

## Playing with I.D. Cards

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Whatever blurs distinctions blurs the classifications upon which identity is built. We have to consider what ideologies and movements represent to people – the women’s movement and racial integration, for example. Sex and race are perhaps the first two main ways of categorizing people. “Racial *discrimination*” is an apt term, because it brings out the classifying act.

Equality for women and integration of races subordinate sex and race to humanity, as Communism supposedly does nationality (its anthem is “The International”) and as ecumenicalism does religion. One of the vices attributed to the “liberals” in “Ballad of Kanawha County” is that they bring in a “one-world plan.” In one article and pamphlet after another the John Birch Society blasts the United Nations, which it believes should be abolished (and is part of the Communist conspiracy).<sup>1</sup> What, if not a burning need for *lesser* identity, explains the failures of the League of Nations and United Nations?

The more comprehensive a classification the less desirable it is for most people as an identity. One world, humanity, or citizen of the universe – the concepts are too vague, faceless, and unanchored. Submerging sex and ethnicity into a larger category seems to remove markers so important that disorientation results. Who am I if there is nothing out there to be separate from or against? When Christ asks his disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” he is testing their understanding of his supreme or cosmic identity, which is not based on separation and opposition but on the oneness of all.

Opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment came, predictably, from both the moral and commercial right, that is, from working-class traditionalists and business people. Again, we have to consider what this coalition means, since it yokes together blue-collar workers and corporation executives, factions that from a purely economic point of view should be voting differently.

Equality for women may be perceived as a menace both to survival of the family and to male sexual identity in particular, two explosive psy-

chological issues. Family, blood kinship, stands as the primal group and source of knowledge and identity. Right-wingers who have organized under the rubric “pro-family” know what they are doing! That has powerful appeal and provides, interestingly, an umbrella for most of their causes, including one we have slighted so far — opposition to abortion.

Without taking sides in the intense combat over abortion — and I believe a strong case can be made for each side — we may link it here with preservation of the family identity. Although antiabortionists argue mostly on grounds of murder, a legitimate issue, much of their support comes from fears of further liberating women and thus endangering the family. If women acquire financial independence through equal pay and job opportunities at the same time they achieve total control over birthing, then — it appears to those who have a distrust of women and no faith in the intrinsic worth of the family — women will kick over all the traces, and we can kiss motherhood goodbye. Are, then, inequality and unwanted pregnancy what is holding the family together?

The family represents normalcy. It is a natural rallying point, therefore, for defending a whole complex of traditions from which identity is constructed. The patriarch needs to possess firearms in order to protect the hearth. Conservatives oppose child advocacy (“kiddie lib”) even in the form of federal laws against child beating, because it might weaken patriarchal rule and role. The “right to bear arms” goes with the “right to spank” (though the federal laws aim at treatment much harsher than traditional spanking that state laws don’t dare to outlaw). Similarly, conservatives lobby against spouse-abuse legislation such as the Domestic Violence Bill. Banning most abortion effectively takes a decision about women’s bodies out of their hands and turns it over to society, which is male-governed.

The ironic fact that an increasingly large percentage of fathers abandon the patriarchal role and leave their family no doubt accounts for some of the frenetic efforts to shore up the father image by those whose identity is interwoven with familial imagery and thought patterns. Much of the force behind censorship of textbooks owes to fear that outsiders are undermining the family by stealing children’s minds and undercutting its authority. Much criticism of schools in general attempts to displace elsewhere the blame for social ills more reasonably traced to family conditions (which may be partly traced in turn to the culture). Actually, if the family is crumbling, schools are not the cause (being little changed anyway from decades ago) nor will child- and wife-beating and firearms hold it together.

The real issue is that many people of mating age don’t want to marry or don’t want to stay married. The complex reasons for this range from the possibility of nuclear annihilation any moment — which “pro-family”

proponents increase by their militaristic insistence on maintaining an enemy to maintain identity—to crises of self-confidence and self-esteem that traditional bigoted identity has helped to bring about. Why is it, in fact, that so many young people have abandoned marriage, religion, and patriotism at about the same time even though family, church, and state seem to be necessary centers of identity? Even if a Communist conspiracy aimed to do just this, and successfully exploited schools as a medium, how could they succeed if family, church, and state did for the individual what they should do or have been thought to do?

Some women as well as men worry that liberated women will increasingly resemble men as they take on the jobs, roles, clothes, attitudes, personality traits, and even executive diseases that have defined men. The fact that the sexes will still differ biologically ("*Vive la différence!*") seems to count for little alongside the slippage in *social* definition. Or do we have here another lapse of faith? The more primitive a culture, the more strenuously it distinguishes sexual roles, often raising the sexes differently, initiating them by special puberty rites, and sharply demarcating their adult roles in courtship, family function, and community duties. It is as if a cultural underscoring of sexual identities—pink for the girl, blue for the boy—is thought to help people *perform* fully as male and female. We are told today that as women's liberation advances, more young males suffer impotence. Does identity, including that of sex, depend so much on the group that without its support even the physiology of sex is impaired? Is this why Latin countries so relentlessly drum up the "macho" mystique?

