



Large and small scale forms of personhood

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how forms of mediation are segmented into mediatized forms through links among discursive and commodity-based practices. In obscuring these practices, the “mass media” construct obscures the characteristics of cultural forms that emerge and spread through these practices. The paper focuses on the processes through which the cultural form known as “the liberal subject” was re-scaled through mediatized practices in early modern Europe, a consideration of which clarifies the causes underlying its present day anxieties.

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1. Introduction

My goal here is not to offer an account of what people are “really” like, despite what my title may suggest, but to discuss certain figures of personhood modeled and maintained by mediatized institutions in contemporary society. I describe rather specific institutional logics that articulate these figures and make them available as voicing structures to which actual persons orient in a variety of ways. Part of my argument, however, is that the presence of these mediatized processes in our midst is largely obscured by received conceptions of what is nowadays called “the mass media.” After introducing some contemporary examples (Section 2), and a brief discussion of terminology (Section 3), I suggest ways of re-thinking the terrain of “the mass media” in terms of the logic of mediatization (Section 4). I discuss a number of mediatized figures of personhood, some of which—such as the “liberal subject”—have widely known standard names. Others—what I call the “role-fractionated self” and the “re-scalable self”—lack everyday names, but are nonetheless evidenced as presuppositions of everyday talk about “selves” (one’s own, others’), and in more specialized registers of discourse employed by institutions that seek to “manage” ideals of personhood in practices of consumption and politics today.

The fact that institutions pursue certain goals does not of course mean that they succeed in them (or even *can* succeed in some of them), nor that what they actually manage to do corresponds to what they recognize as their goals. Yet, in a standard contemporary *mythos*, anxieties about the rise of the mass media are joined at the hip to anxieties about the decline of democracy, a link increasingly formulated by appeal to Habermas’ account of the rise and decline of “the public sphere” and of a particular figure of subjectivity, the “rational-critical liberal subject,” who made of it a habitat and a home. In Section 5, I attempt to cure us of these anxieties by offering a different account of the basic constructs that give this myth its charter. Let us begin, however, with a present-day ethnographic context.

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2. How to re-scale a liberal subject

In April 1967, Hilary Rodham Clinton, then a student at Wellesley College, confessed in a letter to her high school classmate, John Peavoy, then a student at Princeton: “Since Xmas vacation, I’ve gone through three and a half metamorphoses and am beginning to feel as though there is a smorgasbord of personalities spread before me. So far, I’ve used alienated academic, involved pseudo-hippie, educational and social reformer, and one half of withdrawn simplicity” (New York Times, VII/29/07). While it is doubtful that everyone manages such persona-hopping with equal ease, such talk is certainly familiar as a discursive form common in accounts of the self. The discursive form treats persons as partible objects, divisible into role-fractions that are extractable from whole persons and replaceable by others; individuals may choose how they re-arrange their parts, and pick the ones they play or “use” in performance. Hilary Clinton’s evocation of acts of consumption (the term “smorgasbord”) suggests that she recognizes this form of talk as somehow linked to a logic of consumerism, even though she—then a student at a small liberal arts college—uses it to harness an autobiographical self in a classic humanist narrative of personal revelation.

Today, the pollster Mark J. Penn—who served as Hilary Clinton’s “chief strategist” when she became a “Presidential candidate” in 2008—has been harnessing role-fractions and liberal-humanist subjects in the service of politics and business for three decades. As CEO of Burson-Marsteller, Mr. Penn has a global clientele.² He is perhaps best known in the United States for having harnessed the “Soccer Mom” while serving as Bill Clinton’s campaign advisor: He coined the term, and identified its referent as a crucial constituency (a “swing voter”) in Bill Clinton’s 1996 re-election campaign. Mr. Penn calls himself a “trendspotter.” In his recent book—*Microtrends: The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow’s Big Changes*—Mr. Penn argues that you (yes: You) are a microtrend, or, at least, contain a role-fraction that corresponds to one, though perhaps one that—unlike the “Soccer Mom”—hasn’t been named yet. So the book helpfully describes and names 75 new ones—including “Sex-Ratio Singles,” the “Working Retired,” “Pet Parents,” “Protestant Hispanics,” “Tech Fatales,” “Non-Profiters,” “Neglected Dads,” “Aspiring Snipers,” and “Stained Glass Ceiling Breakers.” According to his publisher’s publicity blurb, Mr. Penn uses polling methods to “detect relatively small patterns of behavior in our culture—microtrends that are wielding great influence on business, politics, and our personal lives.” But Mr. Penn does not simply describe microtrends. He argues that businesses and political campaigns should try to rescale them.

Here’s why. “[A] trend is not simply a “shift” in how people do things, like more women taking their husband’s name. It is not just an evolving “preference” for a product or activity, like the growing use of GPS systems.” A trend is a grouping of behaviors and preferences into categories of personhood—in particular, into a set of statistically defined “social types”—whose demographic scale and institutional fortunes determine whether the grouping is a “mega-” or a “micro-” trend. Equally important from a business standpoint is the potential for “re-grouping” these types (Agha, 2007a, chap. 5) and, in particular, the possibility of “re-scaling” them. For, as we are told: “A microtrend is an intense identity group, that is growing, which has needs and wants unmet by the current crop of companies, marketers, policymakers, and others who would influence society’s behaviors.” (Penn et al., 2007, p. xx; italics in original). Hence any microtrend is a prospective market niche for a business, or a potential voting constituency for a political campaign. In any market democracy, Mr. Penn tells his reader, simply to rescale a microtrend is to rescale that public enterprise you call your own. How many units of human capital do you need? A bare one percent of the public, or three million people, will suffice to launch any business or social movement, we are told.

All of this leads to certain well-known positional anxieties about the future prospects for liberal democracy and for citizens’ hopes for their liberties. To the “autonomous liberal subject”—that ideal of self-autonomy, in whom the naturalized harmony of “critical rationality” and “free will” yields an exemplary unit-citizen of a liberal democracy—these “role-fractionated” and “re-scalable” selves are joined to each other as a democracy-devouring many-headed hydra succored by things having names like “the mass media” and “consumerism”; while, to “postmodernists,” eager to proclaim the death of the liberal subject, they loom as a nervy hope for a more emancipatory politics, waiting to be born.

My goal here is not to resolve these disputes, but to show that the role-fractionated self and the liberal subject (to say nothing of the postmodern subject) are figures of personhood re-scaled by the same semiotic process, though articulated and institutionalized at different historical times. I call this process the *mediatization of semiotic mediation*. My goal is to historicize this process, to characterize a few of its socioeconomic and semiotic dimensions, and to discuss their implications.

3. Figures of personhood

By figures of personhood I do not mean timeless forms whose shadows we glimpse in the flickering firelight of Plato’s cave, nor Weberian ideal types. I mean contingent, performable behaviors effectively linked to social personae for some determinate population; or, in a semiotic idiom, behaviors that convey icons (or images) of personhood to those for whom

² Mr. Penn has helped usher more than 25 politicians into elected office around the world—including Tony Blair (third Labor party term) and Michael Bloomberg (NYC mayoral campaign). As advisor to Bill Gates, Mr. Penn helped refurbish Microsoft’s public persona and market share. He is variously described as “Master of the Message” (*Time Magazine*), “The King of Polls” (*London Times*), and “The most powerful man in Washington you’ve never heard of” (*The Washington Post*).

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