. according to the season. . . . The cows were usually milked in the pastures some distance from the house. . . . When the milk came home the actual making of butter or cheese began, and on a large farm the process of making cheese was gone through twice daily. The first making lasted until 3 p.m. or 4 p.m. and with the afternoon milking the whole business began again and lasted until late in the evening.” Pinchbeck quotes a contemporary observer, writing in 1788: “It is customary, even in the largest dairies, for the ostensible manager whether mistress or maid, to perform the *whole* operation of making cheese; except the last breaking, etc., and the vatting; in which she has an assistant. But this . . . is too great labor for any woman; it is painful to see it.” Indeed, a good Cheshire cheese could easily weigh a hundred, or even a hundred and forty pounds (12-15).

Conditions across the Atlantic differed, but not dramatically. At the dawn of American industrialization, in 1850, in the planned manufacturing town of Holyoke, Massachusetts, the morning bells rang at 4:40 and 5:00 a.m. The mill gates opened at the first bell and were closed 10 minutes past the second one, when the work began. Those who did not make it through this window of opportunity could not work until after dinner and lost their morning wages (one expects that most did, however). Breakfast was taken at the mill during the half hour after 6:30 or 7:00, depending on the time of the year.

Then work went on for another five to five and a half hours until the half-hour dinner recess at 12:30. The day ended at 6:30, earlier on Saturdays if sunset was before 6:30 (Greenfeld: 2001, 409). In comparison with some other work situations, this was not too bad. David Landes comments that in early industrial America, “hours were long, but shorter for example than in Japanese mills at the same stage” (Landes, 1998: 300). This was probably true. The year 1850 in the history of American industrialization would correspond to the 1870s in that of the Japanese one. In the 1930s, a representative Japanese factory workday began at 7 o’clock in the morning and lasted till 5 in the afternoon, but, when business was good, then continued from 6 to 9:30 p.m. During the work hours one was expected to focus on the job: smoking, loud singing, and gossiping were forbidden (Greenfeld, 2001: 347; Stein, 1935: 66-69). Still, in the early 1850s, the British Committee of the Ordnance Board, which visited all the principal manufacturing sites in the former colonies, reported to Parliament that American productivity suffered from poor discipline, workers being “absent from their employment to an extent which could not be tolerated with us” (Greenfeld, 2001: 426-7; Robertson, 1985: 115-18). But, clearly, American factories were no playgrounds either, not then and not much later, as anyone who watched Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* or read Dreiser’s *American Tragedy* would well recognize. The hours, by our standards, were exceedingly long, the discipline oppressively harsh, the work copious and painstaking enough to keep one thoroughly exhausted by the end of the day and thus out of mischief on Sundays. Only—as the above sources show— it did not. Somehow, these overworked people did not feel busy.

One does not have to look for examples far back in history or in particularly dramatic circumstances. Think of an ordinary, middle-income, urban housewife in the early twentieth century and in the Western—the most advanced—world of the time. With a working husband, able to provide for all the needs of the family, but not rich enough to afford house help, she would have several children and a

husband to take care of. Every minute of her waking life, from early morning till late at night, would be occupied with housework. She would wash, comb, dress, and feed her children; she would clean after them; she would nurse them through their childhood illnesses; she would make most of the family clothing and wash it by hand; she would scrub the floors, and dust, and organize things, and iron; she would do all the family shopping, including food shopping, but all the family meals would be cooked by her, daily (for refrigerators would be as little known in her day as supermarkets with prepared foods sections). She would bake her own bread and make her preserves and cordials; very likely, she would make her own dairy products from the milk delivered by a milkman. On holidays, she would trim her house and prepare special dishes. (A traditional recipe for the *Linzer torte*, which I proudly bake every couple of years, at a certain stage in the preparatory process requires the cook to “stir for one hour.”) In fact, most of her days would be spent in the kitchen. She would, probably, be constantly very tired (or would she?). Yet, it is difficult to imagine her saying to a friend that she could not respond to her knocking on the door for three weeks because she was too busy.