At any rate, we can be sure that identity permeates every sort of human functioning, because we are what we think we are, and any adjustment of the roles and powers of one sex will affect the others' self-image, this being in the nature of any two reciprocally defining things. Women's liberation, in short, puts identity in double jeopardy, if one thinks this way, because it threatens membership in both biological groups—one's family and one's sex.

Homosexuality threatens the identity of the family for some of the same reasons women's liberation does, through obliterating distinctions and roles by which the ego defines itself. Turning to one's own sex could destroy the two-sex system of reciprocal definition; it implies that one sex can be complete in itself. And so even the unisex dress and life style of heterosexuals may also be disapproved. It is no apology for homosexuality to say that hermaphroditic figures have in most cultures symbolized the spiritual achievement of transcending the bipolarity of being, which sex represents most arrestingly. Homosexuality can turn as vicious as heterosexuality. All we need note is that the unisexual implications of homosexuality strike the same blow to identity as does any other univer-

salism or egalitarianism like the United Nations or the Universal Church or the simple pre-Marxist notion of communism (communalism).

I suspect that one reason anti-Semites hate Communists and homosexuals as well relates directly to the fact that Jews (like "Gypsies") are international—that is, for centuries, not until the founding of Israel after World War II, had no country of their own, and hence adopted the languages and cultures of many nations throughout the world. But countries adapt to being adopted, and any such Hebraicizing of a society may be perceived as similar to the spread of the "Communist cancer" and to other "conspiracies" to take over. As Communism disregards national and cultural boundaries, and as racial integration dissolves color distinctions, homosexuality disdains sexual differences.

Furthermore, like women's liberation, the movement for gay rights could seem to endanger the very existence of the traditional family. Not only do homosexuals not reproduce, they lobby for the recognition of other live-together units, other families, than the one based on reproduction. Nature, it is true, in its own conservatism places a premium on reproduction in order to ensure survival of species. In following suit, human conservatives fall into the primitivism of treating humankind like other animals, as if we had in our cultural repertory and higher understanding no course but to persecute people coping with the plight of being attracted to their own sex. Some Amerindians have not only tolerated but fostered homosexuals for the sake of the deviance itself. That is, certain individuals were allowed to differ in every way—to walk backwards, to prefer their own sex, to clown with unusual license (like the monarch's "fool")—because this deviance reminded the rest that their human normalcy does not exhaust or represent the whole of the Maker's various and wondrous creation.

The link between sexual and racial identities is white male supremacy. Since lording it over women culturally defines malehood to some degree, why should Republicans oppose ERA and integration more than Democrats? Why should extending political and economic equality to women and blacks cause more alarm among *conservatives*?

Obviously, whoever wants to conserve things the way they are holds advantages in present circumstances. These advantages may consist of traditions on which aspects of one's identity are built. Or one may enjoy membership in a club that holds the upper hand and owns the most property. One is in. Being male and white are two clubs that have bestowed automatic supremacy. Anyone who is in has something to lose by change. The haves more naturally want to conserve than do the have-nots, who stand most to gain from any change. Older people usually possess more earthly goods and status than the young and so are, as a group, more conservative. Not all people think this way, but to the ex-

tent we are materially motivated we don't give away advantages to those who are out (*materially* motivated precisely because we don't identify with them). Women's equality and racial integration challenge white males in economic competition at the same time they deal a blow to psychological security by blurring identity boundaries.

Though because of their double supremacy white males form the core of American and perhaps Western conservatism, *anyone* who enjoys benefits from things as they are now will think and act as a conservative to the extent he or she does not feel membership in broader categories of beings. Someone who is poor but white, or female but white, may seize more greedily onto racial supremacy than a rich white man, who may feel insulated from economic competition and can bask in the cultural support of his ego. Hence the vehement racism of many working-class whites of both sexes, who not only have to scramble more for money in an egalitarian society but are thrown increasingly together with those to whom they used to be able to feel superior—lumped together in housing and schooling and also, reluctantly, in their own thoughts. And they will often vote the same ticket as the wealthy, who also have only to lose by change.

