

EXPLORING HISTORY AND MEMORY THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

*Explorar la historia y la memoria a través de
la memoria autobiográfica*

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Abstract. The article reviews the role of autobiographical memory as a site of narrative construction. Far from being a place of liberal retrospective recall it is a site of active recapitulation and reconstruction. The article provides examples of how history and memory are intermingled. It also draws in the author's autobiographical vignettes to explore the underpinning desires for historical reconstruction in autobiographical memory work.

Keywords: Memory. Education. Autobiographies. Life stories.

Resumen. *Este artículo reconsidera el papel de la memoria autobiográfica como un lugar de construcción narrativa. Lejos de constituir un lugar de abundante recuerdo retrospectivo, esta memoria autobiográfica es un lugar de recapitulación y reconstrucción activas. El artículo ofrece ejemplos de cómo se entremezclan historia y memoria. Recurre también a anécdotas autobiográficas del autor para explorar los deseos que cimentan la reconstrucción histórica en el trabajo de la memoria autobiográfica.*

Palabras clave: Memoria. Educación. Autobiografías. Historias de vida.

One of the less explored aspects of history and memory is the role of autobiographical memory. This is a most important area for us to explore and this paper tentatively pursues this investigation. It has been acknowledged over time that the relationship between autobiographical memory and identity was intimate and inextricable. The site of «memory work» was

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known as a place where life stories were recounted and described but social scientists were historically unsure about the status and significance of these accounts. As McAdams has noted:

Once upon a time, psychologists viewed life stories as little different from fairy tales, charming, even enchanting on occasions, but fundamentally children's play of little scientific value for understanding human behaviour.¹

Part of the problem was the belief at that time and still in many quarters, that autobiographical memory and life stories were simply patchy and selective descriptions of factual events that had happened. Accounts were seen as descriptive, recapitulative and retrospective.

Matters began to change with some force in the 1980s. New perspectives emerged in studying the place of autobiographical memory and life stories in developing our understanding of life experience.² The major shift was a belief that far from being passively descriptive and recapitulative, autobiographical memory was a site of reconstruction and reflexivity and a place for the re-working of personal meaning.

Martin Conway's introduction to autobiographical memory focuses on these points and argued that the «defining feature of autobiographical memory was that they inherently represent personal meaning for a specific individual».³ He says therefore that autobiographical memory represents «a challenge for the cognitive psychologist and the challenge is how to understand personal meanings»⁴. Conway concedes that in 1990 «autobiographical memory is a comparatively new area of research for cognitive psychologists» and implies the reason for this is that:

Autobiographical memory constitutes one of the areas where cognitive psychologists have no choice but to confront aspects of hu-

¹ D. McAdams, «The psychology of life stories», *Review of General Psychology*, 5 (2), (2001): 100.

² McAdams and L. Ochberg, *Psychobiography and Life Narratives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988); J.A. Singer and P. Salovey, *The Remembered Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1993); B. Barclay, «Autobiographical remembering: narrative constraints on objectified selves», in *Remembering our Past: studies in autobiographical memory*, ed. D.C. Rubin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and W. Nasby and N. Read, «The Life Voyage of a Solo Circumnavigator: Theory and Methodological Perspectives», *The Journal of Personality*, 65 (4), (1997): 785–1068.

³ M.A. Conway, «Autobiographical knowledge and autobiographical memories», in *Remembering our Past: studies in autobiographical memory*, ed. D.C. Rubin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 186.

⁴ Conway, «Autobiographical knowledge...», 186.

man cognition which are often set aside in mainstream cognitive research. These are aspects such as: emotions, the self and the role and nature of personal meanings in cognition ⁵

This new area has burgeoned in past decades and a new range of work has emerged which focuses on autobiographical memory.⁶

⁵ Conway, «Autobiographical knowledge...», XVII.