Our own times also offer excellent examples of the paradoxical relationship between the harshness of economic conditions (the amount of time and effort one has to expend to put bread on one’s table) and busyness, the fact that busyness grows with affluence. In 1992, just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I visited the newly independent Russia. The stores—food stores—were empty. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, they would receive some supplies occasionally, but in provincial cities like Yaroslavl, a regional center less than 200 miles from the capital, or Krasnodar, the chief city of the richest agricultural region of the country, they stayed open out of sheer habit: the only product one could buy there for months, I was told, was dry macaroni. In the countryside this could be exchanged for milk and eggs. Women, who, even under the conditions of constant Soviet “deficit” used to buy most of the staples, such as bread, butter, sour cream, or cottage cheese,

relearned to prepare them at home. Among my personal acquaintances, one Moscow couple (he a world-renowned water-purification expert, she a teacher at the Russian Language Institute for Foreigners) raised a piglet on the balcony of their eighth-floor apartment in the center of the city. In honor of Yeltsin, he was called Boris. He was very smart, and the wife's elderly mother and the couple's son, who took care of the animal, treated him as a family dog. I imagine it was rather heartbreaking to cut Boris into pork chops when he grew into a good-size pig. But for a long time the family had meat.

It was probably easier to raise a pig in Krasnodar. In the "science city" of Novosibirsk, at the university, physicists and philosophers alike received their salaries in flour: department secretaries actually weighed and packaged the portions on their desks. Many other institutions (including those in Moscow and St. Petersburg) stopped paying their employees altogether: to keep alive, people had to sell their possessions. Indeed, for a while Moscow turned into one vast pathetic bazaar. Anything could be sold, and anything could be used as payment. A chocolate bar, a package of pantyhose, a pack of cigarettes was a most generous present. An editor of one of the influential literary magazines, whom I interviewed among others, was able to buy a two-week-long, all-inclusive vacation at an exclusive Black Sea spa for a carton of Marlboros. A \$10 bill as a bribe to a secretary at any academic institute would open to you all the doors and get you anywhere. Dollars were precious. Remarkably, people continued to go to work: there was always hope that they might be paid, and then work was an important social center, a source of vital information (where it was possible to get foodstuffs or something that could be exchanged for foodstuffs), a place to get emotional encouragement, to gossip, in short, to rest from the business of the day. I doubt that anything was produced for some time. But nobody cared about production: what one cared about was feeding one's children (and elderly, and oneself), and in this serious business—foraging for food—one was engaged constantly, wherever one was, and the work demanded utmost concentration and was exhausting and hard.

I WISHED TO EXPERIENCE HOW IT FELT TO LIVE THROUGH A REVOLUTION and so, instead of booking myself into a nice hotel for foreigners (in which they were kept happily isolated from the misery of Russia's "democratization"), I rented a bed in the one-room apartment of a Russian ethnographer/sociologist who was to assist me in the study I came to conduct (I have described some of my findings from this study in Greenfeld, 1996b). I paid her \$500 a month, which at the time was an excellent sum for her, and was also to pay for the food that she would cook. Like many professional Russian women, Natasha divorced her husband (useless as a provider and unaffordable as a charge) soon after her daughter was born and now lived in her apartment with the six-year-old girl. I was to sleep in the girl's bed, while little Anya, for the duration of my stay, would move into her mother's bed. For the month and a half that I lived with them, I lived their life (my study there turned into a participant observation of sorts) and could give a firsthand account of what it was like.

The day began early. Anya was fed a breakfast of cooked oatmeal while we had some bread with butter and tea before she was brought to her grandmother, a retired professor of music theory at the conservatory. We then started *en route* to the Academic Institute of Ethnography and Anthropology, beginning with a search for signs of commerce in the neighborhood. If we saw a line of people, we joined it, only as an afterthought inquiring what it was for (or, as the Russian code phrase went: *what were they giving out*). The longer the line was the better: this meant one had a chance of buying something of real value. Once we were able to begin our day's journey with a couple of cabbages, another time with some milk and bread, yet another with a flannel housedress size 48, which could be exchanged for something else later. With our packages we boarded a bus or a subway train, stuffed to bursting with people burdened with similar packages—our choice of transportation dependent on the stores we needed to visit on the way—and proceeded, getting off several times, standing patiently in several more long lines, adding more packages, occasionally, when whatever it was that they

were giving out was taken before our turn came, frustrated. After five or six hours of this treasure hunt we would reach Natasha's place of work and take a break from our literally backbreaking labor. Her colleagues would arrive at about the same time; people would visit each other's offices, discuss each other's purchases, drink tea with some of them (almost everyone would bring something to the common table), talk about social changes. Some papers were filed or taken out. At about four we would start on our journey home, taking a different route, stopping on the way, standing in lines. We would come home at around 7 p.m.—after a twelve-hour long day, and I, at least, would be tired. Natasha would divide our purchases between hers and her mother's households, spend some time with Anya, maybe put her to bed. And then we would go to see a play, or go visiting, or guests would arrive at our place. And there would be a table spread, perhaps some herring and cooked potatoes, and tea and vodka, and we would sit and talk past midnight. Nobody seemed to be busy.

