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Third Edition
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CONCEPTS OF THE SELF

Third Edition

Anthony Elliott

polity
For Caoimhe
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Acknowledgements

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I should like to thank my colleagues at the Hawke Research Institute at the University of South Australia for the many ways in they have supported my endeavours. Eric Hsu in particular deserves special mention: he undertook research which I have been able to utilize directly for this new edition.

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Anthony Elliott
Adelaide
With the soothing sound of the BBC sounding from her alarm clock at 6.00 am, Ronda wakes – like many the world over living in expensive cities of the West – to the latest news bulletin from digital radio. Listening to the morning headlines, she grabs her mobile phone to check any emails that came in overnight. A high-flying lawyer based in London, Ronda is working at present on a corporate takeover involving both British and American companies – and later in the day will fly to New York for further discussions on the deal. But it’s coffee she needs first. Heading downstairs, she flicks on the LCD television inbuilt on the refrigerator in her minimalist kitchen and checks the international weather on ITV. Sitting down to coffee and a bagel, she scans the morning newspapers not only to see what’s going on in the world but also to check the latest financial developments. All of this has taken about 15 minutes. The city is London, but it might just as easily be Los Angeles, Sydney, Singapore, Athens or Auckland.

Ronda’s morning routine tells us a good deal about our changing world in these early days of the twenty-first century. Certainly it tells us about the rise of information and communications technology in recent times, but also about the changing nature of the self. For the global communications revolution has impacted profoundly on modern societies, and perhaps nowhere more so than in the everyday routines
through which individuals forge and sustain a sense of self. Clearly, those like Ronda living in information-rich societies have an enormous degree of choice in accessing news and entertainment through the mass media. This explosion of global communications is crucial to the transformed nature of the self in various ways. First, an individual’s use of mass media – from newspapers and digital radio to satellite television and the Internet – is not simply about the gathering of information – however important that might be. It informs – in a deeply symbolic way – our everyday activities and connections with others. What one gleans from the morning news, for example, provides fertile subject matter for various routine interactions in which the self is implicated – from discussions with friends in cafés to dialogue with fellow workers at the office.

Second, an individual who reads the morning newspaper is also caught up in a complicated process of self-definition and consumer identification. Whether one chooses to read *The Times*, the *Daily Mail* or *News of the World* – and indeed whether one reads the printed version or reads online – says a great deal about the relation between the self and broader socio-economic contexts. People can separate themselves from others – in actual, imagined and virtual ways – through reliance on the cultural status of media products. Consumer identification with media products often functions in a kind of make-believe way – ‘I only read the *New York Times*’ – but also profoundly influences the self-presentations of individuals. Indeed, for many people, this kind of brand loyalty is definitional of their ‘ideal self’ – the self that they would like to be.

Third, our routine engagement with the mass media implicates the self in a complex web of social, cultural and economic relationships that span the globe. Thanks to the transnational spread of new information technologies, our media-saturated society has created what the Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan terms a ‘global village’ – people increasingly define aspects of their self-identity, as well as memories of self, with reference to global media spectacles. In a world of intensive globalization, breaking news almost anywhere in the world is relayed instantaneously by the mass media. Such developments have not only provided for a much
more interconnected world, but also redefine aspects of the constitution of the self with reference to other societies and other cultures. Where were you when the news of Princess Diana’s death broke? What were you doing on the morning of 9/11, when news of the planes that brought down the Twin Towers spread across the globe? More and more often, people are coming to define aspects of their self-experience – and particularly memories of the self – with reference to global mega-events. While social analysts still debate the pros and cons of the globalization of the media, there is growing evidence that our televisual world of 24/7 news updates and media spectacles is reshaping the self with postnational consequences. That is to say, the self is increasingly defined with reference to global forces, flows and networks – although whether people choose to embrace or deny such worldwide social transformations on a conscious level is an altogether separate issue.

Finally, the reshaping of the self through engagement with the mass media moves us to reflect on contemporary debates about modernity, postmodernism and, in particular, the much contested idea of a ‘speeding-up’ of the world. Some sociologists of the media have argued that today’s good quality newspapers – such as the Los Angeles Times or the Guardian – contain as much information as an individual might have encountered over the course of their entire lifetime in a premodern society. This clearly raises issues about ‘information overload’ in modern societies; but it also raises complex questions concerning the self and its navigation of the myriad narratives and kaleidoscopic perspectives available through the mass media today. How do people forge a coherent sense of self against the expansive spread of information available through the mass media? How does the society of information overload impact upon processes of self-formation? These are issues that increasingly impact upon everyone today.