However blatantly and pervasively racial discrimination may manifest itself in thought and deed, racism is not the real issue. It is only part of a pattern. Scapegoating, yes, but who is ever a scapegoat except the Other as defined by one or another sort of grouping? And as we have seen, grouping may be based on sex, nationality, religion, and many other differences among people. Color is just especially conspicuous. As sex breaks down only two ways, color breaks down only about five main ways. Thus both represent the grossest discrimination, but they do not for all that differ in kind or function from other social categorization. James Baldwin spoke directly to the whites' use of blacks to define themselves and to the virtual panic occasioned among some whites by the prospect of obliterating this distinction.

People inclined to oppose minority and women's rights will probably vote for gun freedom and capital punishment. The "right to bear arms" may be construed as part of "our American heritage" and hence associated with Minute Men and patriotism. Defense is the reason given, as it is for colossal weapons expenditure. (After the truly defensive war was over, World War II, we changed our "War Department" to the "Defense Department.") Just as we used to build cars with more horsepower than could be used on the road—extra, symbolic power—we arm beyond defense to take on the attributes of weaponry, to invest ourselves with a borrowed power we don't feel in our being itself, exactly as primitive peoples take on the power of the tiger by wearing its skin or claws. (To appeal to this totemic mentality today, cars are called Jaguars and

Lynxes.) Moreover, guns and cars are notorious symbols of sexual potency, which overlaps with power generally.

One of the components of the Fascist Scale, a measure used by early researchers in authoritarianism, was "toughness," which of course does not really correspond to courage and endurance but rather to a show of hardness that covers the fear that one is soft and weak. If I am for gun freedom, capital punishment, "law and order," strict child-rearing, a get-tough policy with Russia, and more lethal weaponry, I must be a tough cookie and a real stud. Of course a person might vote for one or the other of these for truly rational and intrinsic considerations, but the *pattern* of voting is a giveaway.

Such a pattern would most likely include also a preference for nuclear power, coal, and oil—the "hard" energy technology—over "soft" energy such as solar, wind, biomass, and geothermal. (See *Why "Soft" Technology Will not Be America's Energy Salvation*, by Petr Beckmann, distributed by the John Birch Society.)<sup>2</sup> "Hard" energy technology disrupts the environment more and endangers people more because it "rapes the earth" as in digging or drilling or heating the sea. It represents *man's* mastery over nature. "Soft" technology goes along more with nature, merely "harnessing" it, and is associated with environmental protection. It is felt as feminine. Coal, oil, and nuclear fission are concentrated energy sources, yielding more power per unit than solar, wind, and biomass, which are "dilute," weak. (It is hardly a digression to point out in passing that energy sources that are concentrated in this sense are also concentrated in the sense of centralized in the hands of large corporations, as Beckmann advocates, rather than "diluted" throughout the populace by means of, say photovoltaic panels on residential roofs. Since energy companies can't meter the sun, they prefer drawing from sources they can dole from, like coal, oil, and a few breeder reactors.)

We can predict that most people voting for gun freedom, capital punishment, and nuclear power or other "hard" energy will also oppose environmental regulation, which is regarded as softhearted and soft-headed, a concern only of giddy movie stars like Jane Fonda or of dowagers from the Sierra Club. Feeling tenderness for animals or for anything else is dotty and effeminate. Thus these issues are united not only by virtue of being traditional or normal, like the reproductive family, but also by the common thread of hardness or toughness that runs through them—false, to be sure, because it is all symbolic.

Getting tough on criminals by supporting capital punishment, harsher sentences, purchase of handguns to defend oneself, and reduction of civil rights for the accused brings out another aspect of this defense against weakness or softness in oneself. Researchers in authoritarianism called it "anti-intrapeption," the avoidance of turning inward and acknowledging

feelings. Getting tough with others presupposes that one is different from them and does not deserve the hard treatment they do. Making punishment severer for criminals and reducing rights for the accused comes easier the less one acknowledges one's criminal impulses or the less one imagines ever being a defendant (which can happen very easily to the innocent once search-and-seizure protections are weakened and laws are then used against political opponents, a common way for a government to move toward fascism).

In other words, people most defending against unacknowledged impulses in themselves that they cannot control will come down hardest on criminals and take a general moralistic line, just as those most belligerent by personality will clamor most stridently to arm against belligerence in other individuals and nations. The weakness of inner controls, the default of self-regulation and self-responsibility, constitutes the main base of the authoritarian or fascist personality, which must rely on external authority because upbringing has forced one to look to others and distrust oneself. Fear of softness and fear of criminality in oneself go together precisely because the combination of strong negative impulses and weak inner controls is what engenders crime. In reality, of course, one masters negative impulses through self-knowledge, by getting tough with oneself.

It is a bitter truth that most convicts come from destitute environments, where authoritarian upbringing is the rule. (Of course, if laws were harsher for the so-called white-collar crimes of the corporate world, more well-to-do environments would be represented in prisons.) So getting tough on criminals partly represents better-off authoritarians rejecting worse-off authoritarians as a way of warding off a similar fate and partly represents just another form of removing minorities, the poor, and others one does not identify with. There is indeed a pressing practical problem of what to do with criminals, but we can solve it only in the measure that we can subtract from criminals the secret emotions with which we invest them.

