SOCIAL HISTORY AND AMERICAN PREOCCUPATION WITH IDENTITY

David Field, University of Leicester, England
Richard V Travisano, University of Rhode Island

INTRODUCTION

Symbolic interactionism has often been accused of ignoring history and 'social structure'. These complaints have come from outside and from within the sociological perspective (Rock 1979 217; Meltzer et al 1975 119). Such criticisms, usually based on misunderstanding of the perspective's theoretical and methodological presuppositions are largely misplaced. Adherence to a symbolic interactionist view does not necessarily preclude an interest in historical processes and structural factors, as the work of Mills (1956) and Strauss (1971) amply demonstrates. Appreciation of such factors is often central to an adequate analysis of problems at the heart of the symbolic interactionist concern.

A concern with identity is central to symbolic interaction, and this concern mirrors a general preoccupation with identity, which is a characteristic feature of the embedding in United States society. In contrast, in British sociological circles and in British society, there is little concern, let alone preoccupation, with identity. It is sometimes suggested by British sociologists that their American colleagues are overly and irritatingly concerned with identity both personally and professionally. This preoccupation with identity in the United States srpings from history and social structure.

THE AMERICAN PREOCCUPATION

In the United States, at the start of each day in schools, children reaffirm their American identity by reciting the pledge of allegiance to the flag. Nothing similar to this occurs in British schools. In the United States, preceding many public sporting events, at the professional, college, and high school level, the National Anthem is played. This is not the case in Britain. In the more modern major American airports, waiting areas have individual television sets to be watched privately by travelers. This is thought to be a pleasant accommodation in America, but is not understandable to Britons. A usual practice in British cafes and lunchrooms is for strangers to share tables and to chat amiably and politely. In the United States this is never done. In some delikatessens during rush hours, strangers may share tables, but conversation is rare. If unaccompanied, one eats mutely. In no American restaurant would an American ask to sit with strangers and then chat with them.

The British are basically sure of who they are, and feel it quite comfortably when their accents, clothing and demeanor label them British in an American setting. Americans are basically unsure of who they are, and experience their instant identification as Americans in the British setting as very different and very pleasant. It is a very pleasant change to be *someone* in a situation without effort. Americans who continuously strive at home to become *something* find to their delight that in Britain they alreay are *something* every time they speak.

Another issue of note is the American style of interaction. Most observers would agree that Americans are generally more garrulous and more assertive than Britons. Reflection on this matter indicates that Americans seem to say more but to reveal less. They use a kind of concealment through revealing, a technique of holding the world at bay through display. Nancy Reagan would not curtsey to Queen Elizabeth when representing the United States at the wedding of Prince Charles, whereas Queen Elizabeth, visiting Arabic countries, accepted the Arabic customs relating to women's behavior and appearance, rather than impose English customs on her hosts. Americans at home and abroad seem to act in ways which make the encounters very much *their show.* In the language of sociology, the forwardness and demonstrativeness of Americans in encounters works to define situations in the American's terms, and their manner of enjoining interaction works to make all situations their own, especially in the British setting. This mode of jumping to the fore and estabalishing the game plan for the encounter avoids the anxiety of operating in an unfamiliar manner, and it stems from a lack of surety of self.

Americans are more preoccupied with identity because they are less relaxed than Britons

about who they are. This preoccupation is manifested in the divergent but related behaviors of display and protectiveness. The Anthem is played; the American stands with knowing self-awareness, as at table or watching television in public places, and protects personal singularity at the same time. The American's behavior is similar in conversation, where one announces oneself on one's own terms, forcing others to relate to that.

IDENTITY

In a succinct and influential definition of identity in symbolic interaction, Stone (1970 300) says that an identity is a validated announcement which establishes what and where a person is in social space. A person announcing or laying claim to a particular identity does so by appearance and demeanor, which includes social place, grooming, and clothing. And when the *audience* of others in the encounter respond in kind, indicating by their behavior that accept this claim, the announcement is validated and identity is established in the concert of behavior. Thus established, it is experienced reflexively by the person as a felt identity, which is to say that it seems or feels experientially real, and for the moment, becomes the meaning of the self.