Later, I heard, things became better. At least in Moscow and St. Petersburg nobody had to raise pigs anymore; huge, Western-style supermarkets sold almost as wide an assortment of foods as here, and, though for the great majority of their customers, most of it was unaffordable, at least they no longer had to spend their days hunting for necessities and standing in lines. The times when salaries in Siberian universities were weighed on commercial scales were over; a money economy replaced the traditional barter, and the question became where to find rubles. Some skills sold better than others; some people became successful, opening their own businesses. The teacher of Russian to foreigners earned a good living by teaching English to Russian businessmen; so did the editor of the influential literary journal (both kept their previous positions just the same). For a well-deserved rest they went to the Caribbean or to the Riviera and remembered with laughter how once one could pay for two weeks on the beach by a carton of Marlboros. In their new affluence they would be embarrassed to serve their guests herring and boiled potatoes. Those—the majority—who

still could not afford anything else, ate their meals alone, for they too were embarrassed to serve them to guests. And so, suddenly, visits became rare. Some were ashamed that they had no money, others—for some reason—no longer had time. “We do not see our friends anymore,” wrote the editor of the influential literary journal dejectedly, “the way of life we hated so much, capitalism, is setting in.”

IN RUSSIAN, THE WORD FOR BUSYNESS IS *SUYETA*, THE SAME AS FOR vanity. Indeed, busyness implies empty, unproductive spending of time, something like walking on a treadmill, only without the benefit of exercise—inconstant, but wholly unprofitable activity. “Busyness” is a modern concept. The word entered the English language around 1850, first in a lighthearted sense, more appropriate to a description of squirrels, which always seemed to be doing something, even when, from our viewpoint, nothing needed to be done (as in “bright brisk busy-ness of the squirrel”—one of the earliest instances cited by the *OED*). Now that we apply the word to ourselves, it refers less to the state of being cheerfully occupied than that of being restless and preoccupied, which we naturally treat as a much more serious business—a justifiable cause for complaint and a reason for malaise. If only we had more time. . . .

But time for what? The 2003 annual report of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas claims that the average American workweek decreased from 76 hours in 1830 to 60 in 1890, 39 in 1950 and only 34 in 2003. “We get more of the goods and services we want for less time at work,” it comments (Federal Reserve Bank, 2003: 5). We are busy not because our physical and economic survival requires constant exertion on our part, leaving us little opportunity for spiritual restoration—relaxing, getting rid of the sense of busyness—but because we are incapable of perceiving and taking advantage of the opportunities for repose. We are restless. And our busyness is an expression of this inability to rest, rather than its cause. Much of our busyness comes from our leisure activities, in fact: preparations for and participation in family gatherings, holiday

shopping (how often every one of us heard—or exclaimed—the desperate “Oh my! It is December 15, and I have not yet done my Christmas shopping!”), visits to the hairdresser and the gym; the phrase itself, “leisure activities,” is telling. We regard all these occasions for relaxation as duties and external pressures: we exercise not because we like it and can afford to indulge ourselves, but because one must keep in shape. We read *New York Times* over breakfast because one must be informed; go to concerts, movies, and dinners with friends because it is important to be culturally *au courant* and sociable. We are veritably torn into pieces by all these simultaneous and necessarily conflicting demands that oppress us every minute of our waking life and eventually invade our sleep.

