

# The Profusion of Individual Roles and Identities in the Postwar Period\*

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*In recent decades, the individual has become more and more central in both national and world cultural accounts of the operation of society. This continues a long historical process, intensified by the consolidation of a more global polity and the weakening of the primordial sovereignty of the national state. Increasingly, society is culturally rooted in the natural, historical, and spiritual worlds through the individual, rather than through corporate entities or groups. The shift has produced a proliferation and specification of individual roles, accounting for what individuals do in society. It has also produced an expansion in recognized individual personhood, accounting for who individuals are in the extrasocial cosmos and fueling elaborated personal tastes and preferences. Where it has been contested, the shift to the individual has also produced a rise in specializing identities (e.g., in such domains as ethnicity or gender). These offer accounts of individuals' distinctive linkages to the cosmos, and they serve to bolster individual claims to standard roles and personhood. Over time, specializing identities tend to get absorbed into roles and personhood. And in turn, expanded roles and personhood provide further bases for specializing identity claims. Because many theorists mischaracterize the relationship of specializing identities to roles and personhood, the literature often over-emphasizes the anomic character of the identity explosion and the closeness of the coupling between social roles and identity claims. On the contrary, specializing identities tend to be edited to remain within general rules of individual personhood and to be disconnected from the obligations involved in institutionalized roles.*

The individualization of modern society has been a main topic of sociological theory and research from the beginning, with primary attention given to the problems associated with individualization. These problems are seen to be of two general types: on one side, the expansion of a stultifying individual role structure, increasingly encaging persons in bureaucratic society, and on the other side, rupture of the individual identity structure, leaving persons anomic and unmoored in the cosmos.<sup>1</sup> The two problems are seen to feed each other, and they take form both at the level of the person and at the level of the nation-state. We array the positions in Figure 1, which shows the problems of individualization for persons and nation-states as they are located in both society and the extrasocial cosmos.

For the nation-state, according to the literature, contemporary individualization means a dangerous weakening of corporate role and identity, opening space for heightened social

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<sup>1</sup> Roles refer to what one does in society, identities refer to whom one is in the cosmos. In some social settings, the two are collapsed in an identity-role matrix, where who one is necessarily determines what one does. With modernity, we argue, the two are increasingly differentiated. And a core theme of this paper is that contemporary identities and organized roles are sharply decoupled.



	Problems of location in society	Problems of location in the extra-social cosmos
Problems for nation-states	loss of corporate role, bureaucratization  (Putnam 2000; Bellah et al. 1996)	decline of corporate identity, conflict
Problems for persons	proliferation and rigidification of individual roles, the iron cage  (Weber 1978; Foucault 1973; Tocqueville [1836] 1966; Riesman 1950)	bloating and fragmentation of individual identities, anomie  (Gergen 1991; Giddens 1991)

Figure 1. The Problems of Individualization.

conflict. The nation-state maintains organizational centrality, but it does so as a soulless bureaucratic individual role structure. For persons, meanwhile, individualization is seen to result in an overwhelming proliferation of roles and identities, the former tending toward defacing rigidity and the latter toward unbalancing fluidity.

While this depiction of individualization is undoubtedly useful—we use it to launch our argument below—it is distorted in important ways. In taking up the problematic aspects of the process with so much fervor, sociologists have painted a picture of individualization with more tension and turbulence than seems empirically to be accurate. Ordinarily, the elaboration and transfer of roles and identities to individuals (sometimes from nation-states and other corporate bodies) occurs quite routinely, with great legitimacy, bearing few obvious signs of destabilization and, on the contrary, striking evidence of global integration. It is this argument we develop below.

## THE DECLINE OF THE NATION-STATE AND THE RISE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

In several respects, World War II and its aftermath sharply shifted the balance of legitimated actorhood from nation-states to individuals in every type of polity, advancing the individual as the main element of reality and thus primary repository of legitimate roles and identities.<sup>2</sup> This happened first as the defeat and utter stigmatization of fascism undermined many remnants of corporate collective identity, most particularly the nation-state. And it happened second with decolonization and the expansion of the nation-state system

<sup>2</sup>In Western history, fundamental entitivities occur in several forms. A medieval system organized them around an opposition between celestial and fallen realms, at both individual and collective levels (Swanson 1971). Over time, the rise of democratic political, capitalist economic, and scientific cultural institutions reshaped this older system, promoting the legitimation of (a) the individual person, developing into the citizen, and (b) the corporate collective community, developing into the nation-state (Mann 1986; Hall 1986). Individuals acquired enhanced standing as citizens in increasing domains (Marshall 1948) and gained personhood on economic, political, and socioreligious dimensions (Meyer et al. 1987). At the same time, societies acquired standing around nation-states, with nationalist histories, ethnic identities, and spiritual ties. They became the central actors in history (Frank et al. 2000). Between individuals and states, each with identities legitimating action, other former or potential loci of human identity weakened (Beck 1992). Occupations, organizations, and family systems all lost most of their direct ties to spiritual or natural forces (e.g., Ramirez and Meyer 1998; Ramirez and McEneaney 1997). The whole process leaves individuals and nation-states as the primordial entities.



to the whole world. Many earlier forms of nationalism rooted in racial (natural), spiritual (religious), or historical claims (e.g., to primordial dominance of territories and populations) lost legitimacy. The new forms of nationalism—however strong—arose on the identities and needs and choices of individual persons, not of corporate societies. Thus even as nation-states grew organizationally and increasingly penetrated society (Thomas and Meyer 1984), their corporate actorhood declined, and they decreasingly put forward corporate (e.g., religious or military) purposes of their own (Fiala and Lanford 1987). New and reformed nation-states presented themselves as associations of individuals, serving the public goods of societies composed of individuals, and they increasingly came to define themselves around the goals of progress and justice for their people as individuals. Thus, for example, Ministries of War (operations of the state) were increasingly transformed into Ministries of Defense (operations for the people) (Eyre and Suchman 1996).