The phrase *for the moment* is important here. It is generally held, in symbolic interaction that the self is an essentially unrelated bunch of identities which exist as meanings when successfully played out in interaction, but which do not exist in any other way. In this severe dramaturgic view of everyday interaction the world becomes only a stage. While one plays the part of *Hamlet* one *is Hamlet*. When one is not playing any role, one is not anything at all. The implication, supported in many interactionist quarters, is that there is no permanence in the self beyond such permanence as there might be in a particular social role in a particular historic period. In modern society, where such permanence is rare, the self becomes a kaleidoscope. This view is peculiarly American.

Such a vision is not entirely foreign to British consciousness. *The Guardian* newspaper from 1979 carried an advertisement which asked, "Shamed by your English?" It went on to offer a course in proper speaking which promised to give one a "leg up" in the business world. The British novel, *Cards of Identity* (Dennis 1961) features members of a British identity association who meet annually to give reports on their identity changes. Author Dennis' view so fits the view of symbolic interaction that one character reports behavior which was never experienced, but which is purely imaginary. The clear implication is that there is no difference in *life experienced* and *life imagined*, as both are equally symbolic fictions. In George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Eliza Doolittle's mastery of English through Professor Higgins' tutoring merely allows her to pass as a young woman of breeding among his friends. In the American movie version, Miss Doolittle ends up marrying the professor. Americans seem to insist that the self is apparent rather than substantive. They seem to be preoccupied with identity, and to lack surety of self. Symbolic interaction seems to mirror this preoccupation and lack of firm grasp by conceptualizing identity as a dramaturgically realized will-o'-the-wisp.

IDENTITY IN BRITAIN & AMERICA

How is Britain different in terms of identity? If we take identity as the often-changing sense of who or what one is, gained through role playing in everyday life, and admit that such behavior is a large part of what goes on in both America and Britain, we may still ask if the wherewithall so to play roles is really all there is to self. Rootedness in social history makes for persons who possibly have real consistencies in behavior over long periods of life in many different situations, and who possibly play at many of their roles with great awareness and deliberation. They certainly have a consistent and fairly unshakable sense of what they are. Such more permanent aspects of a person do not represent a more real or true self than the less permanent ones. But such aspects exist, and they make a difference in behavior. The difference is the basis for the American preoccupation with identity and the British ease about identity.

Stone (1970) suggests that four types of identity may be distinguished, varying by their relevance in various situations. 1) Universal identities such as sex and age, "designate one's humanity." They are *basic identities*, taken for granted, which have influence in almost all situations in terms of deference

and demeanor, and at the same time, they are essentially given. There is no effort involved in estabishing them. Rather, they are difficult to avoid. 2) There are identities which are embedded in what Stone calls *structural relations.* Simply put, these are the institutionalized roles of life which have relevance in many, but not all situations. Various work roles, especially professional roles are good examples. 3) Less formally structured interpersonal relations are both more diffuse in meaning and more restricted in scope than structurally based identities. 4) There are *relational identities* which are peculiarly characteristic of mass societies. These are not particularly important, and have a very limited relevance across situations, such as shopper, and movie-goer. By using Stone's ideas we can get a small but crucial difference between America and Britain.

In the United States, the only aspects of a person which seem basically to inform most situations, and the only universal identities, are age, sex, and race or ethnicity. In Britain, it seems that one must add national or regional identity to the list. Some Britons think of themselves as British. Others think Scot, or Welsh, or Gordie or English identity. These identities are basic because they are essentially given in situations. They are not open to negotiation and they are not doubted. They constitute a base for interaction. In the United States one is an individual, a person, and one may also be Italian, Irish, Polish, or Norwegian. In Britain, one is English, Scottish, or Welsh. The important difference here is that the seeminly similar designations in the two societies are not the same. In the United States their character is essentially adjectival, while in Britain it is essentially nominal.