Clearly, Americans are the busiest people of all, and, clearly, it is quite prosperous people among us who are the busiest. Yet no other substantial group of people in history ever had it so good. Our lives are easy. The combined labors of family and work are not physically demanding. We buy clothes off the rack, and food off the supermarket shelves, whenever and wherever we feel the need. We use labor-saving machines to clean our floors, wash our laundry, and even—if we have an inclination for that—mix the batter for our cakes. We do not have to walk miles to reach our place of employment, but are brought there by decent public transportation or in our own air-conditioned cars. While there, we work reasonable hours. An increasing number of us opt for a “child-free” existence, while those who still want to have children rarely have more than one or two. As for our elderly parents, we do not actually care for them—at most we manage their care. A representative story of several couples, profiled in a recent issue of the *Boston Globe Magazine*, demonstrates the puzzling nature of the phenomenon. The article celebrates, somewhat halfheartedly, the ethic of gender equality that is coming to prevail in the modern American family as a result of the rise of a new, fully participating “breed of father” (Wen, 2005: 22). This development is sure to contribute to the sense of fulfillment of everyone concerned and is a certain sign that the society is becom-

ing more enlightened and life in it more enjoyable. It is a pity that the couples in question are rushed and tired. In their late thirties, both husbands and wives at least college educated and with respectable desk jobs, unlikely to unduly fatigue a normal adult, each couple are parents to a small child or two; at the most—if there are twins—three small children. In some cases the wife, who has decided to stay at home for the first couple of years after birth, is still there, but intends to return to work as the children become older.

The couples' days are hectic. The article depicts mothers and fathers, dividing their domestic duties 50-50: feed their children in the mornings (no labor-intensive dishes, such as scrambled eggs or porridge are mentioned, so I imagine, the children eat cereal) before taking turns to deposit them in a child-care. The author then follows them home in the evenings (the fathers, working 9-to-5 jobs, do their best to be at home by 6) and watches one of the spouses load the food into the microwave, while the other equally selflessly "cuts up chicken and slaps rice" on children's plates (32). The two adults—one per child in most cases—play with the children, feed and bathe them ("Who gives you a bath at night?" the reporter asks the little ones. "Mommy and daddy," they say. "Who helps you brush your teeth? Who takes care of you when you are sick?" "Mommy and daddy") put them to bed. The fathers learn, we are told, what the mothers had known all along, how difficult it is to combine family with a career. "Wanting it all" and "juggling work and home demands is exhausting." "This juggling act is hard work." More than 50 percent of enlightened fathers report tension about it, according to research the article cites. "Men's sense of frustration" rises "sharply." There is a new type, indeed, among contemporary dads: the "Exhausted Dad"; "the chronically fatigued." The worst of it is that their wives' condition does not improve in proportion—the wives are chronically fatigued as well and the type of mother they belong to is that of the "Exhausted Mom." Both husbands and wives, as one couple reports, manage to "survive" only thanks to the equitable distribution of labor between them. And still the husband muses that "it would be

nice if it was like in the old days,” when mothers took care of children and fathers focused on work. (22, 23, 30, 32).

After their hard day’s work is done, one imagines, the exhausted mom and dad plop on the sofa in front of the TV. The reader is sympathetic: so many of us are familiar with the predicament. How difficult it must be to muster energy for romance; these poor couples, probably, have not had good sex for months. The weekends offer no respite: the children still must be fed, played with, washed, and so on, and then there is shopping to do, and one must visit his or her family, or maybe his or her parents plan to visit instead and must be entertained—busyness galore. And yet, things do not add up. The nature of our occupations does not explain our busyness. Most of the time every day we do something that is neither particularly fatiguing nor vital in the sense that our life and the lives of those we are responsible for depend on it.

But, if *what* we do is not the cause of our having no rest, the explanation must be sought elsewhere—perhaps, in *how* we do it.

ONE THING, INDEED, IMMEDIATELY STRIKES AN OBSERVER WHEN comparing the daily occupations of affluent successful Americans today either with their social analogues in earlier periods of American history or with the daily occupations of people in other societies (in which such analogues cannot be found). Americans who suffer from busyness today do not prioritize. They treat all their occupations—work, family, and even leisure—as equally important. The priorities of the Russian ethnographer/sociologist Natasha were made absolutely clear by the harsh economic reality in her country. It was vital that she, the only able-bodied adult in her family, provide food for it. Her professional employment could not be relied on, her work, therefore, was not an important concern. In contrast, when her daily (food-related) duties were performed, she could relax and enjoyed going to a theater or spending time with friends. This was not something she felt obliged to do, but something she did literally as recreation, to make herself ready

for another exhausting day. In the case of the American housewife in the 1900s, the priorities were set by tradition. She knew what she had to, what it was her duty to do: to take care of her children and husband, to see that the family had their meals, to keep the house in order. Her husband's work outside made it possible for her to concentrate on her domestic work. Both could be very tired by the end of the day, but both also had the sense of accomplishment: of having done what they had to do; and, as a result, they could rest. If theirs was a loving relationship (which in those times was, probably, as common or uncommon, as it is today), one can be sure they had no problem having sex.