The very same changes reinforced the generalized actorhood of individual human persons. The defeat of fascism, the fall of colonialism, and the conflicts of the Cold War made for a dramatic rise in the cultural centrality of individual rights, and for the formulation of these as “human” rights claimed in the world as a whole, rather than “citizenship” rights claimed against particular states (Brubaker 1996; Lauren 1999; Soysal 1994). It is now the socio-cultural obligation of authorities great and small to protect an enlarged set of rights of individual human persons everywhere. Modern discussions of the matter call attention to the differentiated perceptions of the individual rights accorded, by dramatizing how many failures in implementation remain. The heightened modern awareness of human-rights implementation failures, characteristic of social theory and research in their normative roles, probably lowers attention to the extraordinary expansions in the acknowledged rights themselves.

Economic and cultural changes under way in the postwar period have reemphasized the same shift. The continuing globalization of free-market capitalism chips away at the actorhood (and thus identity base) of the nation-state, even as it enhances the individual (Sassen 1998). Likewise, the globalization of culture and the worldwide expansion of mass education have spread knowledge across nation-state borders and into individual depositories (Giddens 1991; Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992).

In all of these ways, the individual became more central as the fundamental cultural locus of social membership and identity after World War II, and the primordality (if not the organizational centrality) of the nation-state and other corporate entities declined. Out of these two shifts a new model of society and identity has developed, mainly based on the individual. Consider the core institutions of any modern society, and the ways constitutional changes around the world have altered the depiction of them. What is the modern economy? It is by definition the product of the needs and choices (based on prior utilities and thus identities) of individuals as workers, investors, inventors, and consumers, and it is meant to benefit this society of individuals (rather than, e.g., the autonomous goals of the state). And the modern political system? It is tamed from primordial status (by which we mean rooted in religious or natural reality rather than seen as socially or culturally constructed) and is instead made to reflect the choices of the public of individuals, and to serve the needs of this public. The modern cultural and religious system? It is meant to transform the collective rules and edicts of faith into sovereign individual choices and needs, based on personal understanding and experiential verification (McEneaney 1998; Wuthnow 1988).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> It is probably not essential for a human community to account for itself—to elucidate its origins or explain its functions. The practical facts of interdependence and communication, without much theorizing, may be functionally sufficient. But many societies, perhaps especially more complex ones, do contain self-referential explanatory accounts, to be used in collective mobilization. Potentially, they come in many forms. Since Jaspers’s “axial age,” modern civilizations tend to explain themselves in terms of identities, which root society in a natural,



Many observers have criticized these shifts as both reflecting and opening a Pandora's box of privatized, anomic, willful, and conflict-laden individual claims and as destroying capacities for collective action through, for example, the culturally unified and sovereign nation-state (Bellah et al. 1996; Brown 1987; Putnam 2000; Schlesinger 1992). This view underemphasizes a third great change in the status of the individual. Even as the modern system undermines the primordial sovereignty of national (and other) collectives, it asserts global solidarities. Individual rights are human, not citizen, rights, and they amount to claims on the whole world society. They are accompanied by individual responsibilities to respect the human rights of others on a now-globalized basis, and both governmental and non-governmental associations concerned with the issues have grown exponentially (Boli and Thomas 1999; Smith 1995; Lauren 1999).

The society to which the individual human belongs, with all its conflicts, has also importantly globalized—it has by no means contracted to the subnational level—and local claims (e.g., ethnic ones) are usually tightly linked to globalized models of entitlement and self-determination (e.g., Eade 1994:388). Increasingly, the individual is seen as a member of a highly rationalized and scientized world: interconnected by the global ecosystem, overlaid by worldwide networks of production and exchange, permeated by international associations and organizations, and undergirded by universal (often scientific) understandings. The recent growth of “world society,” the umbrella for all human persons, has been dramatic (Boli and Thomas 1999).

The statelessness of this world society adds fuel to the explosion of a globalized picture of both the individual and that individual's environment. Lacking the capacity to generate much positive world law, forces of social control push (often with ideologies that seem fairly extreme) for the recognition of “natural” laws—scientific, legal, and historical—that tend to reinforce the individual's unbreachable sovereignty. For instance, in the absence of much capacity for global lawmaking, those concerned with the human condition may try to develop natural law about the developmental needs and essential rights of children in light of society's future dependence on them (Chabbott 1999).

Overall, in an expanding and globalizing society of increasing complexity, corporate nation-state primordality is weakened and the individual is strengthened as the central producing and benefiting entity at the beginning and end of all the elaborating steps of rationalization (Calhoun 1994). The redistribution of entitivity and actorhood to individuals in this way involves a tripartite expansion in the institutional structure. First, it gives rise to expanded and detailed individual roles in society, firmly linked to the rationalized collectivity (via, e.g., the gross national product).<sup>4</sup> The proliferating roles discipline individual choices, but they are justified in terms of broadened individual benefits and freedoms (and indeed they recast many aspects of traditional control systems, such as religion, in terms of individual choices and needs). In this way, second, rapid cultural, political, and economic rationalization also gives rise to the expanded authority of individual “personhood”—the master human identity, generalized to a universal scale and imbued with elaborate rights—on which basis arises enormous cultural expansion in the legitimate range of free personal tastes and preferences.

spiritual, and/or historical cosmos (Eisenstadt 1986). According to many authors, Western culture draws especially sharp boundaries between society and this cosmos, stripping the gods, nature, and even history of virtually all capacity to “act.” The division mobilizes society, while taming and demystifying the environment in which society finds its motives, identity, and power. This means that in the modern West, unlike in many settings, humans and human society are constituted as *actors* against a lawful natural, spiritual, and historical backdrop (Meyer and Jepperson 2000).

<sup>4</sup>Notice that, in contrast to some theorists (e.g., Appiah 1996:79; Tilly 1996:7), we sharply distinguish “identities” from “roles,” and see the two as highly decoupled. The former describe the individual's place in the cosmos (nature, spirit, or tradition), while the latter describe the individual's place in society.



These long-term processes—with individuation driving expansions in both the role structure and the structure of personhood—have heightened in recent decades, with globalization and the concomitant weakening of the primordially (or distinctive identity and sovereignty) of more corporate units, such as the nation-state, the family, and traditional occupational and religious bodies. The individual person, bounded and authoritative, is increasingly culturally defined as the root element and primary actor in reality.

