

**Introduction to the French Translation of
*Mirrors and Masks: The Search for Identity***

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[*Note*: This is the original English version of the French Introduction. *Miroirs et Masques: Une Introduction à l'Interactionisme*, translated by Maryse Falandry. Paris: Editions Metailie, 1992.]

From time to time I read again with delight those remarkable pages in *Swan's Way* where the narrator, dipping a madeleine into his tea, brought back with astonishing clarity a long vanished childhood world. There is no such remarkable passage in this book of mine, but when occasionally I pick it up to examine a page or two, the rereading has something of the same evocative power. *Mirrors and Masks* apparently has also had biographical resonance for many readers, despite the three decades since its publication.

As preparation for writing this introduction to its publication in France, I have reread large parts of the book, something I have not done for a very long time. To do so was a vivid reminder of intellectual origins and of a critical juncture in my earlier intellectual life. In its pages are many of the ideas that have since become more fully developed, reflecting thus my later development. Ideas and development, both, have been linked with an intense involvement with a long series of data grounded research studies.

[*Note*: The next three paragraphs are taken from the new introduction to the British reprinted version. London: Martin Robertson, 1977, p. 3.]

"Mirrors and Masks also reflects a fatefully influential era in American sociology, when that sociology was being adopted--and propagandized--around the world along with other American products, technologies and ways of thinking. The book and the central ideas expressed in it are better understood against the backdrop of American sociological movements then taking place. *Mirrors and Masks* was first published in 1959 when I was teaching at the University of Chicago. That was during an era when, in the United States, a previously dominant 'Chicago style sociology'--the tradition within which this book belongs--had become overshadowed by functionalism and survey research. They had emerged during the 1940s, and then in the next decade became increasingly influential, exportable [also] to England and the Continent.

By contrast with Chicago interactionism, functionalism emphasized society as system, assumed equilibrium, seemed to many critics then and later to overemphasize a static world at the expense of tackling forthrightly the problem of social change, as well as taking for granted a relatively homogeneity of societies rather than seeing the conflictful heterogeneity within nations. Functionalists like Talcott Parsons developed a social psychology but formulated it in the service of a functionalist view of society; eventually Parsons even adopted a particular version of Freudianism. Survey research, of course, rested on quantitative methods of analysis, used questionnaires to get

interviewees' responses, was totally oriented toward current events (i.e., non-historical), and some critics thought its practitioners embraced a simplistic social psychology, or at least a rather crude view of human responses. Then and later, survey research reflected an unquestioning positivism.

Not until the 1960s did those two traditions...meet with effective--and international--criticism from the advocates of alternative positions such as neo-Marxism, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, [Feminist] sociology and Black sociology. Interactionism (sometimes called 'symbolic interactionism') again became one of the possible perspectives."

In the years since, although contemporary versions of functionalism and positivist-oriented research continue to dominate in American sociology, the rise of anti-positivism among social scientists and the increasing legitimacy and popularity of qualitative research traditions--now fortified with extensive epistemological rationales--also flourish in the United States and, of course, elsewhere. Many European social scientists have, of course, either escaped functionalism and survey research or have in part also shaken loose from them. Books like *Mirrors and Masks* have played an important part in this change of intellectual climate in America, as well as in other countries. However, different generations and in different places have doubtless found different messages in the book.

When I wrote *Mirrors and Masks*, I was reacting against functionalism and survey-style research, but direct criticism was far from my concerns. Chicago sociologists tended then not to engage openly in ideological or philosophical battles, but followed the implicit and sometimes explicit dictum to "just get on with the work; let the writing speak for itself." (Pierre Bourdieu once asked, around 1974, why I had not directly fought functionalism, and that was the answer I gave him.)

While attending college, I had read with fascination the writings of the American Pragmatist John Dewey, and those of two early Chicago sociologists, William I. Thomas and Robert Park who had been much influenced by him. Then, as a pre-doctoral student in the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago, I moved easily into the writings of another Pragmatist, George H. Mead, and more generally into the sociological tradition of Park's intellectual heirs.

In this sociological tradition, "social psychology" had never been separated from sociology but was assumed as integral to it. This can be seen clearly not only in the early model study by Thomas and Znaniecki (*The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*) but in the well known Chicago monographs, many of them converted theses done under Park (or Ernest Burgess). My earlier predilection for social psychology, derived largely from the Pragmatist philosophers and from Herbert Blumer, was evidenced in my earlier writings. Then, after eight years of teaching, when I returned as a faculty member to the University of Chicago department, I had somehow begun to develop more deeply the social psychological side of this tradition while searching for a way to fuse social psychology with the structural side of the older Chicago sociological publications.

