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Inside the Web

This book is about two issues which have always puzzled social scientists. The first is how to explain the ‘joined-upness’ of experience – how apparently fragmented events and emotions are organized into some kind of coherent story. It seems clear that experiences are not *inherently* meaningful (for example, people from different historical periods or different cultures would make another kind of sense of them). So how do we reach a more-or-less shared understanding of the meaning of things that happen to us?

The second is how these ways of making sense of the world also limit what we can think and do. It is as if, in order to make experience orderly, safe and manageable, we also contrive to trap ourselves in routine ways of seeing and acting – ‘most of us, most of the time, tend to be boring and predictable, not only to others, but even to ourselves’.¹ Born originals, how do we turn ourselves into copies?

It is obvious that these two puzzles are linked. Whatever it is through which we manage to understand and control what goes on around us, and communicate about it with others, also constrains our thoughts and actions. We are, as it were, trapped in the web we spin to capture and digest experiences. But this metaphor is not quite satisfactory, because the web is being spun by millions of us at the same time, and is constantly being repaired and reconstructed; a great deal of our time and energy is spent on joint or reciprocal spinning activities, which in turn transform the web itself. It changes all the time. And yet we cannot perceive what we create, or describe its strings and nodes, or say what holds it all together.

Even this nuanced version of the web analogy fails to do full justice to the diversity of experience. One appealing aspect of the image is the idea that we can move in various directions across the web, but – like spiders – never leave it completely. If we attempt a leap, we remain involuntarily attached by a sticky strand of our own making. But there are also qualitative differences between modes of experience, from the ecstatic or transcendent to the mundane and banal, which show that there are more than two dimensions involved.

Social science has given us an extraordinary number of insights into the processes which enable and constrain our experiences of the world, and our communications about them. But it has not provided a convincing account, either generally or at a specific historical moment, of how either the ‘joined-upness’ or the ‘entrapment’ are achieved. Since Hume,² the dominant view – first in the Anglo-Saxon world, and finally among most social scientists – has been that the web is primarily ‘conventional’ (as he would have said), or ‘socially constructed’ (as we would say today). In other words, we make it up. But why then is it so compelling and inescapable? And what connects our inner, personal worlds with the outer, public one?

To try to illustrate some of the issues, I ask the reader to imagine watching two films, in which the participants speak to each other, but in an unfamiliar language. I shall attempt to describe what is seen in the films as neutrally as possible, and then to anticipate the imaginary viewer’s probable interpretation.

In the first film, a woman is digging up potatoes with a kind of mattock, and a young girl is picking them up and putting them in a hessian sack. The soil is lumpy and wet; it sticks to their boots. They wear simple clothes, and their limbs, which are caked with mud, look raw. After a while, they go to a dwelling, open a low door and enter a kitchen. They wash their hands at a sink. They then peel and cut up the potatoes, cook them and add them to a kind of soup or stew, which is simmering on the stove. Finally they sit down at a table and eat the meal, along with pieces of coarse bread.

There is, I would dare to suggest, little problem in the ‘joined-upness’ of this scenario; the fact that we cannot understand the words they say does little to limit our comprehension of what is happening. The woman and girl may be mother and daughter, or

they may not; the father may be out at work, absent, abroad or dead. But clearly there is an assumed coherence and internal necessity in their joint actions, which tends to be confirmed by the sequence of digging, cooking and eating. The whole film seems to reflect a linked set of rational actions, under the constraint of natural necessity (the laws of nature, as they affect horticulture, and the laws of economics, as they concern subsistence production).

Furthermore, the sense of coherence and 'joined-upness' is reinforced by certain continuities of texture, tempo and mood in the film – the lumpiness of the soil, the potatoes and the soup; the steam of the women's breath and the cooking; the coarseness of the hessian sack and the bread; the slow beat of the mattock and the rhythm of the peeling knives; the stoic quality of the work and lifestyle. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that these are rather poor people, living in a less-developed economy or on the far fringes of an affluent one.