In the case of our exemplary fathers from the *Boston Globe Magazine* and their wives, in distinction, neither reality nor tradition prescribes the order of importance in which their activities are to be regarded. Playing with the children becomes an obligation, a burden, just like going to work, rather than an occasion for relaxation, as do visits with relatives and to the gym, holidays and so on. But why is going to work a burden? Don't the wives want to return to work after spending a couple of years at home with the kids? Shouldn't they feel liberated by their work now, free rather than busy for most of the day? They cannot, of course: as they felt under pressure to leave the children and return to work earlier, because it was at least as important for them to be working outside of home, so now they feel under pressure to be home with the children, because taking care of the family is at least as important for them as working outside.

This disturbing inability to prioritize, which is the direct, proximate, cause of our oppressive sense of busyness, is undoubtedly related to the difficulty modern men and women, Americans above all, have forming their identities. An identity can be visualized as a social map with one's location ("You are here") and adjacent regions highlighted. From the outside it is perceived as a set of characteristic behaviors associated with one's social position. A peasant behaves in a certain way, a nobleman in another, equally distinctive, fashion. A peasant maiden behaves differently from a peasant mother, both behave differently

from their male counterparts, and all three can be easily distinguished from their counterparts within the nobility. But a person who is not aware that he or she is a peasant, or willfully refuses to consider him- or herself one, namely a person who does not have the identity of a peasant, would conduct oneself contrary to the expectations, confusing observers as to his or her position. In sociology, a modern discipline, social positions are referred to as social *roles*. This reflects the shaky social ground on which we stand, the drastically changed nature of the social experience, and thus of identity, in modern society. The concept of a social *role* (suggested to sociology, one would think, by Shakespeare) assumes that we, all of us, are actors, that we can change our public personas as circumstances require—be a hunter in the morning, let's say, a fisher in the afternoon, and a critical critic in the evening (Marx, 1976: 160), and that our identity, our inner self is as independent of the different positions we assume as that of an actor is from the characters he or she plays on the stage. The I that I show to the public, I as a mother, I as a daughter, I as my husband's wife, as a citizen, as a teacher, as a scholar, as a friend, etc., is not the really real me, in other words; and as it is the psychologists' business to know what the really real me is, it is of no interest to sociology.

The sociological concept of the social role is only two-thirds misleading, however, its remaining and valuable third putting the finger precisely on the problem. It is misleading in that, first, identity cannot be conceived separately from social position, and, second, that only modern societies are characterized by the expectation of a movement between positions in the course of a lifetime and of a multiplicity of mutually independent positions at any period of a person's life. Clearly, a medieval king did not play a role of a king, but was one; so certainly was Louis XIV, who in all seriousness declared "L'Etat c'est moi." The wife of a baron in the provinces was not a manager of his household during some hours of her day, his sexual partner after these hours, a personnel director on Tuesdays, an accountant on Wednesdays, and a mother on weekends. No, she was all these

things (and many others) at once and all the time, because all of this was implied in her position and identity as a baron's wife. Her many responsibilities were interdependent, they were not separate, self-contained roles. This is a very different situation from that of a today's American. As mothers we associate with a circle of people who usually have no connection whatsoever with our professional life, as sexual partners use models that are, as a rule, independent of our concept of motherhood, as consumers behave in ways that are often completely unrelated to the nature of our sexual partnership. But this necessarily creates a problem.

An identity, in its most profound, psychological sense, pertaining to the individual's mental health and general well-being, means symbolic self-definition. It is the mental image of one's position in the social world and the image of the relevant sociocultural terrain itself. It contains and provides information regarding one's social status, one's relevant others and the types of relations one is supposed to have with them, one's immediate and more remote social environment, expectations one may have of it and vice-versa, conduct proper to one under various, likely to arise circumstances (that is, foods one should like or dislike, clothes one is supposed to wear, questions one is supposed to ask and issues one is supposed to be interested in, emotions one may legitimately experience and ones of which one should be ashamed, people one may befriend, marry, respect, despise and hate). In short, one's identity represents an individualized microcosm of the culture (society) in which one is immersed, with the image of one's significant sector in it (which may include God and His angels, paradise and hell, or one's immediate neighbors, colleagues, fellow sports fans, or participants in a political movement) magnified and highlighted. An identity is clearly an essential element in one's mental functioning, whether cognitive, emotional, or pertaining to social adjustment. Problems in identity-formation and maintenance, such as crises of identity, doubts about one's identity, multiple identities, directly and adversely affect the degree of one's psychological comfort.