All these basic themes concerning changes affecting the self can, as I say, be inferred from the vignette of Ronda’s hi-tech morning routine. There is little doubt that Ronda can be said to live a very privileged life, but there are aspects of her self-experience as described above which are increasingly prevalent and significant for people throughout the world – certainly in the expensive cities of the West. But, increasingly, such
personal and social changes also have globalizing consequences. As I try to demonstrate in this book, concepts of the self have a key role to play in both the production of everyday life and a central place in the social sciences. *Concepts of the Self* is thus an attempt to make various social, cultural, political and psychological aspects of the self in our changing world intelligible to a wide readership. As we will see throughout the book, concepts of the self have been studied by philosophers and sociologists, by psychoanalysts as well as cultural theorists. Almost all intellectual evaluations of the self draw from, as well as feed back into, our everyday commonsense understandings of the self. This continual interchange between everyday and intellectual understandings of the self is a key theme of the book.

Increasingly, many people today reflect on their sense of self in terms of their private life – particularly as regards friends, family, intimacy and sexuality. In the contemporary world, selfhood is often experienced as a private affair – as a matter of personal choice, design or project, as a defining aspect of inner desires and dreams. Certainly, in our consumer-driven culture in these early days of the twenty-first century, identity is private and privatizing; everywhere, identity is sold as the means for personal happiness and freedom. From the Nike culture of just-do-it to the micro made-to-measure world of iPods, selfhood is advertised, televised and talked about as the principal means for both joining and enjoying the modern world. Many of the social theories of identity that I examine in this book critically interrogate what might be termed this *privatization of the self*. To think about selfhood critically is to think beyond the illusions of a purely private world, supposedly unaffected or cut off from the wider social world. For we are all, no matter where we grew up or what successes or otherwise we might have achieved in our lives, exposed to *cultures* and *structures* in a profound and ongoing sense. And nowhere more so than when we think we are alone, when we think we are ‘away’ from the world, when we think we act on the basis of our own ‘private’ or unique sense of self. Yet this is not, as it may at first seem, a completely cynical view of the self. Some of the social theories that we will look at in this book do indeed analyse the riddles of self primarily in terms of wider social forces, such
as long-term historical processes or social structures. But other theorists of self take perhaps a more complex view, one that critically interrogates the whole relationship between private and public life. The personal life of the self, from this angle, is embedded in powerful unconscious forces, which are in turn deeply rooted in the ways of life of society.

In still another way, all social theories of the self turn on issues of control, capabilities and capacities. This is a more complex point, and the debate around it has involved some difficult terminology – but I think the essence of the issue can be easily summarized. Many sociologists talk about the self primarily in terms of the experience of agency – the degree of active involvement individuals have in shaping both their personal and cultural experience. In everyday life, we routinely engage in social practices – from buying the morning newspaper to taking the dog for an evening walk – in which, for the most part, we express agency in what we do. Self-management, self-shaping, self-stylization: this is just how we give structure to our identities. As directors of our own lives, we draw upon emotional frames of memory and desire, as well as wider cultural and social resources, in fashioning the self. Expressions of personal agency – whether of writing a letter or uttering the words ‘I love you’ – are not something that happens through our actions alone (however much we sometimes think this is so). For practices of the self can also be experienced as forces impinging upon us – through the design of other people, the impact of cultural conventions and social practices, or the force of social processes and political institutions. Society then might be said to discipline and regulate the self, so that our deepest feelings about ourselves, as well as our beliefs about our identities, are shaped to their roots by broader social forces and cultural sensibilities. We may, for example, go to the gym fairly regularly in order to try to attain some ideal body shape (and, by implication, an ideal self), and we may do so because this really matters to us and it is experienced as a personal decision or choice. But in the social theories of self that we will examine in this book, there are always other puzzling social forces at work. There are always cultural or commercial factors influencing the self – for example, omnipresent media delivering never-ending images of ideal body-types as
well as the selling of strategies to achieve such ‘perfect bodies’.