In the second film, a man stands in an airport lounge, talking into a mobile phone. He is dressed in smart casual clothes. He boards the plane, and it takes off. He reads some papers in a purposeful way, before turning to the in-flight magazine. The plane lands. He is greeted by a good-looking woman of about his age. They leave the airport building and go to her small, shiny, new car. She drives him from the anonymous outskirts to the historic centre of the city. She parks the car, and they enter a large building and take the lift. She opens the door of a flat. It is bright and well-appointed. He pours two glasses of white wine. They make love.

My point about the second film is that, although there is no obvious coherence or internal necessity about this sequence of events, we are (I would suggest) just as able to 'follow' (or make up) the story and to experience it as natural and rational.³ Even though it is quite unclear whether this man is on a business trip, a holiday or indulging in sex tourism; whether the woman is his long-term partner, or someone he has 'met' through the internet; or whether they are fellow nationals, associates or strangers – we provide these links almost involuntarily. Furthermore, the people in this film are identifiable (if not identifiable *with*) all over the world. They are, after all, the people in TV advertisements for mobile phones, airlines, compact cars, wines, electric razors, perfumes, deodorants, etc.

But it is not only because of our familiarity with TV adverts for these products that we seem to recognize who these people are and can make sense of what they are doing. They are cultural types (or stereotypes), embodying standards to which we are supposed to aspire and (often in spite of ourselves) somehow do. Unlike the women in the first film, they are not acting under necessity, either natural (climate, soil, growing cycle) or economic (the requirements of subsistence). We can make up a coherence in the vague and disparate elements of the story *because we understand that the man and the woman in the film are making one up for themselves*. They are constructing their identities, their projects and their relationship by choosing from a number of alternative products, air routes, cities, dwellings and other potential sexual partners. It is only by recognizing them as autonomous, mobile agents, acting through choices rather than obeying traditions, customs and rules or the laws of nature and survival, that we can make sense of the film.

What's more, this is not simply a reflection of the commercialization of lifestyles in affluent societies.⁴ Imagine that this is not a glossy advertisement, but an 'art' film, deliberately shot in a more grainy, jerky or disjointed, non-sequential way. One of the many differences would be that the continuity, through consumption of items within a particular package of marketed products, would be played down. And this in turn might be reflected in the music accompanying the film. In the advertisement, it would be chosen to heighten awareness of the combined effects of those products, their association with each other, and the desirable features of the lifestyle. In the art film it would be more likely to emphasize the contrasts of pace, mood and emotion between the artificial, metallic, air-conditioned discomfort of the plane flight, the baroque splendour of the city of destination and the sensual intimacies of the sex scene.

Yet these contrasts would probably enhance rather than diminish our capacity to make sense of the story. After all, it takes a good deal of suspension of disbelief to see aeroplanes or city traffic lanes as opportunities for glamorous self-display, or the expression of personal identity. Only the airport encounter and the sexual coupling achieve the necessary links in the advertisement. If the

man arrived only to catch another plane, and then another, or got stuck in a traffic jam in the city, the message for consumers might get rather lost. But in the art film, there would be no need to try to forge these connections between commodities, autonomy and emotional fulfilment. The links between freedom, movement, self-development and the reciprocities of sexual release would seem self-evident.

Because it corresponds to a set of linked cultural standards about mainstream people's lives in affluent societies, the second film thus generates its own coherence. But there are also some potentially disturbing aspects of what is joined up in this process, and what is not. We almost automatically assume that the two films are about people who are unrelated to each other – who occupy different circuits of the social world. But what if the older woman in the first film was in fact the wife of the man in the second one, or the sister of his sexual partner? Immediately, moral problems, seemingly absent from the second scenario, make a dramatic entry to the piece.

