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Introduction: subjectivity and social experience

This book sets out to explore the relationship between new experiences of selfhood and new patterns of social life. It is based on three years of fieldwork with young people confronting urgent social and cultural transformations, whose experience of selfhood is unclear, often shaped and determined by social forces that are powerful but difficult, if not impossible, to name. It is an account of actors' struggles to make sense of their subjectivity and of their relationships with other social actors. It explores struggles for identity, and for coherence, attempts to name forms of social creativity, struggles against fragmentation of self. But we also encounter crisis – of embodied subjectivity, of the ability to conflictualise experience and produce social relationship, of the capacity to counter the fragmentation of selfhood. The task of engaging with such struggles and exploring such contemporary experience of crisis is critical if we are to understand the social worlds of many young people today. But beyond this, striving to make sense of such experiences is critical to reconstructing our capacity to make sense of a social world undergoing profound transformation.

Over the past two decades what we once called 'society' seems to have given way to a diversity of microgroups and lifeworlds in a way that has profoundly destabilised sociologists. Disciplines like sociology do more than describe; they seek to explain, and sociologists sought to explain the social patterns of industrial society in terms of either social classes (the Marxist tradition) or social institutions (the functionalist tradition), regarding class domination or shared values as the key to patterns of social life. Today's kaleidoscope of microcultures seems to be understood better by advertising agencies than by sociologists. Neither of the older accounts of social structure seems to make sense of the diversity increasingly described in terms of 'patchwork' (Dubet 1998) rather than structure.

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The young people in this book at first seem to confirm the image of society as a postmodern collage of microcultures. In Part I we meet Serge, Mandy, Carson, Pam and friends living an experience of new urban poverty. They are unemployed and their suburb, 'Westview' (not its real name), is powerfully stigmatised for being on the 'wrong' side of the city. They are aged between 16 and 25, and have all been unemployed for a number of years. Many of the young people from Westview we will meet have been involved in some form of crime, and in fact two people withdrew from the research because of this – one was arrested for assault, and the other was on the run from the police for reasons that never became clear. The social world of these young people seems chaotic, unpredictable and unstructured. They confront a reality shaped by powerful forces of social polarisation as cities become increasingly defined by their position in global flows of finance, investment and power (Sassen 1991). But the research points to patterns of coherence, forms of social creativity and struggle.

In Part II of this book we encounter young people who at first seem totally disconnected from the world of the young Westview people. We meet three young middle-class women, Renata, Beth and Andrea, struggling against experiences of anorexia and bulimia. We meet RPB, ACE and their friends, graffiti writers who travel around the city on trains, avoiding the transit police and putting their signatures – or 'tags' – everywhere they can, preferably in places where they will get 'fame'. We meet Tina, Trisha, Abel and Monie, members of two urban gangs that are in crisis. Formerly the gang had allowed them to structure their experience but now they are homeless, squatting in abandoned houses or living temporarily in supported accommodation. We meet Tan, Maryan, Tran and Phon, four young immigrants to Australia whose paths are radically different: Tan is struggling against a future as a seamstress in sweated outwork (sewing garments at home for a pittance, with no union protection), Maryan is a student, Tran is involved in a gang-like conflict with police, and Phon is less and less able to control his experience and is increasingly vulnerable to poverty that threatens self-destruction. And finally we meet Kath, Margo and Malcolm, young Koori (Aboriginal) people involved in cultural action, from dancing in the streets to helping run community camps in areas with which their clan groups have a long association and from which they draw their identity.

These young people all live in Melbourne, a multicultural city of some 3.5 million people in the southern Australian state of Victoria. Our encounter with them poses two questions. Can we explain the social reality of these young people, and the social patterns that powerfully shape their experience? Can we understand these new social experiences of selfhood, new and urgent questions of subjectivity?

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The new social experience of youth

The young people we encounter are at the intersection between the end of a social model of youth produced by industrial society and a new social experience of youth in a society more shaped by the imperatives of mobilisation than by roles, by the imperatives of communication rather than function. Beyond what at first appears to be disconnected microcultures, we begin to see the contours of a new social model. What seem to be disconnected experiences reveal common themes such as the place of intensity, the struggle for visibility and the tensions between powerful social logics. In these experiences we see social patterns characterising an emerging postindustrial society.