The third component of this wider cultural accounting system is the number of specializing identity claims that have received so much attention lately—of African Americans and women, Greek Cypriots and pagans—and that make the individual central in every sense (most recently transcending yet more completely the family and the primordial nation-state). Where cultural construction expands analyses of nature, history, or spiritual domains, or where the expanding general needs and rights of the individual confront a new or contested domain, identity claims arise—beyond universal personhood—to distinctive roots in nature or history or the spiritual world. These claims amount, for the most part, to dramatic assertions of the general needs and rights of individual personhood, and they are organized under individual (rather than corporate) rights. Specializing identity claims are not particularistic violations of expanded modern individualism, in other words, so much as new or contested fulfillments of it. As one Asian American wrote to Dear Abby: “What am I? Why I am a person like everyone else!” (quoted in Waters 1990:159).

In the long run, successful identity claims tend to be absorbed into general personhood and routinized in roles in society (Gamson 1995). In this way, the more exotic specializing identities, legitimized, become choices available to persons in general, and ultimately part of the fabric of rationalized society. For instance, over time Irish American ethnicity loses some of its identity-ness—i.e., its tight linkages to particular blood or heritage—and becomes a choice or taste within the realm of generic personhood. Waters (1990:158) reports the following exchange:

Q: Would you say that being Irish is important to you now?

A: Well, I don't know. I have fun being it. I would not know what to say. I have never been anything else. I am proud of it, but I am not really 100 percent anyway. And my husband, he doesn't have a drop in him and you should see him on Saint Patrick's Day.

Irish becomes a role an individual can play, and part of the general structure of personhood.

Thus, in contrast to most theorists, we see the rise of specializing identity claims—in such areas as gender, religion, and ethnicity—less as reactions to individual role problematics or personhood crises (Gergen 1991) than as special cases of common underlying institutional processes. Identities arise concomitant with roles and personhood, linking these to the wider cosmos.<sup>5</sup> And all three faces of modern individualism are highly cultural in character, rather than idiosyncratic outcomes of particular local situations. They are

<sup>5</sup> All these processes seem to some observers most striking in the core liberal countries—the United States especially—where the individual already stands as the central-most author of society (Frank, Meyer, and Miyahara 1995; Jepperson 2000). In these countries, individual *choices* and *tastes* are legitimated as the driving force behind every aspect of economy, polity, and society. So the elaboration of personhood and of specializing identities emphasizes natural, spiritual, and biographical forces behind drives and choices—sometimes in ways that seem exotic. Identity expansion may be less extreme in societies retaining more collective and communal elements (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:3), but while variable cross-nationally, the identity explosion is clearly a general phenomenon, affecting persons and societies throughout the world (e.g., Altman 2001). In part, we argue, this is because global integration moves virtually all countries toward more individuated models of the person and more individual-centered models of society.

formed in very general or universalistic terms, occur in forms that are scripted worldwide, and are addressed to the wider world at large. Thus, in explaining their recent expansions, we emphasize the broad cultural changes that increase the overall legitimacy and supply of individual accounts, not just shifts in the experiences, interests, or opportunities of particular groups.<sup>6</sup>

### THE EXPANDED INDIVIDUAL

We have described processes that put the individual at the center of the world stage—the central actor within society and the dominant locus of identity linkages to the extrasocial cosmos. These processes unleash forces that on the one hand free the individual to claim a widened array of personal rights and specializing identities. On the other hand, however, the very same processes incorporate and tame the more-liberated individual into an expanding human society.

#### *Expanding the Rationalized Role Structure*

Despite Durkheim's early lead ([1893] 1964), social scientists in recent decades have given much more attention to the dramatic identity movements associated with modern individualism than to the more routine expansion of the ordinary fabric of modern society. Nevertheless, change in the latter area has been intensive and worldwide. Many more, and more specified, roles are available to individuals now than in the past.<sup>7</sup> Just as medieval societies elaborated their structures upward to the kings and gods, and just as earlier modern societies developed into technological detail, so modern societies reach down and elaborate around the individual. More occupational roles are created, as are more dimensions of education, training, and aspiration (Stevenson and Schneider 1999). Family roles are articulated, with detailed instruction and legal regulation (e.g., of spousal abuse) on how to manage newly liberated desires and choices (Frank and McEneaney 1999). Informal recreational activities are formalized, so that one can take detailed lessons in the right and wrong way to golf or sing, and so that direct or indirect state subsidies are available for such activities as they are now incorporated into the collective good. Traditional religious and ethnic cultures are rationalized in role performances (on holidays, in particular) that can be taught in school and specified for any outsider in the press. The rationalized role structure generally expands.

As the process goes on, the roles that emerge are differentiated from the traditional identity-role matrices in which they may once have been located. For example, in order to motivate recreational role activities, such as skiing, one no longer needs to evoke heroic nature, Nordic heritage, or any other identity. A bit of taste will do. Similarly, as many have noted, occupational roles have become mostly disconnected from the more diffuse identities involved in a class or estate structure, or even a national one—so that there are ways to be a good schoolteacher, but less and less a good German or Irish one.<sup>8</sup> Individual identities enter into the rationalized role structure as a matter of empirical practice, but

<sup>6</sup>In sociology, the groups are usually based on race and ethnicity (e.g., Nagel 1995; Waters 1990) or gender and sexuality (e.g., Schwalbe 1996; Weeks 1996). Religion is still relevant (e.g., Wuthnow 1988), but as we note below, class and occupational identities are the foci of fewer claims and less attention.

<sup>7</sup>To the extent most theorists have considered individual roles in relation to identities, they have envisioned a tightly coupled opposition—a dominating machine against which individuals struggle to maintain “identity” (see Gleason 1996). In contrast we see a complementarity—an elaboration of society around individuals in the form of roles and an elaboration of the cosmos around individuals in the form of identities (Meyer et al. 1987).