This sense of self which Britons have is not merely ideational, and not merely a reflection in their heads. These identities of British, English, Scottish, or Welsh are manifested in their behavior. While a British reader might readily agree that such identities and the actions which go with them are basic and given in interaction, American readers might have trouble with this, because identity is problematic in the United States. These identities are basic in Britain, *as they are never challenged and no one ever loses them.* In Britain, people seem to be something before they act, and seem to act from the stance of what they are. This is history built into people. In the United States, people seem to act so that they can become something, and indeed, the best American sociological thought on identity claims that a person who is not acting out some identity is nothing at all.

DIFFERENT HISTORIES

1) Different Attitudes Toward Authority. Britain had a feudal system for a long time and moved out of it very slowly. It is no news that certain legacies of that system continue in British life today. America never had a feudal system, and many of its immigrants were seeking to escape from what they regarded as oppressive forms of institutionalized authority. America was established on the conscious notion that long-held customs and traditions are to be abandoned (Noble 1968). Thus we may say that America is a deliberately enacted society rather than a historically cressive one. It is a society which was deliberately started by consciously rejecting a heritage of long-held customs and traditions. We need to consider but one telling point. The United States has operated reasonably well for almost 200 years on the basis of a quite excellent written constitution which contains various checks and balances to protect against the usurpation of authority by any one individual or group, while protecting the rights of all individuals to specific freedoms. Britain has operated reasonably well for a longer period with no written constitution. Attitudes to institutionalized authority are founded on a long tradition of centralization, and compared to the United States, relative trust and acceptance of centralized power (Thornton 1966). Today, Britain is the more tightly centralized of the two societies.

2) Geographic Space. The United States is a vast country, and Americans think of it as such. Further, there is a history of people moving out over that space in the past, especially when they felt their independence threatened. Ideationally, in the American popular consciousness, the spaciousness of the country has long been associated with individuality and separateness. And popular consciousness aside, communities spread out across the space of America more than 100 years ago with broad geographic separation.

Britain, by contrast, as a relatively small country. There have been many people relatively crowded in Britain for a relatively long time. Britons are conscious and proud of their position on an island off the mainland of Europe. This small island geography, as opposed to the continental geography of the United States, seems to make for a certain *all-of-this-island-together* mentality for which there is no equivalent in the United States. Further, this attitude has been periodically reinforced by British involvement in European wars which, unlike most war involvements of the United States, posed the *immediate* threat of invasion, and directly involved a large portion of the male population. The British, as against the American involvement in World War II, highlights this difference. Not merely *internal space*, but also the spatial relation with other countries is important in engendering different senses of identity.

3. Ethnicity. The ethnic intensity of Britain is contrasted to the ethnic diversity of the United States. It is quite a different thing to be a member of one of a very few ethnic groups, as in Britain, as against being a member of one of a large multitude of ethnic groups, as in the United States. Compounding the issue of diversity, and leading to the dissolution of ethnic identity in America, is the fact that while Scots, Welsh, and English always were Britons, American Italians, Lithuanians, Greeks, and others of immigrant origin were not always Americans. The British situation has worked toward the maintenance of ethnic identity, while the American has worked toward its dissolution.

History as Idea or as Actuality.

The key to the difference between the two societies' connection with the past is the large influx or immigrants in American history, the great mobility in American society, and the legacy of ahistoricism in the American consciousness of the past. So many Americans are of immigrant stock, and so many are geographically and socially mobile. This mobility is recognized as implying a lack of stable identification, a loss of symbols of the past, and a loss of personal and social history (Klapp 1969; Lifton 1969; Berger 1963).