This project was much enhanced by two fortuitous circumstances. The first was that innovative research about professions, occupations and their work was going on at Chicago under the supervision and stimulation of Everett Hughes. He and his ex-students (including Becker, Goffman, Davis and Freidson) provided much stimulation to me over the next few years. Aside from this good fortune, a second critical development in my intellectual career occurred. Another colleague, Nelson Foote, had contracted with several faculty to write sections of an advanced "reader" for graduate students. I was supposed to write about social psychology. So, approximately the first third of what later became *Mirrors and Masks* was written during the summer of 1953. Copies of this manuscript, under the title of "An Essay on Identification," circulated among the students for the next three years. In the spring of 1956, after returning from brief visits to London and Paris (I will say more about Paris later), and several months in Germany as an exchange professor, I finished the remainder of this book. During the time intervening between writing both parts of the manuscript, the more structural (or "social organizational") side of sociology became fused in my thinking with the social psychological.

Significantly, by then I had taken the first steps in doing what would become a characteristic style of field observational and interview research. Though the research topics have changed (the first was of art students' careers), the series of research studies has continued unbroken. In a deeper sense than the merely programmatic, *Mirrors and Masks* must always be my favorite publication since it has provided a set of directions---directives--for the rest of my working life. Note that the sentence above began with the word "significantly" and pointed to the research invisibly embedded in and stimulating the last half of this book. The central assumptions behind my sociological thinking and its major themes seem constant enough; but their empirical and theoretical elaboration are possible only as I move from one research study to another. It is no accident that as a co-author of the "grounded theory" method of doing social science research I have benefited from firmly grounding my theorizing in my own experience and research.

Though the personal research behind *Mirrors and Masks* is not visible, something of my belief in the necessity of grounding theory on research, along with three crucial conditions for doing this creatively, does come through in the book. One condition is a sensitivity to theoretical concerns ("theoretical sensitivity"); another is a deep immersion in ongoing research projects; and a third is an unabashed drawing upon personal experience. All of these lie a bit below the surface of the writing in *Mirrors and Masks* but, aside from specific ideas expressed in it, perhaps they are what has made the book additionally stimulating for its readers.

When the time for its publication approached, its publisher asked for a change of title. He had two reasons. The book otherwise might be confused with Erik Erikson's recent publication on identity; and, besides, a book with "identification" or "identity" in the title was unlikely to sell well! His insistence gave birth to the title it has borne since then. I have no regrets, for its title (unlike that of an exceptional but much mis-titled novel by Ford Maddox Ford, *The Good Soldier*, once wittily characterized as the best

French comic novel in the English language)--the title of *Mirrors and Masks* is probably better as well as "jazzier" than its stodgier predecessor.

Besides, though identity--both individual and collective--is one of the central themes in the book, this is far from the only important one. Nevertheless, I will touch first on how it appears. I decided to write about the concept of identity in order to shake thinking out of old ruts. I was not interested in using the concept either as a psychological or psychiatric category or to criticize a mass society, uses of identity soon to become popular, at least in the United States. My idea of identity had nothing to do with either view. No attempt was made to define the term, which was used only for opening up and deepening the discussion about the mutual relationships between individuals and society.

"Identity" treated in this way--and by a sociologist--meant linking individual identities with collective ones. So, it is not surprising to find the book opening with an emphasis on that most quintessential collective process, the use of language--used in these initial pages with purposeful duality: "A [person's] name can be very revealing, both of its donor and owner....Any name is a container, poured into it are the conscious and unwitting evaluations of the namer" (p. 16). In the last chapter, "Membership and History," as the title suggests, the book moves most extensively to a discussion of collective identity. Emphasizing again the centrality of language and its use--that is, language in action (communication and communicating)--I ended the book with a long and vivid quotation from a debate between two Yugoslavs, reported by Rebecca West (in *Black Lamb, Gray Falcon*). The debate is between a Croat and a Serb, bitterly at odds. I followed the quotation with a commentary on the need for studying these intertwined personal and collective identities, both with personal and with historical data. "A man [woman!] must be viewed as embedded in a temporal matrix not simply of his [her] own making, but which is peculiarly and subtly related to something of his own making---his conception of the past as it impinges on himself" (p. 164).