<sup>8</sup>Only a few occupational roles—e.g., those that are stigmatized (drug dealer, prostitute) and those that claim special inheritance (princess, psychic)—still link individuals to the spiritual, natural, or traditional cosmos, and thus furnish much identity.



their influence is very much muted in the cultural accounts given (Schleef 2000). Thus it is increasingly hard for a person with the identity of “woman” to say she plays the role of “housewife” because “that’s what women do.” The identity-role accounting, invoking the woman/mother identity-role matrix, is illegitimate. The preferred accounting depicts the woman as a sovereign individual person with a taste for domesticity: “That’s what I choose to do.”

As the role structure reaches down to, and elaborates at, the individual level, an opened menu of activities becomes available—to work, to play, to strategize, to express (Stevenson and Schneider 1999). Within this elaborated role structure, however, a good deal of scripting occurs, with detailed specification of how to fulfill the various roles—to be a good teacher, parent, skier, or whatever. Individuals have increased possibilities for choice and decision, in other words, but the rationalized system exerts much social control too. The rationalized role structure disciplines choices within a frame, leaving open domains of uncertainty about which roles to choose but providing more and more structure about proper ways to behave given chosen roles. One can elect rather freely to be a schoolteacher or husband, but proper conduct once in such a role—guided by calculation or consultation with skilled professionals (Giddens 1991)—is more tightly constrained than in the past.

While the rationalized role structure thus limits some individual behaviors in something like Weber’s “iron cage,” it also affords substantial advantages in the forms of clarity, legitimacy, and often considerable social resources. If the rationalization of material from an old identity-role matrix eliminates excitement (as it has for lesbians and gays: see Epstein 1999; Plummer 1999), the process provides greatly enhanced social standing, the benefits of which usually outweigh the benefits of distinction. Thus, much effort is devoted to routinizing matters originally rooted in identity, with social movements seeking to legitimize themselves with incorporation into established role structures (Gamson 1995).

Thus, we argue that:

1. The greater the expansion and rationalization of society around the individual, the greater is individual role differentiation.<sup>9</sup>

This process is intensified by the increasing cultural dependence on the individual person as the modern source of all meaning and action (in contrast, for instance, to the nation-state or the gods). As the individual becomes sacralized as the suprasocietal wellspring—through ties to nature, spiritual forces, and history—individuals become ultimate in almost every sense, and ultimately equal in their core personhood. In a complex and stratified modern system, this adds to the intensity of individual role differentiation. Because the modern system cannot justify variations in stratificational value in terms of “inherent” differences in personhood, stratification must be justified in terms of immediately rational functional and coordinative requirements. This takes place in much modern organizational structure, or in terms of rationalized principles of personnel allocation, as in the elaborated modern educational system (Meyer 1994).

2. The greater the emphasis on (equal) personhood as the identity root of society, the greater is role differentiation for individuals.

Thus we argue that the current period has seen a great expansion in the numbers and articulation of roles for individual persons, fueled not only by expanded social complexity

<sup>9</sup>This proposition and those that follow describe properties of a main cultural system that characterizes core countries and, increasingly, world society. It is this system that is our unit of analysis.

but also by the increasing centrality of the equal individual as the foundation for all of society. We suggest that this expansion in the system of rationalized individual roles occurs in all institutional sectors (though more so in some than others): for instance, economic and occupational, religious and educational, familial and recreational. Vastly expanded models of society are in place, rooted in the roles of individuals.

### *Personhood and Taste*

In the course of expansion, the rationalized role structure tames many alternative courses of preference and action into decisions and choices with correct answers: There are quite explicit rules, for example, on how to play the role of “professor” (Shils 1982). But the proliferation of rationalized roles does something else too. It reinforces the status of the individual human person, and authorizes persons to have and exercise individual tastes (neither correct nor incorrect). Globalization, which empowers individuals under natural law and weakens alternative sovereignties, does the same thing with great force. As the ultimate producer and consumer of all social goods, the individual person gains extraordinary ontological standing, with legitimate tastes, interests, and needs: Consultants (psychologists, spiritualists, and school counselors) abound to help individuals cultivate and develop them.

Individual personhood is the standardized master identity of the modern system, celebrated worldwide in documents such as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and in global institutions such as democracy, the free market, and the psychological sciences. Personhood as an identity can be claimed on a global basis (obviously with varying effectiveness, but with little dispute about the moral validity of the claim). It is also defended at national and local levels, in institutions such as education, citizenship, and welfare (Rauner 1998). Personhood involves, in principle, an enlarged set of needs and rights and capacities to choose lines of activity. But there are, even in principle, constraints that involve accepting the personhood claims of others. One cannot validly claim, on the basis of spiritual or natural or historical virtues, to be more of a person than others, and in this way, modern globally-legitimated personhood is distinguished from many traditional forms of identity, and in some measure tamed.

Personhood accords broadened *and equal* rights to choice and taste. For example, moderns can claim exceptionally varied tastes in food, unconstrained by religion, nationality, or class. Of course the rationalized role system constrains on some food preferences in the name of health and safety, but the ability to build a secure food stratification, with high and low cuisines, is very limited (cf. Ferguson 1998). Tastes, like personhood, are equal. The same principles hold with marital and other personal relationships—one advertises unique tastes, not standardized role performances, and one seeks matching uniqueness in partners (Buchmann and Eisner 1997). So also with music, art, and other cultural matters, which increasingly flout distinctions of high and low taste, and float rather freely in personal option pools (Peterson and Simkus 1992). Likewise occupations, which become choices or tastes rather than inherited or semiobligatory matters connected to family or traditional class categories. And so also with nationality: The modern person must be careful not to claim much distinction on a national basis. All persons have more or less equal rights, and the special status of citizenship is weakened (Soysal 1994; Jacobson 1996). Choice maps, and the tastes to navigate them, are open.