In most societies, traditional, or modern but struggling with hardship, one's identity is acquired as a result of a simple learning process—supplied by one's society, in other words. One is ascribed a definite social position by tradition, depending on the circumstances into which one is born, and learns by experience what this position implies. One is not free to choose what position one is to occupy and, as a result, is not free to define one's identity otherwise than it is defined by one's society, even one's possibilities of imagining it differently are limited. In the case of a modern struggling society, the sphere of one's freedom, and therefore one's choices, is strictly circumscribed by the exigencies of the situation. One realizes very clearly what one can do and, however dissatisfied with the situation (it is difficult, indeed, to enjoy raising a pig on the balcony of a high-rise in the midst of a modern city) limits striving—and, with it, the possibilities of frustration—to the narrow restricted sphere in which one must act. Already Durkheim, writing about modern society in which tradition was weakening and individual freedom on the rise, noted that poverty—physical and material hardship—is an effective defense against mental exhaustion, in fact against suicide (which, one presumes, is caused by deep unhappiness). It sets limits to people's desires, he explained, which, if unlimited, necessarily result in disorientation, making life unmanageable (we call this “stress”) and, ultimately, unlivable (Durkheim, 1951 [1897]: 254). Americans, naturally, consider poverty an unmitigated evil that must be at all costs eliminated, but, ironically, they accept an arguably far greater evil, death, for the very same reason for which one may reconcile to poverty: it is not worth agonizing about simply because one has no choice. One may not like it, but one learns—and learns easily—to live with it.

The natural limitations of human existence, however, are the only limitations life imposes on contemporary Americans. In comparison to other societies, our sphere of freedom, and choice, is greatly extended. None of us is ascribed a lifetime position at birth by tradition, very few of us must contend with poverty as it is experienced

by our contemporaries elsewhere—absolute poverty, poverty actually endangering physical survival, not relative deprivation, which is what poverty is with us, contradicting our society’s commitment to equality and offending only against our sense of justice. Instead, each of us has to “make oneself”—to choose a position best suited to one’s potential and achieve it. But to do so one must know what one’s potential is (not an easy thing to do in most cases before the potential is realized)—one has to “find oneself,” in other words. Identity can no longer be a reflection of the social position, which one simply derives from the environment, it becomes a condition for status and has to be independently constructed—created from scratch—by the individual.

In today’s America, and in particular among the more materially comfortable strata, one, for the most part, does not know who one is and is not comfortable in the position one occupies for the moment. There are so many choices around; one is responsible for making the right one. What if one has chosen wrongly? What if being a mother or a college professor is not the real me? What if I am, as a matter of fact, an alpinist and a “child-free” lesbian? Thus, especially the young, in high school and in college, go through agonizing periods of “self-searching,” trying on identities, like one tries on clothes in a store. Sometimes it is funny, but always poignant. Several years ago a student of mine, a very good-looking boy of 19, with a gorgeous mane of hair the color of dark gold, walked into the classroom a minute or two after the class had begun—as a blond. The intended effect, I suppose, was platinum blond, but as the transformation was performed by himself, and as he was not an experienced colorist, there was more than a hint of carrot in his locks. It so happened that the student was also my son, and I was so taken aback by his unexpected, Bozo-like look, that I screamed. He grew very self-conscious, and later I had to apologize for my mistake long and profusely. In the course of these apologies I had the chance to ask: “But, listen, you never approved of me coloring my hair just to cover the grey, what on earth possessed you to color yours?” His answer to this was most illuminating. “You,” he said, “wished to pass

for somebody you are not”—that is, I knew that I was no longer young but wished to appear young—“while I am just trying to see who I am.” Perhaps the real him was a blond, after all. It turned out that no, he was not a blond. But to be certain that one is right to reject an option, one must know well what the option is, and almost everything is an option for Americans in college today.