More generally, on reflection, the links which make the second film's sequence of interactions seem both natural and rational are almost too compelling. They leave too little room for other distractions, excursions or diversions. It becomes all too predictable that, when they rise the next morning, the man and the woman will – either jointly or separately – go out to clinch a business deal, or satisfactorily complete a professional contract. They will then celebrate their individual or associated successes with a meal in a tasteful restaurant, and so on. It is not just that we are conditioned to expect these further developments by advertisements for other products (computer software, business systems, banks); it is also because we know that these are the things that autonomous, mobile, self-developmental people do, in pursuit of their agendas. And also that the world is organized in such a way as to facilitate precisely those processes and outcomes.

In other words, the coherence of the second film reflects something about the web of present-day life which is more stable and structured than the other 'made-up' features of its linkages. The organizations through which the protagonists are able to travel, meet, make love, strike deals and dine out to celebrate are not ran-

domly disposed; they form a kind of order, which spreads across national boundaries. Yet for all that has been written about globalization and the international institutions which sustain it, there is still much to be explained about how personal choice, group affiliation, collective action, economic strategy and political coalition reinforce and consolidate each other, and how they exclude and disempower other forms of social organization.

Above all, what I shall analyse and try to account for are the processes through which these forces combine to make certain ways of thinking and acting compelling, both in the sense of providing strong psychological, social and economic motives for adhering to their precepts and following their pathways, and in that of denying possibilities for coherent opposition or alternative strategy. It feels natural and rational to talk the talk and walk the walk of that culture and its order. By contrast, resistance to it is difficult to articulate; opponents have to struggle for coherence and a clear vision.

It is not that this resistance lacks numerical support or commitment. George Monbiot describes the European Social Forum in Paris on 16 November 2003, in which more than 50,000 mostly young people gathered in some 300 meetings to seek strategies for transforming politics. Although they were united in tracing the injustices they challenged to globalization and capitalism, Manbiot acknowledges the problems of connecting up the fragmented elements of the opposition to these forces in convincing ways, and putting forward a coherent replacement for them:

By the end of it, I was as unconvinced by my own answers as I was by everyone else's. While I was speaking, the words died in my mouth, as it struck me with horrible clarity that as long as incentives to cheat exist (and they always will) none of our alternatives could be applied universally without totalitarianism.⁵

So this, then, is the really compelling aspect of the web in which we, as participants in affluent, mainstream global culture, live our lives. However much we may deplore the exclusive, unjust consequences of the new world order, and especially the military imposition of 'regime change' on selected states for dubious

reasons, we cannot break into (or out of) the tightly sealed links of that web. In particular, the freedoms we prize, even when they are hypocritically defended by our leaders, seem superglued to other ambiguous or unacceptable elements of that order.

What's more, we are struck by a paradox about the relationship between the 'made-up' (interpersonal) and the organized (institutional) elements in the web. Under the previous global order – the stand-off between US-led liberal democracy and Soviet-style socialism, and a world made up of quasi-autonomous nation-states – 'freedom' on the one hand and 'equality' on the other were presumed to be the dispensations of governments. The everyday lives of citizens were regulated by laws, providing frameworks of restraint and fields for cooperation. In that culture, the interpersonal order was assumed to be derived from *rules* (even state socialism presupposed a kind of proletarian 'morality'), which ran parallel to the official rules of the political system. People might not have always done the right thing (in fact they probably seldom did); but we presumed that things worked the way they did because of a known set of principles for doing things right. The political order was supposed to be related to the moral rules.

Nowadays, most commentators and theorists agree that our decisions and actions are, and should be, *choices*; and that these are not derived from stable moral or political traditions. They emphasize the extent to which we make up our own order to fit our personal development and our preferences for public services. Part of what it is to be aware and responsible beings, in charge of our destinies, is constantly and actively to reinterpret the principles which guide our relationships with partners, parents, children, friends and associates, and to reshape the values which sustain the political community. Whether the authors celebrate or deplore these transformations, they see them as characteristic of the culture shift which ushered in the present order. Here, Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck give slightly different versions of the transition to 'individualized', 'intimate' and 'post-traditional' social relations, but ones which share these themes.