The opened ranges are all justified on the basis of personhood—the master identity in the modern system—offering individuals dense ties to realms prior and external to functioning society. In nature, the individual is *Homo sapiens*, a member of a single species with a long natural evolution, united with all other persons by way of deep biological (and



in this sense psychological) similarities. The individual human also has the same ultimate spiritual certification, equal before the moral law (and many international legal principles rooted in the natural law). In increasing measure, the individual human is also part of a shared world history (and national or civilizational distinctions are now muted—Frank et al. 2000). The general movement is toward a common and equal human identity shared by all individuals. Conflicts about this occur only at extreme margins—regarding the identity status of the fetus, the dying, and sometimes the extremely defective.

Overall, we argue that:

3. The more the individual stands as the ultimate source and beneficiary of modern society, the stronger is the master identity personhood, which legitimates a wide array of personal rights, capacities, preferences, interests, and tastes.

The foundation of universal personhood, with its authorized needs and tastes, is produced rather directly as part of the cultural theory on which modern societies are built. Personhood is also produced indirectly, through the expansion of the rationalized role structure confronting individuals. Many of the choices and decisions of individuals are highly structured in a system that specifies correct answers (one may choose whether or not to smoke, but there is no question of what is right). But rationalization generates more taste-based alternatives, too. Occupational role activities are specified in great detail, but moderns may reasonably choose, based on taste, which occupations to take. There are correct ways to play the role of mother, and these are promulgated by education, laws, and other controls, but modern women may choose—on “personal” grounds of taste—whether to bear children or not (Berkovitch 1999). Such choices involve the promulgation of individuated needs and tastes:

4. The greater the expansion and differentiation of the rationalized role structure, the greater the development of the master identity personhood, with associated legitimate individual rights, capacities, needs, preferences, interests, and tastes.

Thus, in balance with the elaborated individual role system, contemporary society generates an elaborated theory of individual personhood that legitimates and justifies enlarged individual tastes. Causality is reciprocal here—more personhood generates more roles, and more roles generate more personhood (Meyer, Boli, and Thomas 1987). Both components follow from overall societal expansion, from the rise of the individual, and from the deconstruction around the individual of more corporate entities.

### *The Rise of Specializing Identities*

The changes discussed so far—the elaboration of individual roles in society and the rise of the master identity personhood—represent the primary pathways of contemporary expansion. They provide a cultural account for practically all of the institutions of global rational society. For instance, they stand at the heart of “education for all,” which provides individual access to all sorts of knowledge (Chabbot 1999). Likewise, they center the universal declaration of human rights, the worldwide celebrations of democracy and the free economy, and so on. Virtually all of this now-rationalized material is justified and motivated in terms of individual role demands and human personhood. And this has been the main development of individuation in the contemporary period—in most cases proceeding routinely, barely noticed by social scientists.

To these general trends, however, there are exceptions. These occur at the frontiers of individualization, reflecting disputes, conflicts, and transitions in the whole process, and they receive much attention. Conflicts and boundary expansions generate waves of identity movements around the claims of individuals demanding recognition of the legitimacy of their distinct properties.

Some of these specializing identity claims locate the individual in nature, from which a person may derive a wide variety of particular abilities, disabilities, perceptions, or desires, such as sexual orientations. Others root the individual in a spiritual or transcendental environment, including one or another god or essence, with associated qualities, needs, or preferences. Still other identity claims embed the individual in a unique tradition or history—ethnic, familial, or personal—which may be used to explain diverse particular individual properties or actions (e.g., as a “survivor” of one or another abuse or as an inheritor of a particular ethnic background). In all of these cases, the idea is that the self is more than a current action system, and is a special case of the standard individual person. The self, it is asserted, reflects a pattern institutionalized in a distinctive and authoritative suprasocietal environment (Jepperson 2000).

Specializing claims arise in two general areas. They arise where the expanding modern system is penetrating older corporate orders—many of them once regarded as “private” (Zaretsky 1994) or external—reorganizing and rationalizing them on a more individualistic basis. And they arise where expanded analyses of nature (e.g., sexual drives), history (e.g., ethnic traditions), and the spiritual world (the new religions) produce new opportunities for specializing claims. Some types of situations can be noted.

First, the mobilization of specializing identity claims is characteristic of the reconstitution of older corporate orders in rationalized and individualized terms. In particular: (a) There is ongoing reformulation of the formerly elaborate family system into a network of individuals, freeing sexuality and gender from earlier social constraints. The process produces identity claims around new groups of entitled individual persons—women, gays, lesbians, children, the aged, and so on. (Notice that some of the first specializing identities to arise from the breakdown of the family have almost disappeared with routinization: the “divorcée” is an example.) (b) Similarly, the further breakdown and rationalization in human-rights terms of the nation-state and nationalism generates waves of new ethnic identity claims worldwide: As nation-states lose corporate identity, individuals are increasingly free to adopt their own individual ethnic identities (e.g., Tsutsui 2000; Kunovich and Hodson 1999:649). (c) Along similar lines, the continuing breakdown of religious controls and the globalization of religious systems produces waves of claims from new spiritual explorers (Wuthnow 1988).<sup>10</sup>

But note how little by way of specializing identity claims is produced from the modern occupational system, despite fairly rapid social change. The occupational system has long been incorporated into rationalized society, with only remnants of its old corporate aspect—guilds (and their saints)—left to destroy. Thus the creation and destruction of occupations occurs with few specializing identity repercussions. (“The last of the stenographers” rings none so resonantly as “the last of the Mohicans.”) The general expansion of personhood, with its legitimated individual tastes and capacities, needs and preferences, sufficiently accounts for occupational matters. In a similar way, few identity claims are now generated from the destruction of estate society—the diffuse identity claims associated with peasants and aristocracies have long since been rationalized.

<sup>10</sup>In the famous battle cry of character Stephen Dedalus, James Joyce perfectly forecasts these three dissolutions of the corporate order: “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church.”



As a second main source of specializing identity claims, expansions of rationalized society and personhood involve the incorporation of all sorts of formerly stigmatized, demeaned, or excluded persons and activities. Expanded personhood offers room for the promotion of formerly hidden qualities and tastes as natural and human. The groups involved are likely to claim specializing identity status—with unique ties to history, nature, or the spiritual world—to bolster their entry into legitimate societal membership. And they are likely to claim distinctive status in terms of the individual human rights of their members, who are empowered in the contemporary system, not the corporate rights of groups, which are not. Examples include many individuals once categorized as handicapped, perverted, or antisocial.