What emerges clearly is a rupture with the model of youth that developed in industrial society, where youth was a structured transition from childhood to adulthood, organised around a series of stages such as moving into permanent employment and a stable relationship and ultimately establishing a new household (Galland 1991). That social and cultural model of youth focused on the future; it was one where youth as was lived as a 'project' (Leccardi 1988). That model is now profoundly disorganised. The clear temporal stages which shaped it have been 'desynchronised' to the point that youth is no longer lived as a project defined in terms of the future, but more as a 'condition', no longer associated with images of the future (Leccardi 1988).

Sociology has often explored youth experience in terms of social problems, from the Chicago school's exploration of the gang experience (Thrasher 1936) to contemporary studies of youth violence. This sociology of social problems, from explorations of poverty to studies of strikes, attempts to understand them in terms of broader questions and issues in public life, grappling with broader analyses of social structure and patterns (Merton 1971). This book stands as part of this tradition, but it is important to recognise that the relationship between social problems and wider social structure is increasingly difficult to conceptualise, as older models of social structure appear less and less adequate.

In a very important study of marginal youth in French cities undertaken in the 1980s, French sociologist François Dubet (1987) argues that particular periods of social development will be dominated by particular forms of youth marginality. He argues that the early Chicago studies of the gang experience from the 1930s and 1940s underline the centrality of problems of social integration, the gang being essentially a response to the social exclusion of immigrants in the early periods of industrial capitalist development in American cities. The postwar period, he argues, saw a decline of the gang and the rise of working-class youth cultures structured around the tension between generation and class, themes that were largely absent in the gang

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experience. The theme of class domination experienced generationally is central to the sociology of postwar working-class youth cultures (Brake 1984; Hall & Jefferson 1976). Dubet argues that the themes of generation and class began to disconnect in the 1970s. This can be seen in the way youth class cultures have become shaped by the defence of community in crisis, evident in the development of skinhead experiences (Brake 1984), while the theme of generation and generation conflict became central to student-youth cultures (Parsons 1963) where the theme of class is largely absent. The fracture in the unity of youth culture is evident in the mirrored development of skinheads' dark defence of community in crisis on the one hand (Leccardi 1988), and the rise of optimistic student culture and protest on the other.

This dissociation of the generation–class nexus, which had proved so fruitful as a theoretical framework for exploring the postwar youth cultures, led in the 1980s to a crisis in sociological studies of youth. No longer able to conceptually frame youth experience, sociology increasingly focused on modes of social control or regulation. Empirical encounters with young people gave way to critical studies of 'moral panics' and the representation of youth in the media, or discourses of regulation focusing on education, health or the juvenile justice system. Youth largely disappeared from youth studies, which became critiques of representations of youth within a theory that viewed society as a network of social control or discourses of regulation – the actor disappeared, effaced by the critique of social control. The absence of youth from the sociology of youth in the 1980s is striking. The critique of 'moral panics' that emerged as sociologists of youth drew on Becker's (1961) sociology of labelling radicalised to the point where the sociologist's task became that of revealing structures and discourses of power. Youth experience became a residual category, the product of such discourses. Where it did not correspond, it was understood in terms of 'resistance', which became a general category grouping together a vast array of experience. My research was intended to break with this disappearance of the actor. In that sense this book forms part of the trend in contemporary sociology that represents a 'return of the actor' (Touraine 1988; Chazel 1992).

We have seen that forms of youth experience can be used to explore patterns of social development. The experience of the gang points to the birth of industrial society, the rise of generation-grounded class cultures points to the triumph of that form of society, and the decomposition of that youth culture illuminates social processes involved in the end of industrial society and the transition to a new form of postindustrial social life. While sociologists have looked to new social movements as cultural laboratories (Melucci 1989) announcing the birth of postindustrial society (Touraine 1982), Dubet argues that exploring forms of social crisis can equally reveal the emergence of new

social patterns ‘from below’, in contexts where social movements fail to emerge (1987: 418). This book attempts to do this, and thus it pays great attention to ideas of agency, to creativity and to the fragile forms of struggle for recognition (Honneth 1995) in the lives of the young people we encounter. But it aims at more than a sympathetic account or ethnography of young people facing social and cultural difficulties. In the tradition of the sociology of social problems it aims at constructing a social explanation of those experiences. To do so, it must draw on theoretical frameworks that will allow us to move from description, however sympathetic, to analysis.