The self is seen as a reflexive project for which the individual is responsible. . . . We are, not what we are, but what we make of our-

selves. . . . [W]hat the individual becomes is dependent on the reconstructive endeavours in which she or he engages. . . . The moral thread of self-actualisation is one of *authenticity* . . . based on 'being true to oneself.' . . . The morality of authenticity skirts any universal moral criteria, and includes references to other people only within the sphere of intimate relationships. . . . In contrast to close personal ties in traditional contexts, the pure relationship is not anchored in external conditions of social or economic life – it is, as it were, free-floating. . . . [S]elf-identity is negotiated through linked processes of self-exploration and the development of intimacy with the other. Such processes help create 'shared histories' of a kind more tightly bound than those characteristic of individuals who share experiences by virtue of a common social position.⁶

The individualization of political conflicts and interests does not mean disengagement. . . . Instead, a contradictory multiple engagement is emerging, which mixes and combines the classical poles of the political spectrum so that . . . everyone thinks and acts as a right-winger *and* left-winger, radically *and* conservatively, democratically *and* undemocratically . . . politically *and* unpolitically, all at the same time.⁷

The obvious question arising from these assertions is how such a do-it-yourself, pick-and-mix version of morality and politics can have any binding force on its participants at all. Yet the claim these authors make, and the paradox of our own experience, are that this binding force is in some ways more compelling than that of the older, rule-based order. The rather convoluted language of these quotations describes this paradox without explaining it.

I shall argue that the compelling power of the new order results from the mutually reinforcing actions of interpersonal and institutional elements. In less pompous terms, this means that the way we communicate with each other informally, both verbally and non-verbally, confirms and validates what we experience and do as members of formal groups and organizations, and vice versa. What's more, I shall argue that this mutual confirmation and validation happens in a very particular way, which makes it specially convincing. It follows a kind of formula which – like some potent spell, passed down by our earliest ancestors – exerts a binding force upon us. We seem almost instinctively to recognize the

effects of this elixir (just as we know when we have fallen in love, or struck the perfect shot), and this explains its powerful hold over us. We also concede authority and dominion to leaders skilled in manipulating its components.

Let me try to make this abstraction more concrete by the example of my own present life. I spend many hours on public transport of various kinds and, being a sociable person except when in my darker moods, I tend to engage fellow-travellers in conversation. To launch into such exchanges is (at least in my case, and over a longish journey) to open up the possibility of having to give an account of oneself – who one is, where one is going and something about what one is doing there. Particularly if one initiates such a conversation (as is usually the case with me), the onus is on oneself to set the standard of disclosure, as it were. The other person, as respondent, is free to choose whether or not to reciprocate in their accounts. How far I get with my story depends, of course, on the interaction; only if there is an exchange do I perform the whole script.

I have heard myself do this so often (with some variations, I hope) that I can recognize the formula I follow, in trying to provide an engaging, coherent and morally adequate version of myself. As to who I am (apart from strenuous non-verbal exertions to communicate that I am *not* so old, tedious, intrusive or perverted as to cause the other person to change seats), this relies on some account of the family network in which I am embedded. I do my best to describe this tangle of fragmented and discordant relationships in a way which captures the more charming idiosyncrasies of its members and the more fascinating aspects of their grudges and quarrels, as well as the bonds which tie us all together. This is a story of how the sense of family survives (albeit in a somewhat battered form) through three generations of divorce and transcontinental migration. It is also one about how my partnership is rooted in a history of common endeavour, both in our work together as educators of social workers, and in our efforts to give something to children and grandchildren, despite its origins in my delinquency and defection. (The latter aspects are usually only hinted at, I must admit.)