In such cases of conflict and stigmatization, the paths to standard personhood and role performance are cleared by specializing accounts. The need is intensified because the groups involved commonly face quite real resistance. Thus, over and above the legitimated free tastes of personhood, the new sexual and gender identities are asserted with particular status vis-à-vis nature, spiritual ties, or history. The same claims are made about newly mobilizing formerly excluded ethnic and racial groups, disabled persons, and so on. The incorporation of formerly deviant or subordinated people and activities into the system of expanded individualism thus leads to the proliferation of specializing identity claims.<sup>11</sup>

Third, ongoing individuation produces some specializing identity claims in formerly dominant groups, as with the “reactive ethnicity” of white Americans faced with the civil rights movement, or the elaborate identity claims of the anti-abortion movements in their defense of more corporate family arrangements (Luker 1985). Similarly, men develop some identity accounts in the face of feminists (Schwalbe 1996), and heterosexuals discover identity in the face of lesbians and gays (Katz 1995). All claim new linkages to distinct natural, spiritual, or historical roots.

Fourth, extensions of personhood produce conflicts between competing identity claims, reinforcing the inclination to develop specializing identities over and above standard personhood. For instance, the individual identities linked to national citizenship conflict with the expanding individual rights associated with subnational ethnic groups, reinforcing the specializing mobilization of each conflicting party. Or expanding rights linked to general personhood conflict with the rights claimed by specific national or ethnic groups, as in the conflicts over female genital circumcision (Boyle and Preves 2000). These situations generally raise the supply of identity accounts.

Finally, the rationalization and globalization of the extrasocial cosmos tills new soil for the rooting of specializing identities. The realm of nature, for example, has expanded enormously in the hands of scientists over recent decades, producing many new identity bases, such as those derived from psychological and genetic characteristics (e.g., Fausto-Sterling 1993; Kessler 1990). Meanwhile, the spiritual realms expand with globalization, providing a more varied terrain in which to root specializing identity accounts. And analyses of the histories of all sorts of groups provide much material that can be used to ground new identity claims. In all of these cases, the cultural expansion of the cosmos is fueled by pressures for accountings of the individual in society. And in all these cases, the new cultural material is available to groups building broader agendas, but also to groups and individuals engaged in identity differentiation as essentially play activity (as with genealogical hobbies, Civil War reenactment games, and a variety of religious explorations).

Overall, thus:

<sup>11</sup> Many theorists become mired in the “paradox” of identity—its simultaneous assertions of similarity and difference within society (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Scott 1996). In our view, there is no paradox. Specializing identities displace difference to realms *outside* society (in natural, spiritual, and historical domains) in order to clear the way for equal access to roles and personhood.



5. The greater the expansion of individualism as a cultural account—of the rationalized roles held by individuals and of personhood as master identity—the greater the specializing identity claims. They occur especially in regards to new or contested ties to the cosmos.

Thus our arguments take issue with standard sociological narratives that see specializing identities as escapes from regimenting roles or as salves for the alienation of mass society (functional arguments from the right: e.g., Gallagher 1997; Gergen 1991). They also depart from explanations that depict the rise of identity categories as extensions of elite political and economic controls (functionalism from the left: e.g., Foucault 1973; Miller and Rose 1994). In the extreme, both positions depict the proliferation of identities as anomic in character—as both cause and effect of societal breakdown and resurgent localism and particularism (Brown 1987; Putnam 2000; Schlesinger 1992). And both positions conceive of modern identity claims as closely tied to the social organizational role system: either reacting to its stresses or collapsing into it.

In contrast, we see identities as integral to the modern system—a general cultural property—rather than as responses to modernity's contradictions and stresses. Specializing identities are fundamentally linked to the modern expansion of the status of the individual and are tied to expanded (and sometimes conflict-laden) claims to universal personhood in a rationalized and global world. At the microsocial level of individual experience, identity claims sometimes may be reactions to the stresses of modernity and the burdens of restrictive roles. But at the more macrosocial (e.g., national and supranational) and cultural levels we address, identity claims fulfill expansions in modern rationalization. Very directly, the modern system provides opportunity for identity differentiation by culturally weakening the primordality of corporate entities and locating the individual in an increasingly analyzed natural, spiritual, and historical frame: The individual is the core source and beneficiary of society. Less directly, the modern system provides opportunity for identity differentiation by elaborating a highly individuated role system, which provides an arena for ever-multiplying individual needs and tastes: Every new link in the causal chains constructing rationalized society supports a newly enlarged picture of the individual with new possibilities for identity. Conversely, amplifications in personhood and specializing identities expand and construct new roles in the rationalized society (Meyer et al. 1987).

In short, the same broad forces of individuation that produce expanded modern role differentiation and expansions in the tastes associated with personhood also work to facilitate specializing identity differentiation both as a general cultural process and as a set of political claims against older constraints. All the specializing identities that arise are not equal, of course. Those associated with the breakdown of older stratifying corporate orders tend to have more political significance, while those arising from the expanded cosmos tend to be more playful. The former characterize the old European core, while the latter are more common in the United States. In this sense, as is commonly recognized, the high level of identity work in the United States typically involves rather low levels of conflict.

## THE EFFECTS OF IDENTITY CLAIMS

We have discussed the ways in which the general expansion of the individual is central to the modern cultural accounting system. The process drives elaboration of (a) the rationalized role structure, which links nominally autonomous individuals to society; (b) authoritative general personhood, with its enlarged capacity for taste; and (c) specializing individual identities, which tie the individual to the expanded cosmos, and which often attempt to



unclog blockages in the first two, more routine, individual expansions. We turn now to effects running the other way: from expanded identity claims back into the structure of rationalized society.