The central theoretical frameworks I use and develop are Alain Touraine’s sociology of action, and its extension by François Dubet (1994) as a sociology of experience. Both of these sociologists are grappling with the nature of action and identity in contemporary (postindustrial) society. Touraine (1997a) argues that we are witnessing the end of the coherence or integration of national industrial societies, and are living a process of ‘demodernisation’ marked by globalisation, on the one hand, and increased fragmentation of identities on the other. The culture of this emerging social model, Touraine argues, is one of dissociation, one which juxtaposes the incongruous and explores the dissociation of once-coherent spaces, times and societies. The corresponding social model is shaped, he argues, by two processes – *deinstitutionalisation* and *desocialisation*.

For sociologists institutions are forms of social structure which socialise and transmit norms, social definitions of what is right and wrong – classical examples are the school and the family. Contemporary sociological research shows decisive transformation in these areas. The sociology of the school, for example, underlines the end of secondary school as a socialising institution (with its mobilising and integrating rituals of sports, trophies etc.), pointing to the emergence of a new context shaped increasingly by the juxtaposition, and at times confrontation, of two cultures – the culture of the teachers and that of the students (Dubet & Martuccelli 1996b). As educational sociologist Philippe Meirieu (1997: 94) argues, in contemporary secondary schools the status of ‘pupil’ or ‘student’ has almost disappeared, replaced with the identity of ‘children’ or ‘young people’. No longer a socialising institution producing norms and roles, the secondary school is a social space where a youth culture and a school culture confront each other, young people navigating between the two. We can see a similar type of transformation in contemporary families, which are structured less in terms of the interaction of social statuses (father, mother and child) than in terms of communication and the search for authenticity (de Singley 1996). This emerging culture of the family blurs generational identity and boundaries. This is most powerfully underlined by the weakening of cultural models of transmission and the increasing

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preoccupation with the most potent form of generational dissolution – the return of the question of incest. This blurring of generational boundaries in the family and corresponding weakening idea of transmission within family life is explored by Théry (1997).

For Touraine, this weakening of institutions is accompanied by a process of *desocialisation*, ‘the disappearance of roles, norms and values through which the life world is constructed’ (1997a: 57). This dual process of deinstitutionalisation and desocialisation, which Touraine characterises as a process of *demodernisation*, is the basis of the increasingly problematic character of individual experience in contemporary culture. Dubet makes a similar point when he argues that personal experience is less held together by social institutions; instead, individuals find themselves in a social world made up of diverging and increasingly incoherent social logics from which each must construct a coherent and unified experience.

Similar themes are developed by French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg (1991), who argues that contemporary society is witnessing not so much a retreat into the private as the rise of a mode of experience where individuals are increasingly called upon to be ‘entrepreneurs of the self’. For Ehrenberg, at the centre of contemporary social transformation lies the rise of a new ‘uncertain individual’, characterised by greater responsibility and greater vulnerability, and a blurring of boundaries between self and the world, between private and public. Here, he insists, we encounter the shift from a culture of socialisation and institutions to a culture that is increasingly shaped by an imperative of self-esteem (1995). Identity resources are increasingly critical to social actors in a society of risk and uncertainty as opposed to a society of reproduction and roles.

This is the social world of the young people interviewed for this book. It is no longer organised in terms of the tension between generation and class, nor in terms of socialising institutions; it is increasingly shaped by the imperatives of producing forms of subjectivity, of mobilising self-esteem, of entering into communication with self and other, of participating in a social world of flow and movement. This is the social terrain we explore – attempting to identify the forms of power that shape this world, but also the forms of social creativity and struggle. At the centre of this social terrain is a social experience of selfhood.

Personal identity, social experience

Self-identity is at the centre of the experiences we explore in this book. It is present as problem and as crisis, but also as the issue at stake in forms of social action. The youth experiences do not lead to debates about class and

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generation – they underline the increasingly problematic character of individual experience in contemporary culture, a theme that Touraine places at the centre of his analysis of contemporary social life. Increasingly, in a context of demodernisation:

either the individual is reduced to a mosaic of behaviours so diverse that they are incapable of generating any principle of unity of personality, or they seek this unity in a cultural heritage, a language, a memory, a religion or more so in libido just as impersonal as culture but which provides a principle of construction of the personality. We encounter here the central paradox of our society: just as the economy globalises and is transformed in an accelerating way through new technologies, personality ceases to be projected towards the future, seeking support instead in the past or in ahistorical desire ... We have moved out of the society of production through the desocialisation of the actor (Touraine 1997a: 57).

