

Preface

This book, I realize now that it is written, is about a lifetime's discomfort with hierarchy and authority, with the experience of being instructed what to do and, directly or indirectly, discouraged from asking why. If, as a child, you miss the message and do ask why, you will likely be invited to collude in your own submission, being told "Because it is right!" That is very different from a threat of punishment or the promise of a reward; threats and promises are straightforward, because they give you the chance to think the matter through and decide what is in your interest. But when you are told to do something because it is right, your *interests* are not involved: your *conscience* is. You are not invited to think the matter through for yourself: quite the reverse. You are told to have faith; be a true-believer. What conscience, oddly enough, has in common with authority is that both tell you to let someone else or something else do your thinking for you and make your decisions.

On the other hand it is sometimes a relief to be told what to

do. Besides, who would want to live in a world—almost unimaginable—where everyone constantly played the child's regressive game of always asking why? Nothing would ever be done.

The issue is a perennial in the gardens of philosophy. Recall how Rousseau opened *The Social Contract*: "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they." It is, he adds, an arrangement that is "legitimate"; it is good that people are everywhere in chains. Rousseau is playing a game with his readers. The chains, it turns out, have nothing to do with force, jails, or prison cells. They are *conventions*, the basic agreements on which society depends for its orderliness; without those "chains" we would all end up in an abyss of social chaos.

The same metaphor appears at the end of *The Communist Manifesto*. "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains." This time there is no game; chains connote imprisonment, force, loss of liberty, loss of identity, deprivation, and exploitation; they are not legitimate.

Life is difficult—or perhaps challenging—because we constantly experience chains in both those senses. We know that our continued existence depends upon social groups and the conventions they impose on individual behavior. Workers in factories, soldiers in armies, students in schools and colleges, women in households, ordinary citizens hemmed in by the bureaucracy—none of them would survive without the protecting framework of society and its institutions. At the same time all to some degree resent what they are being made to do; but, unlike Marx's hoped-for revolutionaries, most of them most of the time do not see salvation in taking power themselves and abolishing the institutions that make life unpleasant for them, because they believe they are dependent on those institutions, and sometimes they cannot conceive of life without them. All they seek is a limit to the power that others exercise over them,

and perhaps, sometimes, a chance to make the bosses pay for something they are not getting.

The issue and its congeners are indeed perennials. Still into the twentieth century they occupy a prominent place in social philosophy. How does one make the connection between the micro-level and the macro-level of social analysis? How does one link agency with structure, action with institutions? What does near-focus ethnography contribute to our understanding of change in larger social formations? How closely do those larger formations constrain the detailed behavior that ethnography reveals? Does ethnographic description confront structural theory with reality and so test it? These are some of the ways in which the problem of the individual and the collectivity manifests itself.

This book is mostly an ethnography, a personal and selective recollection of my own experiences, and an indirect statement of my attitudes. When I give meaning to the experiences, making use of one or another kind of social theory, it is more in the spirit of "So that is what it was all about!" than with a desire to sell this theory of agency or that theory of institutions. The experience rules, and whatever theory makes sense of it is put to use.

Nevertheless some issues in the agency-structure debate were settled (for me) a long time ago.¹ Much of the literature is rhetoric that elevates one framework and downplays the other. But in practice (as well as in logic) the paired concepts require each other. A theory of institutions leaves much unexplained if it is not matched with a theory of agency; and vice versa. Without attention to agency there is no way to explain how social formations ever change as conditions external to them change; without the concept of structure or institution there is no way of describing what is changing.

¹See Bailey 1960.

A matter which has more recently become clear to me is the connection between power and conscience—*conscience* in the sense of knowing what is the right thing to do. As an individual I am controlled in two ways: from inside by my conscience, that is, by conventions (and the institutions which those conventions serve to maintain) and from outside by people who exercise power over me. It is somewhat paradoxical that the first kind—internalized values—can provoke resentment (which often is blurred by a feeling of guilt).² More common, I suspect, and certainly part of my own experience, is the unqualified resentment that arises when I see my internalized values misappropriated by others who use them to manipulate me. That is the feeling I described in the opening sentences of this preface. In other words, those who direct institutions, those who have authority, in practice often own the institutions and exploit them for their own benefit. Rousseau's chains turn out, after all, to be just like the Marxist chains, instruments of domination. When I perceive this is happening, I withhold my consent, refusing legitimacy to the rulers: if they want me to obey them, they must either pay me or intimidate me. Of course, if I am unaware of what is being done, I follow my conscience and collude unknowingly in my own subjection.