In the soul-searching about the Vietnam war we can see again how this false toughness masks a resistance to self-knowledge. "Hawks" have claimed that America was blameless in Vietnam; the only problem was that a fainthearted public hamstrung the military and prevented it from using its full force. Today hawks still deplore the weakness of having examined ourselves and having concluded that we were implicated enough in the evil suffered by that country to warrant losing a war for the first time. Fighting enemies outside is strength; finding weaknesses inside is itself weakness. The role of this rule in anti-Communism was almost comically demonstrated by Reagan's second secretary of education, William Bennett, who complained in a speech he gave in Washington at

the end of 1986 "that teachers in American schools focus too much on the perils of nuclear war and not enough on the perils of Communism. . . . It is not the business of American education to encourage unreasoning fear of any kind," he said.<sup>3</sup> It is reasonable to fear what the other fellow is doing but not what we and he are doing in common. (If the perils of nuclear war are not reasonable grounds for fear, then why are all the governments of the world, including our own, so concerned about it?)

The spiritual approach to problems is to examine oneself along with the situation and to acknowledge any implication in the situation. It is not spiritual to claim the problem is a battle between good and evil and that God is on our side because we are good. This is surely the worst case of taking the Lord's name in vain, especially as it is used to excuse ourselves and rationalize interventions in other countries to support despotic governments that our founding fathers would have despised.

Behind the fear of self-examination is self-distrust, which ties together many symptoms in the syndrome of agnosis and which is a major if hidden issue in the banning of books. The power of literature to illuminate and to effect catharsis cannot act on me if I am too afraid of my feelings to admit that "there but for the grace of God go I." If I am just barely curbing impulses or staving off depression by sealing off feelings and perceptions beyond daily access, then of course I will react with great alarm to other people's expression of moods and deeds that strike me as violent or depressed, *without discriminating the form, tone, manner, and purpose with which these are presented*. Some primitive individuals, like the enraged spectator who stalks down the theater aisle to strangle the villain onstage, can't keep in mind a distinction between life and art because turbid emotions are set throbbing when they resonate with the depicted action.

But anyone, primitive or not, whose negative feelings begin to resonate too strongly with what he or she is seeing or reading will turn against the spectacle or book that arouses the feeling. How else is one to deal with such passions? Just as men sometimes are mean to women who, unwittingly or not, arouse desire that in the situation the men do not know what to do with, so the person unsure of moderating and balancing forces within himself will simply want to banish the object creating the problem for him. If we don't feel we have the grace of God then we merely feel "there go I," which is naturally a terrible feeling.

Self-distrust manifests strongly in reading, which is a form of role-playing. The reader "becomes" a character or at least "goes along" with the author's drift, willingly "suspends disbelief" for a while. Unless one can hold one's ego in abeyance and let another's mind hold sway, most reading is impossible. Laying aside the book, a reader may criticize and even reject the character or the author's ideas, but to enter another's point of view requires dropping guards.



Precisely because it is dangerous to do this with strangers in real life, lowering defenses in protected situations like reading and role-playing becomes important. Without safe situations permitting escape from the egoistic defensive stance to other points of view, how is one to learn something more than defense? Avis Hill made very plain in his interview that role-playing can pose the threat of losing one's identity. And there it is, the recurring bugaboo that you lose yourself if you try to enlarge yourself. The fear prevents expanding the identity beyond the pettiness that causes conflict, traps one in the conditioned ego, and forestalls the reunion of individual consciousness with the cosmic or God consciousness that is the goal of all religions. (The root meaning of "religion" is "retying.")

Psychologist Lawrence Kubie recognized the problem as it arises with creativity, which requires shuffling off these initial conditions and risking identity. Creative people, he says, have faith that they can lose themselves for a while *but always come back*. This way they get the advantage of the ego's stability but also slip its limitations. Hill was right that some movie stars become self-destructive because of identity problems but not, however, because they lose their identity from pretending for a while to be someone else but because they suffered from a weak identity in the first place and tried to fabricate a new one based on celebrityhood, which is subject to declining popularity or fading beauty and so brings on enormous anxiety. Like mature actors and creative artists, good readers *know* they will return to themselves.

If you have enough faith in yourself you know you can risk to know and not lose yourself. This gives courage in hard times. If you grew up within an environment that, by not resorting to fear and awe, implied you could trust yourself, you have some faith to resist agnosis when hard times do tempt everyone to seek the herd and pull on the blinders. Unblessed by such an upbringing, we can still liberate ourselves by coming to understand what limits thought, choice, and action.