The characteristic American self-searching is more common among the young, faced as they are at this period in life in any society with the need to define themselves as adults, but it occurs often enough among other age groups to consider it a general problem. In this audience we all know of a respected social scientist, a teacher at a university, a husband and a father of two grown kids, who, in his fifties, decided that the real him was actually a woman and underwent a sex-change operation. One shudders at the thought that an obviously sensitive, thinking person, lived in a deep crisis of identity, uncertain of what he was, uncomfortable in his skin, indeed playing roles which were profoundly foreign and undoubtedly distasteful to him, not being himself, for most of his adult life. And given how very radical was the step he took to end this situation, it stands to reason that for every individual who takes a similar step, there are many who cannot muster the courage to take it and live not being themselves all their lives. At the same time, one cannot escape the suspicion that the problem in this case was at least aggravated, if not created outright, by the relatively recent development in medicine that made sex-change actually possible, thereby expanding the range of identity options available and adding sexual identity to the identities one is free to choose. Yet another limitation has been lifted from our desires and yet another area of experience problematized. Now it is up to the individual to decide whether one wants to stick to the physical role one is born into, or to remake one in this respect too.

As any college teacher knows, uncertainty as to one’s sexual identity is quite widespread, although only rarely does it lead to such irreversible life-changing decisions and is usually restricted to tempo-

rary experimentation with what is called “alternative lifestyles,” trying on identities for fit. Far more widespread, however, is the inability to define oneself in a wider social world, in terms of one’s social relations and occupations. This inability is expressed in two ways, of which busyness—collecting identities/social positions that come one’s way and attempting to act on them all, without prioritizing, which obviously leads to a tremendous psychological stress—appears to me to be the less hurtful. The other expression, less common and often very stark, is that of a complete or nearly complete social paralysis. This is the case of the most profound, disabling, embarrassment of choice. One is overwhelmed by the degree of freedom one is allowed (which always comes with a commensurate burden of responsibility for one’s fate) and totally at a loss as to which path to choose. How, indeed, can one make up one’s mind, if one does not know—and has no indication as to—what one is? This predicament of Alice in Wonderland (“—Excuse me, can you tell me which way should I take?—If you don’t know where you are going, it does not matter which way you take”) can very well result in destroyed lives, wasted in drug abuse or alcoholism, dragged on painfully or ended early, and it is to be regarded as a positive outcome for the individual in question (though, naturally, rarely seen as such by his or her family) when it is resolved through turning to religious fundamentalism or joining a radical political or religious movement.

Again, these problems are not unique to today’s American society—they are problems of modernity in general. We are just so lucky—so prosperous and free—that among us they become particularly prevalent. We are an ideal modern society in a way (Greenfeld, 1992). Modern society reflects (follows in its construction) a cultural, symbolic model that differs dramatically from other order-generating cultural systems; as a result, it is sharply distinguished from other types of societies in its organization and the very nature of the existential experience among its members. (Another paper in *Social Research* focused on this subject: Greenfeld, 1996a: 3-40) The root of this difference is the essentially

secular character of modern culture. This culture (and, by implication, modern consciousness, the way we imagine and shape reality) is focused on this world, regarded as independent and ultimately meaningful in its own right. This empirical world, the world the living human beings experience, is the source of all its laws and values. In distinction, in all other order-generating cultures this world was conceived as a part of a larger, transcendental (that is, not empirical) cosmos or order and derived its meaning from the latter, which meant, among other things, that its laws and values were given, prescribed to it from the outside. This fundamental difference is evident in every sphere of our lives, including the very way we search for the meaning of our existence and learn of these laws and values. The dominant epistemological approach of modernity is science, that is, a logical interrogation of the empirical reality itself.

The privileged meaningful sphere in this empirical reality is the sphere of human social relations; it is they that take the place of the relations between man and his maker, or the individual and the transcendental realm, more generally, as that which defines one's place in the universe. It is mundane social relations as such that represent the framework within which one finds the meaning of one's particular existence as well as one's identity. These social relations—that is, modern society—are organized in accordance with two principles: the principle of popular sovereignty and the principle of fundamental equality of communal membership. (Since the first community constructed on the basis of these two principles, the first modern society, was called a “nation”—this was the English nation of the sixteenth century—the form of culture and social consciousness—the image of society—that incorporates these two principles is properly referred to as “nationalism.”) Though “nationalism” may also have other meanings, for instance, virulent xenophobia, when used to characterize others' positions, when used as a self-characterization, the word always implies commitment to the principles of popular sovereignty and fundamental equality of membership. The two principles of social organization