In telling where I am going, I try to give a context that conveys me as someone always on the move, despite my rootedness in

family and farm (see pp. 7–8). This allows me to live up to the cultural standard described at the beginning of this chapter; I am pursuing a stimulating and challenging lifestyle, made up of personal choices from the available options, both in the UK and the wider world. Because I am travelling second class (and now with an older person's concession) it is important to give this aspect of the story a democratic flavour. I am an academic, but when abroad I always make sure I live in modest flats, in culturally diverse inner-city districts. A few anecdotes can establish my credentials in these respects, making my journeys seem slightly glamorous, without being in any way ostentatious.

Since the research and teaching sides of these visits do little to enhance these features of my accounts, I emphasize the freedom (nay, licence) associated with the role of visiting professor. I dwell on the opportunities for new friendships and cultural experiences, and the aspects of the infrastructures of European cities which facilitate these delights. I confirm with due modesty that my books are known in these places, and that my visits stem from my contributions to global wisdom in the social sciences; but I prefer to emphasize the informal elements of these experiences, and above all the relationships to which they give rise. This is where my converted cowshed comes into the reckoning, because I can both illustrate the enduring links created, through my visits, and give a kind of overall coherence to the disparate elements in the whole account. I give examples of the (mainly) young people (former students, other friends, even those I have met on trains or planes) who have since come to stay in this comfortable facility, thus sealing the whole circuit of embeddedness and movement in my story.

Whether or not this version of myself is convincing and morally adequate, the important question is why I tell it in this particular way – presumably I am trying to convince myself. It seems always to take this form (if not necessarily be told in this order), because the various parts are supposed to reinforce each other and to mesh in a particular way. This is meant to describe and in some sense reconcile elements of membership by blood and soil (family, community and nation), elements of personal development (life projects, commitments), aspects of wider *chosen* association or belonging (networks, elective memberships), and economic path-

ways and outcomes (jobs, careers, investments). I shall argue that this combination is in turn required to be connected up in a formulaic pattern.

In the next two chapters, I shall try to trace the components of this formula, and to specify the exact relationships between them which supply the desired outcome. But the broad outlines of the formula I seek to identify are already clear. It addresses the central issue in the social sciences – the mutual influences of individual experience and action on the one hand, and the forms of collective life (cultures and organizations) generated by human groups on the other. Despite the huge variations in these over time, and between different parts of the world and sections of societies, there seem to be common patterns in the most influential theories and explanations, just as there is a recognizable pattern in my accounts of myself to strangers on long journeys. And the formulae for social scientific explanations and those for everyday stories have some important features in common.

The pattern is clearest in the work of those writing in the dawn of the modern era, before the social sciences split between psychology, sociology, economics and politics. At that time, philosophers were still also psychologists, sociologists, economists and political theorists. They did not conduct research in those subjects, but used a combination of introspection, observation, reading and speculation to draw together their analyses of and prescriptions for the changing social worlds in which they lived. Although writers like Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, Rousseau and Adam Smith used ‘evidence’ which would not pass muster today, they insisted on combining data from history and ‘anthropology’ (viz. travellers’ tales) with theoretical analysis in order to provide what they saw as convincing arguments and models.

In addition to these similarities of evidence and form, they also all dealt extensively in the problem of how the rivalrous, foot-loose, quarrelsome and self-sufficient (‘private’) aspects of human behaviour were reconciled with the cooperative, convivial, reciprocal and social (‘public’) aspects of communities. It seems that they were striving towards a kind of explanation for how this reconciliation was accomplished, which contained certain features:

- 1 A pattern of behaviour, or a social outcome, is produced by an institution, or set of institutions.
- 2 This pattern or outcome is beneficial for the individual members of a community.
- 3 The pattern or outcome was not intended by the actions of the individuals who initiated or participate in the institutions.
- 4 The fact that their actions produced the pattern or outcome is not recognized by the individual members of the community.
- 5 The institution sustains the pattern of outcome, through a 'feedback loop', passing through the individual members, by their interactions.