⁶ W.F. Brewer, «What is autobiographical memory?», in *Autobiographical Memory*, ed. D. Rubin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 25–49; W.F. Brewer, «What is recollective memory?», in *Remembering our Past: studies in autobiographical memory*, ed. D. Rubin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 19–66; Conway, «Autobiographical knowledge...»; J.M. Fitzgerald, «Intersecting meanings of reminiscence in adult development and aging», in *Remembering our Past: studies in autobiographical memory*, ed. D.C. Rubin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 360–383; H. Markus and P. Nurius «Possible selves», *American Psychologist*, 41 (1986): 954–969; H. Markus and A. Ruvolo, «Possible selves: personalized representation of goals», in *Goal Concepts in Personality and Social Psychology*, ed. L.A. Pervin (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1989), 211–242; D.P. McAdams, A. Diamond, E. de St. Aubin and E. Mansfield, «Stories of commitment: the psychosocial construction of generative lives», *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72 (1997): 678–694; K.H. Moffitt and J.A. Singer, «Continuity in the life story: self-defining memories, affect, and approach/avoidance personal strivings», *Journal of Personality* 62 (1994), 21–43; U. Neisser and E. Winograd (eds). *Remembering Reconsidered: ecological approaches to the study of memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); D.B. Pillemer, *Momentous Events, Vivid Memories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); B.J. Reiser, *Contexts and indices in autobiographical memory* (New Haven, CT: Cognitive Science Program, Yale University, 1983); B.J. Reiser, J.B. Black and P. Kalamarides, «Strategic memory search processes», in *Autobiographical Memory*, ed. D.C. Rubin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 100–121; J.A. Robinson and L.R. Taylor, «Autobiographical memory and self-narrative: a tale of two stories», in *Autobiographical Memory: theoretical and applied perspectives*, eds. C.P. Thompson, D.J. Herrman, D. Bruce, J.D. Read, D.G. Payne, and M.P. Toglia (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1998), 125–144; J.A. Robinson, «First Experience Memories: Contexts and Function in Personal Histories», in *Theoretical Perspectives on Autobiographical Memory*, eds. M.A. Conway, D.C. Rubin, H. Spinnler, and W.A. Wagenaar (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1992), 223–239; D.C. Rubin (ed.), *Autobiographical Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); D.C. Rubin (ed.), *Remembering our Past: studies in autobiographical memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); D.C. Rubin, «Beginnings of a Theory of Autobiographical Remembering», in *Autobiographical Memory: theoretical and applied perspectives*, eds. C.P. Thompson, D.J. Herrman, D. Bruce, J.D. Read, D.G. Payne, and M.P. Toglia (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1998), 47–67; R.C. Schank and R.P. Abelson, *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1977); R.C. Schank, *Dynamic Memory: A Theory of Reminding and Learning in Computers and People* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); J.A. Singer, «Affective responses to autobiographical memories and their relationship to long-term goals», *Journal of Personality*, 58 (1990): 535–563; Singer and Salovey, *The Remembered Self*; T.J. Strauman, «Self-guides and emotionally significant childhood memories: a study of retrieval efficiency and incidental negative emotional content», *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 59 (1990): 869–880; T.J. Strauman, «Stability within the self: a longitudinal study of the structural implications of self-discrepancy theory», *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71 (1996): 1142–1153; A. Thome, «Developmental truths in memories of childhood and adolescence», *Journal of Personality*, 63 (1995): 138–163; A. Thome, «Personal memory telling and personality development», *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4 (2000): 45–56; B.A. Woike, «Most-memorable experiences: evidence for a link between implicit and explicit motives and social cognitive processes in everyday life», *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68 (1995): 1081–1091.

This article stresses how autobiographical memory helps to define and locate our narratives of selfhood within a continuing and coherent life story. There the memory works in a more improvisational, constructional and creative manner.⁷ In these accounts the life story provides the compass for the delineation of our courses of action throughout life and hence in this version autobiographical memory is a crucial lynch pin for human action and human agency. The implications of where autobiographical memory locates itself on this spectrum of possibility are considerable for their role in identity construction and maintenance as well as in the associated activities of learning and pedagogy.

Other work points up the enormous cultural variability of autobiographical memory. There is a Eurocentric and American perspective which focuses on highly individualised patterns of induction into autobiographical memory. Studies of socialisation show how developing our autobiographical memory is partly «learned behaviour».⁸ This learned autobiographical memory work is linked to modalities of «reconstruction» that we have referred to earlier.

John Dewey who has much influenced new work by Michael Armstrong on reconstruction⁹ says that «education is a constant reorganising or reconstructing of experience». He says:

It has all the time... an immediate end, and so far as activity is educative, it reaches that end—the direct transformation of the quality of experience. Infancy, youth, adult life— all stand on the same educative level in the sense that what is really learned at any and every stage of experience constitutes the value of that experience, and in the sense that it is the chief business of life at every point to make living thus contribute to an enrichment of its own perceptible meaning.¹⁰

⁷ E.G. Barclay, «Autobiographical remembering...».