are closely related (in fact, the principle of equality in the first place refers to equality in sovereignty), and both are obviously related to the essential secularity of modern culture. The focus on this, empirical, world and its elevation to the status of the ultimately meaningful reality eliminates the need in transcendental forces to supply meaning to life, and it is because God is no longer regarded as the sovereign author of the social and political order that the community, the people, is believed to be sovereign. The focus on this world necessarily reinforces the new dignity of the individual implied in the principles of equality and popular sovereignty, at the same time as it makes the one life the individual is allowed in this one world much more precious than it must seem when it is only a short prelude to an eternal existence in some other realm. The dignity of the individual and the preciousness of one's limited time on earth, in turn, lead to a far greater activism in molding one's economic, political, social, and personal fate on the part of the modern individual than any other type of society has ever experienced. On the one hand, we, the moderns, are greatly empowered by our imagination, which represents us as authors of our destiny, rather than playthings in the hands of unfathomable forces much larger than ourselves; on the other hand, we, unlike the people in many other historical formations, lack the solace of afterlife: we cannot wait until we are dead for the realization of our dreams and the correction of the ills that irk us; we have nothing but the here and now.

The equality principle is reflected most clearly in the system of social stratification characteristic of modern society. This system, referred to as class system, is open and fluid; its most salient feature is social mobility. Individuals and nuclear families are moving constantly up, down, and laterally on the alternative scales of social prestige and socioeconomic status. It is normal for anyone in modern society to occupy several unconnected positions in the course of a lifetime. The concept "career" implies an upward movement; in a modern society it is quite common to have several careers. In comparison to other societies, our lives are so rich in opportunities. We get so many chances. We

are allowed to fail once and again and end up successful. We can change the scenarios we design for ourselves in the midst of the action and replay almost every episode. Our lives are exciting and free as human lives never were before. But nothing in life comes free of charge. That there is no free lunch is one sociological law that brooks no exception, and the price of our open society, of our freedom and ability to shape our own destinies is *anomie*.

*Anomie* is a systemic cultural insufficiency, the inability of a culture to provide people within it with a sense of order—that is, to fulfill its essential social and psychological function. Durkheim, who introduced the concept, regarded *anomie* as the scourge of modern society, but recognized in it a necessary ingredient of the latter, a built-in problem, that could be eliminated only with the destruction of modernity itself. As a rule, *anomie* results from structural inconsistencies within a cultural/social system, which, on the psychological level, are expressed in contradictory messages the individual receives from different spheres and elements of the culture. Widespread *anomie*, affecting large groups of individuals and expressing itself in social turmoil, most commonly implies gross inconsistencies between elements of a culture impinging on the individual identities, specifically inconsistencies within the system of social stratification that defines a person's position in the social world in general and with particular others. A readjustment of the stratification system eliminates these inconsistencies, that is, resolves *anomie*, again making possible unhindered development of identity and routine functioning of both the individual and the surrounding society.

It is not structural inconsistencies, however, that are responsible for the *anomie* in modern society. Its cultural insufficiency is produced by the very nature of modern culture, the modern image of reality. Modern culture cannot provide us with a sense of order because its constitutive beliefs and attitudes, its supreme values and norms, consistently undermine order, because, in other words, it is consistently and thoroughly *anomic*. To insist on the fundamental equality of members in a community is to leave them fundamentally undefined vis-à-vis

each other, to leave them without an identity. To proclaim and defend popular sovereignty and the individual's freedom to make oneself is to demand that each one construct one's identity on one's own. Lifting limits from our desires, paradoxically, places very heavy burdens on our shoulders.

It is up to us to decide, which of them, our desires or our shoulders, we care for more. Most of us, however, wish to make no decisions: we want to keep our desires unlimited and our shoulders unburdened. Therefore, we complain. We accuse the society that gives us so many opportunities and hate the very life that they make so tempting; we refuse to strive, but demand that our government assures us the equality with those who do that we were promised; or we go shopping for identities, try them on, accumulate them—and become oh so very busy. Of course, the majority of our fellow citizens still live normal, orderly lives. Perhaps they do not allow our cultural precepts to penetrate too deeply into their souls; perhaps they face obstacles that prevent them from realizing that the sky is the limit to their ambitions. It is us, the better off, the better placed, the more educated, who suffer. Ah, the poor rich busy free Americans. What tough luck, indeed.

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