### *The Properties of Specializing Identity Claims*

The master individual identity of the modern system is personhood. Tastes and preferences simply based on this generalized structure legitimate much of modern society. In the nature of normal, non-specially-identified personhood, one claims the right to express this particular culture, that style of sexual behavior, or the other spiritual experience and belief. But when the reach of personhood to cover some taste or activity is contested or not yet established, specializing claims arise. Cultural tastes may be legitimated in the name of a formerly suppressed ethnic group, whose language (for instance) was excluded from the former nationalist educational system, giving rise to historical identity claims (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Formerly prohibited sexual behaviors and stigmatized handicaps may be defended with claims to unique biological natures and thus identities (Hobbs 1975; Rosario 1997). Ridiculed beliefs may be defended with reference to particular religious experiences and connections (Wuthnow 1978).

The contemporary rise in all this specializing identity material has produced strong reactions among critics, who see the process as representing fragmentation of the self and disintegration of society against a past of more standardized and presumably integrating homogeneity. And enough conflicts do arise to provide satisfying examples for these critics. But by and large, the criticisms are based on misunderstandings of the nature of modern identity movements, and of the properties of the claimed identities.

First, modern specializing identities are legitimately claimed by individuals as individual rights to the expression of needs and choices. They are rights *within human personhood*, not against it, and attempts to ground special claims in authoritative corporate groups (as with religious cults thought to transcend the individuals involved) are strongly resisted. Specializing identities amount to claims asserting that legitimate qualities have not been properly recognized as features of standard personhood and thus require special markers in order to be incorporated.<sup>12</sup>

This means, second, that modern specializing identity claims continue the long historic process of undercutting the power of corporate groups. Individuals may claim ethnic, gender, or spiritual identities rather freely; representatives of these identities, on the contrary, are restricted in their freedom to claim power over individuals. For instance, no new legitimated religious orders with binding power to monopolize the future decision rights of the individual arise, and old religious and ethnic corporate bodies are reduced to voluntary associations. Members of ethnic groups informally may try to discipline their compatriots into proper ethnic identification (encouraging, for example, within-group marriage), but the legal and cultural rights of the modern individual stand in the way of effective enforcement.

Thus, third, neither society nor identity advocates can do much to properly enforce membership in an identity group. Individuals are increasingly free to claim, deny, or change their ties. In principle, one can claim to be dyslexic, Irish, and female one day, and the next day to be not specially abled, Scottish, and male (Lieberson and Waters 1988; Snipp 1989). Society—and the groups involved—can decreasingly impose these categories on an individual.

<sup>12</sup>The pre-eminence of personhood over specializing identity appears in a commemorative plaque placed by the Black Veterans of Malcolm X College: "In Memoriam to the Black Veteran, One God . . . One Aim . . . One Destiny. From the Beginning of Time to Eternity."

This means, fourth, that the meaning associated with specializing identity claims is restricted. They cannot really be claims to superior status in the allocation of power and resources, though some protections or recompenses may be involved. The specializing identities are put forward under broad norms of personhood that acknowledge the equal personhood of others. By and large, this means they are heavily expressive, and beyond the general assertion of personhood they tend to emphasize matters of aesthetic taste or life-style (food, dress, and language, not occupational rights, for instance) (Bellah et al. 1996).<sup>13</sup>

Fifth, the links between identity claims and rights and obligations in the rationalized role structure of society are strikingly weak. Bluntly, specializing identities may be very poorly correlated with behavior. One may claim to be gay or straight or bisexual, without engaging in the associated behavior (as in the claim that all women who resist patriarchy exist somewhere on the lesbian continuum: see Rich 1983). And for that matter one may announce a clear gender identity without having the expected sexual organs (Green 1994). One may claim an ethnicity on the most tenuous grounds (Waters 1990; Lieberman and Waters 1988), knowing neither the language nor the customs of the claimed identity, and perhaps lacking even the appropriate ancestry in the main or entirely (note the novelist who claimed to be Irish his whole life [Priall 2000]). One may validly claim a spiritual or religious identity, say in accounting for an exotic taste in foods, but then change it (and the associated taste) tomorrow, or simply claim the identity without engaging in the food choice at all.

6. The more specializing identity claims assume equal personhood, the more they take the form of individual rights rather than enforceable obligations, and the less they relate to role activity.<sup>14</sup>

Given these principles limiting special identity claims, what then is their point?

### *The Impact of Specializing Identity Claims*

In the modern system, specializing identity claims are political and cultural assertions more than action ones (Bernstein 1997; Melucci 1989). They attempt to change the rules and boundaries of proper personhood and the rationalized role structure, not principally to behave within the extant system. The claim to an ethnic identity, over and above run-of-the-mill tastes legitimately derived from personal background, activates a driving spiritual, natural, or historical force that must be recognized in society. The specializing claim to a gender identity has a similar character—asserting something of the true nature of the individual that a just society must recognize as falling within the domain of personhood.

Sometimes the assertion involved seeks to change the political structure of an immediate interaction situation—requiring the participants as proper persons to recognize a new dimension of personhood, as with an ethnic speech style or sexual preference. Sometimes it is a collective demand for massive political change—establishing rules to legitimate an ethnic culture in national politics or eliminating prohibitions on sexual conduct or requiring that public spaces be accessible to special individuals—that extends the boundaries of normal and equal personhood to new groups, activities, or tastes.

<sup>13</sup>Thus, even as the intermarriage rate of American Jews has dipped to around 50 percent, there is a klezmer revival (Leiter 2000). It is the expressive identity, not the old identity-role matrix, that flourishes. Likewise, the hill tribes of Thailand are “identified” by variations in dress and housing much more than variations in economic or political rights.

<sup>14</sup>This is clearly not true of ascribed identities, in which older identity-role matrices, marking inelastic “types” of persons, remain in force. Many such matrices, such as those around race, are disintegrating, but others, for instance, around the severely mentally retarded, persist. In these cases, identities severely constrain roles and personhood. For a vivid description of the matrix, see Barth (1996:302).



In the current period of expanded legitimate individuality, many special identity claims have been put forward, and many have been quite successful. The right and capacity of national states to privilege particular ethnic cultures, for instance, has been greatly circumscribed, as has the right to legally constrain freer gender and sexual tastes (e.g., Frank and McEneaney 1999).