This issue of the agency of the self is certainly a confounding puzzle, and one that often divides many of the social thinkers that we will examine in this book. In attempting to understand the lives of individuals, and of the role that society and culture plays in their lives, should we emphasize the practical knowledge of people? If so, to what extent? But what if ‘practical knowledge’ of the self is shaped to its roots by the power of the social bond? At the heart of these questions is an intriguing division which has arisen in the social sciences over the self-shaping of creative individuals, on the one hand, and the social regulation or control of selfhood on the other. The self has come to be viewed by some social analysts and cultural critics as an upshot of cultural constraint or social exclusion, an approach which, as we will see, focuses on the status of social forces and institutional dynamics. For other critics, the self can only be adequately understood by grasping the creativity of action, focusing in particular on personal agency and autonomy. The concept of the reflective, reasoning self has been central to many schools of thought in the social sciences, and yet an emphasis on human agency varies considerably depending on whether we are discussing sociological, psychoanalytic, post-structuralist, feminist or postmodern approaches. Sociological theories, for example, tend to emphasize how our sense of self is shaped by one or another institution or cultural form in the larger society, how we build up notions of the self and other selves as social constructions, and how concepts of the self play a central role in the constitution and reproduction of social networks. Psychoanalytic theories, by contrast, put the emphasis on the organization of our internal worlds, on the emotional conflicts of identity, and on the power of the individual to create, maintain and transform relations between the self and others. Concepts of the self emerging from these traditions of thought – that is, sociology and psychoanalysis – have very different ways of conceptualizing how individuals cope with the burdens of self in their day-to-day lives. Sociologists and psychoanalytic critics deal with this issue, as I shall discuss in the chapters that follow, by prioritizing either social forces or individuals in conceptualizing the self.
The relation between identity and society is therefore fundamental to thinking about the self. But there are also other themes of key significance in approaching concepts of the self. Just as social theory divides over prioritizing either social or individual experience in the constitution of the self, so too issues over unity and fragmentation, continuity and difference, rationality and passion, gender and sexuality, come strongly into focus. In the psychoanalytic reading of self and personal identity, for example, individual strivings, desires and actions are grasped as self-divided, torn between that part of the mind that is conscious, rational and reflexive, and the unconscious motivations that lurk within us, but of which we are dimly aware. Postmodern theory shifts these conflicts of identity up a gear, arguing for the multiplication of narratives of self as a site for reconfiguring relations between society, culture and knowledge.

The Arts of Self

A radio station to which I sometimes listen recently ran a competition called ‘The New You’. The competition was designed for ‘losers’: people with recurring difficulties in their personal and intimate lives. To enter, it was necessary to describe on radio some embarrassing private situation or circumstance – for instance, something going horribly wrong on a first date, falling in love with your best friend’s partner, or making a personal gaffe at work. The act of discussing one’s personal embarrassment on radio placed the entrant in line for a play-off with other ‘losers’. The final winner – in this case the ‘grand loser’ – took home prizes with which to remake his or her identity. The winning prize consisted of a car, clothes, holiday and cash. I raise the radio competition because it offers an interesting example, I think, of some core links between popular culture and dominant conceptions of the self. For the defining outlook pervading the competition seemed to be that individuals are relatively free to experiment with their sense of identity. The self, in this view, becomes a matter of choice and risk. If you are willing to take identity risks – in this case, to tell a wider public about some aspect
of your intimate life – then you do not have to be a loser. The radio competition was conducted, of course, in a spirit of light-heartedness. Yet it remains suggestive of deep cultural assumptions governing how we see the self: namely, that it is linked to role-playing, gender, choice, risk and, above all, the realm of consumption.

There are profound connections between the cultural assumptions informing ‘The New You’ competition. on the one hand, and, on the other, concepts of the self in the social sciences and humanities today. Selfhood is flexible, fractured, fragmented, decentred and brittle: such a conception of individual identity is probably the central outlook in current social and political thought. As the pace, intensity and complexity of contemporary culture accelerate, so too does the self become increasingly dispersed. Displaced and dislocated within the wider global frame of post-industrial capitalism, the individual self turns increasingly to consumption, leisure and travel in order to give substance to everyday life. Or so some have forcefully argued. Many other authors, for a variety of reasons that we will examine, remain sceptical of such a portrait of the self. I shall discuss shortly the complex, and often unintended, ways in which the academic study of the self can, of itself, shape the cultural know-how and resources of the broader society. At this point it is worth briefly noting some core concepts of the self, some of them social science ones, which influence our everyday understandings of personal experience and individual identity.