The most famous example of this type of argument and demonstration is Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' account of the distributive effects of markets.⁸ It goes:

- 1 The best possible distribution of resources is achieved by exchanges in markets.
- 2 This distribution is beneficial for all the members of society, even idle beggars.
- 3 This distribution is not intended by those who trade, since they intend only to benefit themselves.
- 4 Traders do not recognize that they are distributing resources in the best possible way.
- 5 The institution of markets sustains the efficient and fair distribution of resources, through the insouciant interactions of traders, intent only on turning a penny.

Indeed, it is possible to see many of the features of this formula in the analyses developed by other Renaissance and Enlightenment philosophers, as if they were attempting, not always successfully, to bring off such an explanation. For instance, Hobbes's version of the origins of political authority, Locke's of the invention of money, Montesquieu's of the effects of the emotions ('passions') on the conduct of government, Hume's and Rousseau's of the part played by sexual pleasure and procreation in getting society started all prefigured aspects of Smith's invisible hand

explanation, and might be seen as early attempts – using similar kinds of evidence – at producing this sort of theory.⁹

It is also worth noting that this same formula has been recognized by three distinguished social theorists, Robert Merton, Jon Elster and Mary Douglas, as being requirements for a successful ‘functionalist’ explanation of social phenomena.¹⁰ Although the first two were mainly concerned to show that most social scientists who have attempted such explanations (including Karl Marx) have failed to meet these requirements, Douglas argued that functionalist analyses are possible in many more cases than are widely recognized, and indeed are necessary to make sense of the interconnectedness of the social world.

In this book, I shall try to show that we all unconsciously attempt functionalist accounts of the way in which that world works, and our position within it. Furthermore, we tend to try to illustrate and embellish our versions with evidence of the kind brought forward by these philosophers. And in doing so, we tend to bear out their seeming conviction that the ‘glue’ in the web which reconciles the private and public elements in our experiences and in social arrangements is made up from sexual and emotional satisfactions, material rewards and the skilled actions of political leaders. In stark terms, by sex, money and power.

However, this is only one part of the kind of convincing story which social scientists seek. In addition to the formula, defining the way that story should be told, and the elements in it combined, there is also the equally important matter of how it is communicated between the partners in a conversational exchange, or between the members of a group. If what we are trying to understand is the *social bond*, then this aspect deserves at least as much attention.

To return to my long journeys by train and plane, the original purpose of starting up the conversation with my fellow-traveller was not to tell my life story, but to make a connection and initiate an exchange. This could not be achieved by reciting a version of myself, according to this formula or any other. Communication depends upon the artful threading together of accounts of a shared social world, in which the participants take turns to spin the web, both by recounting elements in their experiences and under-

standings which confirm or contradict those of the other participant(s), and in extending the jointly spun web to embrace other topics and fields.

Again, in looking back on innumerable such conversations, I am conscious that I offer parts of my story which I intuitively feel may have resonances with the other person's life, as an invitation for him or her to reciprocate, and to develop a version of their own. It is difficult to say exactly how I set out to do this, but I suppose that it is partly to do with having been a social worker for many years that I can tune in to others, on a number of non-verbal as well as verbal wavelengths, to pick up unspoken signals as well as spoken ones. This feels as if it is not so much a 'listening skill' (as it is pretentiously described in the professional literature) as a letting down of the barriers which all of us erect when in public or in the company of unchosen strangers. These barriers serve as defences against the remote possibility of being assailed by a stream of unwanted communications, about how Jesus knows and loves us, or concerning close encounters with beings from other planets.

Instead of protecting ourselves in these ways, we open up the possibility of reciprocal spinning, when each helps the other to develop aspects of their stories about how the world works. The conversation then soon becomes a cooperative enterprise, in which the building of a bond is an inescapable ingredient. Erving Goffman captured the ritual elements in such exchanges, in which the participants 'make and give face'.¹¹ They bestow social value upon each other by the way they accept and embellish each other's accounts of self. But all this is done within the frame of cultural standards and requirements,¹² of what it is to give an adequate account; they (we) use skills in improvisation and artful adhocery to fulfil the demands of such versions.