7. To the extent that specializing identity claims seek normalization in routine personhood, they tend to address the normative and political systems rather than role activities and relationships.

When a special identity claim is successful, the defended tastes and behaviors acquire cultural and political support as falling within the range of normal personhood. And thus the associated excitement and mobilization tend to be reduced, as the identity aspects of the claims—their dramatic rooting in nature or spiritual realms or history—devolve to the normal and mundane.

8. To the extent that specializing identity claims are successful, they are absorbed into normal personhood, as ordinary individual needs, tastes, preferences, and choices.

Thus, the specializing identity claims that remain alive and active in a modern system are those that face some continuing barriers or blockages. On the one hand, American society can absorb ethnics from central and eastern Europe as part of the standard range of normal persons, and the ethnic mobilizations and claims from such groups tend to be limited. On the other hand, African American and American Indian populations, facing continuing social and legal boundaries, remain more distinctive (e.g., Gonzales 2001). So also with contested gender identities of many sorts. And in American society, which has great absorbing capacity in many domains, religious identities retain some vitality because of the separation of religion and political life (cf. rational choice models of the same phenomenon [Warner 1993; Finke and Stark 1992]). These principles make the complete incorporation of religious identities in American national life difficult.

### *The Absorbing of Personal Identity in Rationalized Society*

We describe above the ways that specializing identity claims tend to become absorbed in the routines of normal personhood. Vital histories and biological properties become normal tastes and styles, for which explanations do not need to be given, and exotic claims are moderated. The same society that generates special identity claims first constrains them (e.g., under the rules of equality) and then absorbs them in routine individuality (as it has, by and large, many once-strong identities: e.g., bastard, orphan, and widow).

In like manner, the tastes of normal personhood tend to be absorbed into the rationalized role structures of modern society (Thomas et al. 1987). Many have noted the absorbing power of the modern system (e.g., Marcuse 1992), though fewer have connected this absorbing power with the system's capacity to generate constantly new tastes and identity claims, and thus the equilibrium that tends to result.

Over time, legitimate tastes and preferences tend to be rationalized and disciplined in the modern system. They are schooled, organized, and linked to the overall economy. Thus, for example, the mother of an infant child may now exercise a legitimate taste to return to work—a choice most difficult under the old identity-role matrix. And her choice will be facilitated by an elaborated role structure that will feed, clothe, bathe, and care for

her child, even to the point of pumping, storing, and delivering the mother's own breast milk. And all such activities will contribute to society—enriching the GDP and enlarging the domains of freedom. With incorporation, much of the material once stored in the identity “mother” gets redistributed to standard personhood and the rationalized role structure.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We have seen contemporary changes in modern society as greatly expanding the space for the individual as core to the modern cultural account. This continues a long process of rationalization in terms of the individual, accelerated in recent decades by globalization, development, and the further breakdown of corporate collective life (prominently, the national state as a strong collective actor).

The expansion of society around the individual in the form of roles drives expansion of the cosmos around the individual in the form of personhood, and vice versa. When older corporate or normative systems pose barriers to expansion and when rationalization opens new realms of the extrasocial cosmos, claims to specializing identities arise—to distinct personal rootings in unique natural, historical, or spiritual locations prior to society and interaction. Over time, specializing identities tend to be absorbed in normal personality and, in turn, to flow into the rationalized role structure, with its differentiated definitions and regulations. Thus the modern system produces some rough equilibria between what is personal identity and what is social role performance.

The trends we analyze are clearly visible in most developed societies, and in developing ones, too. They are most obvious in, and indeed generally thought to be characteristic of, the liberalism and individualism of American society. The United States has for almost two centuries been a world leader in expanding those dimensions of individuation stressing individual choice. The United States has had expanded rationalized individual role systems, with early educational expansion, the elaboration of formal organizations and associations, the rapid differentiation of occupational systems, and highly organized religious and recreational systems. And on the personhood side of the equation, the United States is famous for producing and supporting the blossom of claims to religious, natural, and historical selfhood, with all the exotica of extreme self-expression finding a home.

But if the analysis focuses on the individuation of human needs and entitlements (rather than choices), assessments of where the identity explosion is most prominent will likely shift. The maintenance of special individuated entitlements based on gender, ethnicity, region, community, and so on may be much more substantial in developed countries other than the United States (Heidenheimer 1981; Soysal 1994). This is notoriously true when assessments of individuated welfare arrangements are involved—a variety of northern European countries score very high (Koopmans and Statham 1999). It is well to remember Tocqueville's analysis of ways in which American empowered choices produce narrowed zones for sharp identity differentiation ([1836] 1966).

On a more comparative scale, we may suppose developed societies have changed in the same individuating directions (see Inglehart and Baker (2000) for quantitative examples). Forces such as globalization and Europeanization and the ideologies associated with them tend to reinforce expanded individuation, and weakened corporate identities, everywhere. And with these forces one finds in accompaniment both expanded rationalized role systems (educational, occupational, and organizational structures of great articulation) and broadened subjective personhood (deeply rooted in world human rights doctrines).

While conflict and resistance most certainly continue, the legitimate alternatives to some form of the individuation we have discussed seem weak in contemporary world society. It is difficult to maintain strongly legitimated corporate identities with national or



subnational monopolies, and thus to restrict the flowering of elaborate specializing identity claims and claims to expanded tastes rooted in general personhood. It is also difficult to maintain a more traditional model of rationalized society built around group structures rather than highly elaborated and expanded individual role systems. Intellectuals envision Shangri-Las with the capacity to resist the system: here a modernized Japan with traditional family and organizational systems, there an Iran or Afghanistan with vitalized enforcements of traditional religious scripts, over there a successful socialist order, and back somewhere tribes that retain their culture (e.g., Escobar 1995). But resistant alternatives, under conditions of expansion and globalization, seem very fragile. They violate, on the one side, the norms of organizational rationality set by the regime of liberal individualism. They violate, on the other, basic principles of human rights that certify as legitimate and routine forms of individual self-expression and identity that a few decades ago would have seemed very extreme indeed.

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