In day-to-day life, we implicitly assume, and act on the basis, that individuals have a ‘sense of self’. We refer to people as selves; we recognize that most people, most of the time, deploy commonsense understandings of personal and social experience in order to manage the routine nature of their social worlds. We recognize that making sense of lives is often difficult, sometimes confusing, and that we are recurrently ambivalent about the coherence of our sense of personal identity. This mysterious terrain of our social and cultural life is, sociologically speaking, at the core of the arts of self. There is very little that goes on in daily social life that is not, in some very basic sense, conditioned, structured or dependent upon such fabrications of the self. The making, remaking and transformation of self-experience are funda-
mental to these arts. Things change; people change. Societal ambivalence and private torment lead us to see that identity is fluid, not fixed once and for all. In the terms of a key sociological tradition that will be discussed later, the self is a symbolic project that the individual actively and creatively forges. The self can be understood as a symbolic project in the sense that people routinely refer to their sense of identity as a guiding orientation to their lives, to other people, and to the broader society. In this sense, individuals can be said to use practical knowledge as a means of producing and reproducing their defining sense of self.

Some critics reject the idea that practical knowledge is an essential characteristic of the self. Some critics argue that, as sociologists or social critics, we needn’t concern ourselves with the intricate settings and assumptions that people bring to their presentations of self; rather, the self can instead be studied as an object, without reference to the interpretations that individuals make about their own lives or their views about the wider social world. This is not a view I share. Indeed, one argument I develop throughout this book is that the self cannot be adequately studied in isolation from the interpretations that individuals make about themselves, others and society. Charles Taylor develops this point in an interesting fashion:

We are selves only in that certain issues matter for us. What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me. And as has been widely discussed, these things have significance for me, and the issue of my identity is worked out, only through a language of interpretation which I have come to accept as a valid articulation of these issues. To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self-interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there couldn’t in principle be an answer. . . . We are not selves in the way that we are organisms, or we don’t have selves in the way we have hearts and livers. We are living beings with these organs quite independently of our self-understandings or interpretations, or the meanings things have for us. But we are only selves insofar as we move in a certain space of questions. (Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1990, p. 34)
The self, on this view, is fashioned from individuals regularly appraising what it is they do (watching TV, going shopping, staying ‘in’) as a means of actually performing such activities. All selfhood has a ‘recursive’ or ‘reflexive’ quality to it, as we will see in chapter 1 when examining the sociology of the self. The self is recursive or reflexive to the degree that people constantly monitor, or watch, their own activities, thoughts or emotions as a means of generating these aspects of their identity.

To emphasize the significance of an individual’s interpretations about their own sense of selfhood, however, is not to suggest that people can ever fully know all there is to know about the conditions of their lives. Many authors have argued that selfhood, in a sense, fails; such accounts emphasize that the stories we tell about ourselves fall short of the deeper truth of lived experience. The founding father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, is perhaps the central figure here. Freud’s theory of a self dislocated and fractured by repressed desire suggests that self-experience is radically divided, or split, between conscious, rational thought on the one hand and unconscious desire, fantasies and memories on the other. The Freudian conception of unconscious desire and motivation has entered sociology, political science, feminism and philosophy in important ways, principally in connection with the study of the dividing line between presentations and pathologies of the self. Psychoanalytic theories of the self are rich and challenging not only because they dethrone commonsense understandings of individual intentions and reasoning; what is valuable in psychoanalytic concepts of the self is the stress on emotional dynamics of loss, longing and mourning.

This is not to say that the self is only fashioned, as it were, from the inside out. In forging a sense of self, individuals routinely draw from social influences, and maintain their sense of self through cultural resources. Social practices, cultural conventions and political relations are a constitutive backdrop for the staging of self-identity. But even this formulation is perhaps inadequate. The self is not simply ‘influenced’ by the external world, since the self cannot be set apart from the social, cultural, political and historical contexts in which it is embedded. Social processes in part constitute, and so in a sense are internal to, the self. Neither internal nor external frames of reference should be privileged; all forms