The art of having interesting conversations on trains is to establish reliable and secure enough boundaries between the selves which are being produced by these cooperative narratives, but also to maintain just enough ambiguity about one's identity and agenda to sustain communications beyond those of conventional exchanges. As in any other encounter with a stranger that may eventually lead to friendship, the trick is to be just indiscreet enough to be interesting but not alarming, and just idiosyncratic

enough to be challenging but not threatening. In this way, the exchange may conjure up a special sort of milieu, with a kind of magical quality; at best, both can see themselves reflected back in an interesting, new and stimulating light, in which they take on lively and original personae. This is also dimly recognized as the product of the exchange itself so that each bestows upon the other a temporary charismatic aura.

It seems surprising that social bonds can be created out of nothing, as it were, and can arise from chance meetings such as those between fellow-travellers. In my experience this does happen; several people I have met on trains have become regular visitors, along with their families, to my converted cowshed.

There are some parallels between social scientific theories of how the private and the public aspects of human behaviour are reconciled and analyses of the social bond. Here the sociologist Thomas Scheff outlines his version of how bonds are created and sustained.

My model of the social bond is based on the concept of *attachment*, mutual identification and understanding. A secure social bond means that the individuals involved identify with and understand each other, rather than misunderstand or reject each other. I assume that in all human contact, if bonds are not being built, maintained, or repaired, they are being damaged. That is to say that in every moment of contact, one's status relative to the other is continually being signalled, usually unintentionally. . . . Status-relevant verbal and nonverbal signs both signal and determine the state of the bond at any given moment. . . . Threats to a secure bond can come in two different formats; either the bonds are too loose or too tight. Relationships in which the bond is too loose are *isolated*: there is mutual misunderstanding or failure to understand, or mutual rejection. Relationships in which the bond is too tight are *engulfed*: at least one of the parties in the relationship, say the subordinate, understands and embraces the standpoint of the other at the expense of the subordinate's own beliefs, values or feelings.¹³

Here again, Scheff's theory describes a process by which individual emotions and experiences, and those of others, are balanced and reconciled through transactions which create and maintain

social bonds. Scheff goes on to develop this model into an explanation of how much larger human collectives, including states, conduct their relationships in terms which mirror these processes and reflect hidden emotions such as rage and shame.¹⁴ His theory is explicitly aimed at reconnecting the separated disciplines of the social sciences, to provide an integrated explanation of how practices, beliefs, judgements and emotions combine to create the 'habitus' of everyday life.¹⁵

However, this does not account for another dimension of this web, which has not been captured in my story so far. Although the interactions studied by Scheff create, sustain, damage and repair social bonds, they also somehow incorporate into such bonds aspects of the wider institutional world of organizations, the economy and politics. And in so doing they both change that institutional landscape¹⁶ and, in turn, are changed by it.

This book is as much an attempt to analyse the transformation of collective life – of social, economic and political relations – as it is about how intimate and impersonal interactions join up the parts of global society. It attempts to show how the formula for giving convincing versions of the coherence of such relationships, and analyses of the emotionally laden transactions concerning social bonds, must also explain how change occurs at all levels. Ultimately, what we do in our everyday lives is linked into the great waves in the web which shape patterns like the mass migrations of population, and conflicts between power blocs, ethnic groups or religious faiths worldwide.

Social scientists who try to make these connections have very different interpretations of the great transformation of collective life which has taken place in the past twenty-five years. For Giddens, Beck and the other theorists of individualization, intimacy¹⁷ and post-traditional relationships, equality and democratic negotiation, which are required to sustain closely bonded partnership and parenting in the new order of domestic life, spill over into the wider economy and polity. They create new forms of engagement and activism, and even what Ken Plummer calls 'intimate citizenship' (see pp. 30–1).¹⁸