The sociology of action is not alone, as a series of otherwise diverging intellectual orientations are exploring the social experience of contemporary subjectivity. Anthony Giddens (1991) argues that in advanced societies life is less shaped by tradition, and as a result we are increasingly subject to heightened anxiety and insecurity and are increasingly ‘reflexive’. By this he means that we increasingly act with a calculative attitude, weighing up risk and possibility and using the various self-help manuals and forms of therapy which, as contemporary ‘expert systems’, have replaced tradition as a guide to behaviour. There is an important difference here that we will revisit at different points in this book. Giddens and Touraine place the question of subjectivity and the capacity to produce a unified experience of personality at the centre of social life; Touraine contrasts what he calls the ‘sociology of the subject’ to Giddens’ model of reflexivity: ‘The subject does not imply the care of the self, but the defence of the ability to become an actor ... self-identity explored by Giddens is a form of individual reflexivity, whereas the subject, as I define it, is a dissident, a resistance fighter’ (Touraine 1995a: 263–4). What this might mean is one of the questions at the centre of this book.

If Giddens and Touraine argue, albeit in different ways, that the social experience of selfhood is at the centre of social life, so do a series of other approaches to contemporary social life. Manuel Castells (1997) argues that the increasing importance of identity in social life mirrors the contemporary process of globalisation, while Alberto Melucci (1996) also underlines the centrality of subjectivity to emerging patterns of social life. These themes are increasingly central to neofunctionalist analyses as well. American organisational sociologists Jerald Hage and Charles Powers, for example, contrast industrial society, where workers were required to perform roles, to the social patterns of flexibility, complexity and uncertainty that are replacing order and predictability. They ask ‘what kind of selves and minds will be needed for

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successful life in postindustrial society?’ (1992: 67). The new selves, they argue, will be shaped more by the ability to communicate than by the ability to follow orders; they will interact flexibly rather than be socialised into roles and will be information-gatherers and problem-solvers rather than locked into specific identities. They offer this contrast:

Industrial selves feel most comfortable when there is a sense of certainty about who the self is and where the self fits in relationship to other selves, and where the feedback about the self is consistent ... A complex self can entertain different identities simultaneously, and has the ability to handle change in the definition of social roles and their corresponding identities (1992: 79, 82–3).

Sociologists influenced by the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault also argue we are witnessing the emergence of what they call a ‘new regime of the self’. Nikolas Rose, for example, argues that contemporary selfhood is constructed by an increasingly powerful and pervasive network of experts and mechanisms which promote an ethic of self-improvement and adaptability. Although constructed in a language of the active and autonomous, choosing self (1996: 168), they actually represent an extension of the power of government to shape the very experience of selfhood – a development that Rose links to the increasing role of psychological disciplines as ‘technologies to govern conduct’ (1996: 12).

There is a striking convergence of quite different orientations around the increasingly problematic nature of individual identity and experience. What is equally striking is the divergence of analyses and research programs. For Rose the terrain of selfhood is a field of regulation, for Hage and Powers it is one of strategy or dysfunction, for Giddens self-observation and reflexivity, for Dubet and Touraine crisis and conflict. Each of these approaches leads to different research programs. Rose’s concept of self as an expression of governmentality leads to analysis of the role of disciplines of regulation in social life. Hage and Powers counterpose the strategic selves to the emerging dysfunctional selves which, according to them, characterise the emerging underclass. Giddens argues that in an increasingly uncertain or risky society (Beck 1991) the development of contemporary forms of therapy is a modern form of expert system that replace earlier forms of social norms. As such, the expert system represented by a therapy manual is reflexivity at work, and it is through exploring such manuals and accounts of self-help experiences that sociologists can capture ‘the most distinctive connection between abstract systems and the self’ (1991).