American life is less rooted in history and historic symbols than British life. And there is certainly a physical difference. America is a new world. There is a fair number of structures 150 years old dotted over the American northeast, but most of the country has few structures built before 1900, and many towns have none. Britain has thousands on thousands of buildings — cathedrals, churches, castles, public buildings, houses and cottages — 300 to 600 years old. It has no mean number of churches and castles up to 1000 years old, and beyond that, is almost littered with Roman, Bronze Age, Iron Age, and Stone Age sites.

The impact of this difference on the people is hard to specify. If we consider that there are still a few people in the American northeast living in 200 year old ancestral homes, and if we imagine what it is like to live in such a situation, knowing that one's own forebears had lived in those very rooms for all those years, we begin to appreciate that the overwhelming majority of Americans have no sense of immediate delimited connection with the past. This kind of connection may be called the *past as actuality*, a kind of connection with history which Americans lack because they are so mobile and so newly established in such a vast country.

In Britain there are not large numbers of people living in ancestral homes, and the proportion may be no larger than in the United States. But in Britain, the plethora of older structures seems to combine with the other factors we have mentioned into something which comes down to the same thing: a sense of the past which anchors. This kind of connection with history, as *the past actuality* should be understood as more than a matter of perspective. Rather, it is an actual connection with the past as it has come down the years infused with the present in ways which make for particular perspectives and actions in the people involved, in *traditional* modes of behavior. This kind of connection anchors people, and being anchored, people seem to have a sense of who, where, and what they are. They cannot escape it. This describes the British.

Americans lack this kind of connection, and being unanchored, they drift everywhere. They seem unable to stop the drifting. Living in a condition where traditional connections have been broken, Americans' sense of the past is what we may call the *past as idea.*

This means that the Americans' idea of the past is not the history of their own ethnic group, be it that German or Italian or Greek. It is not even the history of America in a conceptualization even somewhat related to what has actually gone on for the past 200 years. Rather, it is the imagined history of escape from the oppression of the Old World to the opportunities of the New World. This yields a completely distorted notion of history simply as a land of opportunity.

Since a people's notion of the past obviously informs their behavior, we may ask what this difference between Britain and the United States means in the way people relate to the world around them. Put dramatically, the British relate from the stance of having once built and ruled a great empire. The Scots and Welsh live from the stance of having long suffered the Vikings, the Normans, and more recently, the English. Britons do dramatize their history. We would expect a people with so much Celtic background and influence to exercise good deal of poetic license. But poetic license with the past is not what happens in the United States. Americans relate to the world from a stance of a totally imagined past of escape from historical and communal connections into boundless opportunity, where Miss Doolittle marries her Professor Higgins, or where the princess' kiss turns the frog into a handsome prince. American tradition is based on British and European dreams. The British are living in history, while Americans are living in a British fairy tale. But even in America, life is not at all like a fairy tale.

LOSS OF HISTORICAL CONNECTION

The overall combination of these differences in history and connection with the past make for what can be called a loss of historical connection in the United States. This is nothing less than a loss of culture. The term *loss of culture* is strange to sociology, where a liberal tradition has led to the wide acceptance of the idea, generally taken as fact, that all cultures are different but equal, and that all human beings have culture, because a cultureless human is not possible. This is true only in part. A human being without culture is impossible, but it is not true that all cultures are equal, equally effective and equally humanizing.

From an evolutionary perspective, all animals must connect effectively to the world if they are to persist as individuals and as species. Human beings, essentially freed from what we call instincts in animals, connect to the world through symbolic culture. In any human community which persists over a long period, a great deal of wisdom about the world — what it is and how it works, and how it can be manipulated, and how it is dangerous — is won through trial and error and long experience. In the United States over the past 200 years, the millions of immigrants from all over Europe and Africa have abandoned their ancestral culture. The new generations have abandoned the ways and wisdom of their parents and grandparents, and earlier forebears. Lost are their native language, folklore, wisdom, music, dancing, and arts. Such losses are not always total, and some elements are retained in many cases, but this is in bits and pieces. In a general sense, their past was totally lost.