Others take a much more pessimistic view. The equally eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman sees social bonds as consistently polluted and made more brittle and fragile by the commercialization

of all aspects of collective life. Through this process, *desire* (the wish to consume everything outside the self, and thus annihilate it) replaces *love* (the wish to preserve, respect and care for the other).¹⁹ Relationships which endure over time are analysed as business links or investments.²⁰ Although sexual desire 'remains the most obviously, unambiguously, unassailably *social*' of the 'natural' human propensities, consumerism has given it a calculative and exploitative form.²¹

In Bauman's account, the 'spilling over' comes from the institutional sphere into the intimate one, rather than the reverse process of Giddens's, Beck's and Plummer's models. Furthermore, it affects all aspects of human belonging, membership and sharing: 'the invasion and colonization of *communitas*, the site of the moral economy, by consumer market forces constitutes the most awesome of dangers threatening the present form of human togetherness.'²²

But it is not obvious that traditional and communal forms of collective life were (and are) specifically *moral* in ways that deserve a principled defence. After all, the primary social bonds of past centuries – family, kin, clan, neighbourhood, religion, class and country – all stem from contingencies of birth, unchosen and fortuitous, and often sustained by coercion and violence. Blood, faith and soil can scarcely be presented as *ethical* bases for togetherness; they have historically provided the foundations of many forms of domination and exclusion, from patriarchy, through bigotry to chauvinism. If collective life is being transformed by sex and money, as Bauman claims, then this might well be for the better.

In a recent lament for the passing of the 'golden age of cultural theory', Terry Eagleton blames current scholarship's failure to address issues of morality and truth, preferring to deploy evidence from TV programmes to produce analyses which are 'centreless, hedonistic, self-inventing, ceaselessly adaptive':

Structuralism, Marxism, post-structuralism and the like are no longer the sexy topics they were. What is sexy instead is sex. On the wilder shores of academia an interest in French philosophy has given way to a fascination with French kissing. In some circles, the politics of masturbation exert far more fascination than the politics of the Middle East.²³

My task in this book is to show how the everyday world of sex and TV advertisements is joined up with the politics of the Middle East, and how this shapes the choices open to both individuals and political leaders. These links are glimpsed through the changes which have transformed my own life, from being embedded in the practices of a British public service, to one of a European scholar-geographer, with informal networks of friends and collaborators in many cities, maintained by email messages and occasional visits. Meanwhile, my contemporaries in my former professional life have mostly moved right out of social work or academic posts and into consultancy or entrepreneurship, often owning a house abroad, or relocating to a distant country.

These shifts have an economic as well as a personal-developmental logic, and the two reinforce each other, as I shall try to show in the later parts of the book. They reflect a social world made up of more mobile individuals, living for shorter spans in smaller units with chosen others, and grouping themselves in collectives which select through members' preferences and the subscriptions they charge, rather than through birth, proximity or nationality. This mobility and these groupings mean that political authority can no longer claim that its provision of the infrastructure for public life entitles it to rule, tax and mobilize individuals as it did in the past. The togetherness that can be created by sex, and the belonging that can be bought with money, meet many of the needs which used to be served by states.

But only for the lucky few. Although people whose lifestyles are based on moving and choosing set the cultural standard, the great mass of the world's population does not live in this way. The organizational structures which facilitate movement and choice for the global elite exclude them. Hence political authorities increasingly cannot sustain solidarities between the privileged and the poor, because the better-off escape their grasp. While new, commercial units provide the collective goods required for mobile, chosen lifestyles, new social movements and communal bonds join up hitherto separate groupings among the excluded majority.

On one night (20–21 November 2003), as the Israeli government was pressing on with its construction of the so-called fence to separate its citizens from Palestinian enclaves, rockets were fired

from a donkey cart at an international hotel in Baghdad where an American envoy was staying; two suicide bombers wrecked an HSBC bank and the British Consulate in Istanbul; and a crowd of around 100,000 demonstrated against the visit of the US President in London. The ways in which these events were joined up, and how everyday life connects to regime change and privatization of the public infrastructure of Iraq, will be the challenges for the analysis presented in this book.