This linking of individual (also aggregate) and collective identities, as well as their respective temporal choreographies--each affecting the other over time--leads to an explicit linking also of structure and interaction. Interactions can take place between individuals, but the individuals also represent--sociologically speaking--different and often multiple collectivities who are expressing themselves through the interactions. Of course, interactions between collectivities also involve representative actors, like diplomats or infantrymen engaged in battle. Thus, social structure and interaction are intimately linked; and also reciprocally affect each other (again) over time. This is a temporal view not merely of interaction but of structure itself, the latter shaped by actors through interaction. Contemporary readers using the popular terminology of "macro" and "micro", and perhaps attempting to bridge the seeming gap between large scale and very small scale studies, can understand, I hope, that in *Mirrors and Masks* I was trying to avoid that very dichotomy. We cannot make adequate microscopic studies without careful and precise identification of relevant structural conditions, nor adequately understand macroscopic "structures" and actions without considering the "identity" conditions that impinge on the macroscopic.

In the book, too, there is a lengthy discussion of the subtle aspects of structured interaction (whether face to face or otherwise). These have direct bearing on how one thinks about the nature of social order. Durkheim's collective conscience was one way to address this issue; Parsons, of course, provided another. An interactional view of society, however, leads to the topics discussed near the end of *Mirrors and Masks*: for instance, "membership as a symbolic matter"; and "concepts, coordinate action and abstract groups." Looking back now, I can see myself reaching for a view of society that five years later would entail the concepts of "the web of negotiation," and "negotiated order." This view would also involve an explicit argument against explanations of social order that overstress rules and regulations while ignoring how they are promulgated, maintained, manipulated, escaped, altered, and even totally destroyed and superseded. All this can only happen if one has a view of humans as shaping their worlds to some extent--but in the face of inevitable structural constraints. One of my chapter headings captures this interactionist paradox, noting the inevitable interplay between "change and continuity." This paradox is of course also referred to as the strain between freedom and constraint.

Rereading these pages from my past I am once again struck by the first trial passages about "social worlds." This a concept and topic that I would almost two decades later begin to develop more fully. By then, I had finally understood that in contemporary nations with their permeable boundaries and multiple, and often international, members implied the need for abandoning older frameworks of explanation. The discussion of social worlds in *Mirrors and Masks* was still rudimentary, but given added suggestiveness by its placement within the context of pages on the unexpected subtleties of group membership. Temporarily is again built into this early discussion, but there was not yet the idea of internal and external conflict as expressed in the form of inter-world or intra-world arenas.

I will end this introduction to the French edition with a story that seems appropriate to my personal history and to sociological history, as well as to a French audience. In 1955, as mentioned earlier, I visited Paris, instructed beforehand by E.C. Hughes to "be sure to meet Friedman" and the young men around him. Among them, on the very last day of my stay, I dined at the home of Jean-Daniel Reynaud, henceforth a life-long friend. (Our wives have also been part of this relationship.) The sociological part of our talk was perhaps mainly about our mutual interests: work and occupations. French sociology then, of course, was far removed otherwise from the interactionist views that I embodied. Yet in later years, somehow, our views on the nature of society, nations and social order seem to have converged, though our intellectual developments were otherwise quite separate. One commonality is that we had both done some years of grounded research that also involved us in many personal and thought-provoking experiences. Another commonality, no doubt, is that we both had intensely studied and thought about the implications of negotiation for social relationships--and at every level of scale from the most minute to the international. I note this here not to express publicly this sociological kinship but to underline the great importance that I ascribe to thinking about society and social relationships in relatively open-ended, contingent terms. The

quasi-literary essay form of *Mirrors and Masks* reflects this belief.

One last, general observation: this view of social life is closely related to a theory of action first formulated by American Pragmatist philosophers, notably John Dewey and George H. Mead, and later incorporated into Chicago-style interactionist sociology. Among its themes are those that appear prominently in this book: emphases on action and interaction, on their inescapably temporal features, on the interplay between constraining conditions and action, and on society as a collective product made possible through action and interaction. These themes constitute the ground bass for the substantive notes more easily heard in this book.

And now, my thanks to the translator, Michael Pollak, and to Anne Marie Metailie for conceiving of and bringing out this edition.
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