The issues at stake in these opposing accounts of the social nature of subjectivity are as central today as interpreting the nature of work was in understanding industrial society. Rose’s Foucaultian model of regulation,

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while very influential, seems far removed from social practice and fails to grapple with contemporary expressions of social conflict, creativity and struggles for freedom. It is more an ideology of critical intellectuals than a tool of social analysis. Hage and Powers' neofunctionalism represents, I will argue, a new ideology of the powerful. Giddens' concept of reflexivity, while more interesting sociologically, seems deeply flawed. It is a model that reduces action to cognition and therefore, although extremely influential among intellectuals, is not a tool that allows us to explore social relationships, as we will see below, in the analysis of experiences of addiction.

The sociology of experience

This book is grounded in and seeks to extend Alain Touraine's sociology of action, and its development as a sociology of experience in the work of François Dubet (1994, 1996b, 1998). Dubet argues (1994) that once we accept that the social world is made up of multiple terrains which no longer cohere in the way that the Marxist and functionalist traditions believed, we can no longer consider sociology as the study of societies. But this does not condemn us to a vision of social life reduced to a meta-narrative, either celebratory or despairing, of fragmentation. On the contrary, it underlines the need to encounter the experience of social actors confronting these different logics. Sociology can no longer focus on societies, with their structures and functions or their bases and superstructures. Dubet calls instead for a 'sociology of experience':

it is the capacity of actors to construct their experience and to give it coherence which is the object of a sociology of experience and the subject. The heterogeneity of logics of action implies the work of an actor in the construction of their experience; this alone can combine diverging logics and rationalities when actor and system cease to be unified (Dubet 1995: 112).

One way to do this is by focusing our analysis on social movements, on the new identities and struggles that these movements are producing, on their production of a language of possibility, on their role, as Melucci (1989) describes it, as cultural laboratories. This is critical to reconstructing an analysis of social life, of exploring the contradictory tendencies of globalisation and identity. But a study that focuses only on social movements may miss major dimensions of social life, and in particular may fail to encounter more fragile struggles for subjectivity than those we encounter in movements. Rather than explore contemporary movements, this book engages with experiences that are closer to what we might call social problems – where forms of crisis are mixed with forms of creativity. But what we encounter

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is more than dysfunction. We encounter a struggle to articulate experience, to produce relationship. As Dubet notes, in a tradition that goes back to the Chicago school and its attempt to understand the experience of the American city, 'social problems' are crucial as a lens to make sense of wider social life:

Social problems involve particularly visible cracks in social experience. It is for this reason that a sociology of social experience can firstly turn to explore problems of schools and education, illness, urban problems, work problems, or more generally, those forms of behaviour which put into question the inadequacy of the subjectivity of individuals in terms of 'objective' expectations. Such problems are important not only because they cannot be reduced to the simple dysfunctions of a system, but because they highlight domains where the articulation of logics of action is particularly difficult and, above all, because they reveal the face of social domination mixed in with exclusion and public welfare responses which shape a 'pathology' in such a way that themes of conflict get lost (1994: 257).

The chapters which follow are an example of such sociology. In them we encounter social actors attempting to name powerful forms of social experience, from the struggle for embodied subjectivity or the fragmentation of social terrains, to the search for visibility in a world of intensity and flow or the struggle to conflictualise dignity or reclaim memory. This research is not based on participant observation, but is an attempt to reconstruct the meanings of experience through a process of dialogue with social actors. The method is one of communication (Dubet 1994; Habermas 1987), where the researcher does not objectify the social actor, as if the actor is unable to understand their own experience, but neither does the researcher fuse into the group and become its spokesperson. Each chapter is built up from research sessions. Some involved one or two group meetings, while others took the form of a sociological intervention where participants used the research to speak to other social actors. For example, in Westview, young unemployed people used the research to speak to an employer, a representative of the labour movement, welfare workers, police and representatives from different government employment agencies. The transcripts of these research sessions, presented here as primary material, inevitably contain strong language.

Today the discipline of sociology is dominated by population-based studies. While important, as Andrew Abbot (1992) argues, these eclipse ideas of agency, creativity and the moral claims which political philosopher Axel Honneth (1995) states lie at the centre of what he calls 'struggles for recognition'. Abbot argues that the discipline of sociology needs to learn from earlier work which links narrative, generalisation and case-based research, such as in the Chicago school of sociology, where we encounter real people,