It could be argued that loss of such items as language or music is not cultural loss. The Irish speak more English than Erse, and no one questions their sense of ethnic identity. Yet there is a difference. The Irish have made English their own, rendering and transforming it with the Gaelic rhythm and lilt. No successful American group has done anything similar. Only at the very bottom of the American class structure, with black and Hispanic Americans does one find English language with distinction. There may be regional accents in the United States, but these are not associated with ethnic groups. When ethnic groups came to the United States, their oral traditions stopped dead in a generation. The *old ways* were deliberately isolated and discarded in an effort to become "American." American ethnics are proud to acknowledge their ethnic origin, but they are also proud to be real "Americans," and do not want to be thought of as greenhorns just off the boat. Toward such new immigrants, even from their own old-world country, they condescend from the heights of their superior Americanism.

Americans have escaped their own individual ethnic histories and connections by getting lost in the ahistoricism built into American society on the basis of a European dream of

escape from history. This is the dream which followed the immigrants themselves to the New World, down to the present. The real bother in this is that an enacted tradition based on a human dream is different than a historical tradition based on a long history of informing human experiences. When this dream of unconnectedness has persisted as it has in the United States, the hard-won traditional wisdom which is being thrown away is never regained. The culture remains ever young and buoyant, full of hope and promise, but full of naivete as well. The glory of it is the typical American enthusiasm and frontier sensibility of being able to overpower the world. The cost is a built-in stupidity about life and the human condition and history.

CONCLUSION

These historical differences between Britain and the United States are what lie behind the the American preoccupation with identity, on the one hand, and the British ease about identity on the other hand. Acceptance of authority as against its lack, and smaller space as against space which seems boundless, ethic intensity as against ethnic diversity, the *past as actuality* as against the *past as idea*, and unbroken tradition as against tradition abandoned — these have made the difference. Britons are more sure of who they are, and so have a sense of surety and strength in themselves to be more individuated. In a remarkable reversal, there is in the people of Britain, much differentiation within sameness. The American situation is the reverse. Lacking a sense of surety about identiy, Americans are significantly less individuated and more conforming. While there is differentiation within sameness in Britain, there is much sameness within dissimilarity in the United States. Yet Americans can be much more individual. Less caught in history, community, and tradition, they can be more free if they dare, and when they dare, they are often explosively and startlingly creative. While such creativity may gain Americans much notoriety, and sometimes fame and fortune, it does not give them sureness of identity. Identity for human beings seems to come only from connection with unbroken historical community.

REFERENCES

Berger P L 1963 *Invitation to Sociology.* Garden City NJ Anchor Doubleday

Dennis N 1960 *Cards of Identity.* New York. Meridian Books

Klapp O I 1969 *Collective Search for Identity.* New York. Holt Rinehart Winston

Lifton R J 1969 *History and Human Survival?* New York. Random House

Meltzer B N, J W Petras, L T Reynolds 1975 *Symbolic Interactionism. Genesis, Varieties, and Criticism.* London, Boston. Routledge Kegan Paul

Mills C W 1956 *The Power Elite.* New York. Oxford U Press

Noble D W 1968 *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden: The Central Myth in the American Novel Since 1830.* New York. Braziller

Rock P 1979 *The Making of Symbolic Interactionism.* New York. Oxford U Press

Snowman D 1977 *Britain and America: An Interpretation of their Culture, 1945-1975.* New York. Harper Row

Stone G P 1970 Appearance and the Self. G B Stone, H A Farberman eds. *Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction.* Waltham Massachusetts. Ginn Blaisdell

Strauss A L 1971 *The Contexts of Social Mobility: Ideology and Theory.* Chicago. Aldine

Thornton A P: 1966 *The Habit of Authority; Paternalism in British History.* London. Allen Unwin