I also have a bias that is certainly not rational. I do not like true-believers in either direction, but especially I mistrust those philosophies that push the pendulum far to the right, resolutely subsuming individuals and empowering only collectivities. It is not simply that they leave questions unanswered. That is to be expected; every theory does the same. What I find distressing is that the proponents of those philosophies build themselves the intellectual equivalent of a convent, an ivory tower, an exclusive club of true-believers whose sense of superiority over nonbelievers is quite effortless and never re-

²I discuss this in Chapter 6 with reference to family life.

flexively questioned; ideas are transformed into scriptures. Even that would be tolerable, if they really did live in an ivory tower; but they do not. They use their scriptures to work on the world around them, and periodically they propel it into disaster. No less unfortunate is a rampant hypocrisy which denies that this philosophy has anything to do with domination.³ But I will try to be objective, since I also know that those who push the pendulum too far the other way, toward agency, are equally tunnel-visioned. Besides, if they had their way, they would certainly create a life that would be, in the melodic words of Thomas Hobbes, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Three questions about the balance between individualism and its opposite will concern me: First, what can people do to push the process in one direction or the other? Second, what (in more detail than is given here) are the consequences of moving the pendulum left or right? Third, what are the contexts that allow one or the other philosophy to dominate?

The story, told in three parts, is about a never-ending contest between the scientific attitude and religion, between questioning and true-belief, between the critics and the faithful. The first part (Chapter 1) contests the pervasive spirit of collectivism that has marked the social sciences (other than economics), and insists that individualism is a reality manifested in *disengagement*—what individuals do to prevent themselves from being entirely incorporated into collectivities. The second part is about tactics: about what organizations do to give themselves legitimacy and make obedience a matter of conscience (Chapter 2); about the forms of *symbolic* reassertion that individuals use to preserve their identity (Chapter 3); and about the *practical* measures available for individuals to escape instrumental coercion by organizations (Chapter 4). The final part looks into situations that bolster one or the other sentiment. Chapter 5,

³This argument is made in Bailey 1991a.

after describing experiences that elevate the sense of being an individual, argues that organizations defeat themselves if they succeed in regimenting individualism out of existence. The final chapter, on the family and on experiences in the Second World War, demonstrates that ambiances maximally marked by the spirit of collectivism yet contain the source of their own inversion.

Books, especially academic books, are often written about other books, not about any direct experience that the writer has had of the world. The world of experience comes into the picture in the end, but at several removes: the critic insists on the beauty or fatuity of A's ideas about B's ideas about C's ideas about what goes on in the world. Of course the ideas have to be there; one cannot convey an experience without giving it meaning, and that is what ideas do. The simple notion of what anthropologists do (simple before the "writing culture" people⁴ threw their hats in the ring) was that anthropologists convey through their writing the ideas that some particular set of people have about their world and how it works and should work—A's (the anthropologist's) ideas about B's (the native's) ideas about B's world. This subject-viewing-object formulation, the writing culture scholars have made clear, conceals the unhappy fact that in their writing anthropologists (A, the subject) are likely to misrepresent, distort, exploit, and in various ways do violence to the integrity of the native (B, the object).

This book is different, in that much of it is about my own experiences; I am both A and B. To that extent I am my own Other, dialogic within myself (as should be clear from what is ambivalently written above and below about structure and agency). I am being authentically represented, in a rather literal way. The question *Who speaks for whom?* should not arise. But perhaps it does. First, the "I" who now writes is no longer

⁴To make a beginning see Clifford and Marcus 1986.

the "I" who experienced; therefore it is quite possible that I am exploiting me, a novel kind of reflexivity. Second, I have an obvious incentive to paint out the warts; I am not aware of having done so. Of course I have prejudices; I have tried to make clear in this Preface what they are, and, as the narrative proceeds, the reader can probably work out where they originate. Third, I do speak for others every time I put myself into a category (schoolboy, soldier, student, and so forth); but I still speak as a native more than is usually the case in an ethnography. Fourth, obviously, the dialogue is not within myself alone; it is a confrontation between my ideas and what others have written that accords neither with my experience of the world nor with my values.

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