⁸ J.J. Han, M.D. Leichtman and Q. Wang, «Auto-biographical memory in Korean, Chinese, and American children», *Developmental Psychology*, 34 (1998): 701–713; M.K. Mullen, «Earliest recollections of childhood: a demographic analysis», *Cognition*, 52 (1994): 55–79; Q. Wang, M.D. Leichtman and K. Davies, «Sharing memories and telling stories: American and Chinese mothers and their 3-year-olds», *Memory*, 8 (2000): 159–177; M.D. Leichtman, «Pre-schooler's memory environments and adults: recollections in India and the US» (paper presented at the Symposium on Culture and Memory, Valencia, Spain: Third International Memory Conference, 2001).

⁹ M. Armstrong, «Education as reconstruction: another way of looking at primary education», *Forum*, 55 (1), (2013): 9–29.

¹⁰ J.A. Boydston (ed.), *John Dewey: the middle works, 1899–1924*, Volume 9, 1916, (Southern Illinois: Southern Illinois Press, 1980): 54.

The realisation that «memory work» is part of an on-going process of reconstruction and learning has substantial implications for those involved in all pedagogic endeavours. In part this is all related to a vital shift in our understanding of human inquiry. Post-modern theorists have begun to shift us from the view of rationality and human inquiry fashioned by the Enlightenment: «The philosophers of the Enlightenment put their faith in reason. Reason was supposed to work like a searchlight, illuminating a reality that lay there, passively awaiting discovery».¹¹ The active and reconstructive aspects of reason were left out in this account human inquiry: «The active role that reason can play in shaping reality was largely left out of the account. In other words the Enlightenment failed to recognise reflexivity».¹²

More recently work in Social Science has focussed on the learning and pedagogic potential of social reflexivity. Anthony Giddens has developed a range of work looking at reflexivity and exploring its links with life narratives and autobiography. He, like Dewey, focuses on how these accounts reconstruct our knowledge base. He says:

Developing a coherent sense of one's life history is a prime means of escaping the thrall of the past and opening oneself to the future. The author of the autobiography is enjoined both to go back as far as possible into early childhood and to set up lines of potential development to compass the future. The autobiography is a corrective intervention into the past, not merely a chronicle of elapsed events.¹³

The autobiography then is a prime space for the practice of reflexivity and learning. In Giddens' sense reflexivity refers to the use of information about the conditions of activity as a means of regularly recording and re-defining what that activity is. The autobiographical memory is then a site for corrective intervention in other words for the reconstruction of knowledge.

In Giddens' terms then the self is seen as a reflexive project «for which the individual is responsible».¹⁴ Hence: «A person's identity is not to be found in

¹¹ G. Sorros quoted in J. Rowson *Transforming Behaviour Change: beyond nudge and neuromania* (London: RSA, 2011): 22.

¹² G. Sorros quoted in Rowson *Transforming Behaviour Change*, 22.

¹³ A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: the self and society in the late modern age* (Stanford: California: Stanford University Press, 1991): 72.

¹⁴ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, 75.

behaviour nor —important though this is— in the reaction of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going».¹⁵

The autobiography becomes by this view a major site for identity negotiation and production: «Self-identity is not a destructive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography».¹⁶ The on-going production of autobiographical «memories» is then an on-going process of knowledge production and learning. Central in this knowledge is the capacity which autobiographical memory work has to allow us to dis-embed our understanding of the world. In doing so we move beyond the birth right scripts we inherit ancestrally into the production of new scripts and visions.

Robert Kegan has written at length about the process of dis-embedding as it begins in childhood. He talks of the child looking at other people: «He cannot separate himself from them; he cannot take them as an object of attention. He is not individuated from them; he is embedded in them. They define the very structure of his attention».¹⁷ The strategy for dis-embedding our understanding of the world is reflexivity which Kegan describes as: «Detaching or distancing ourselves from both the socialising process of the surround and from our own internal productions, albeit in such a way that does not prevent us from connection and joining in community and personal relationships».¹⁸

Autobiographical memory work becomes a key arena for «detaching and distancing» as the work of reconstruction and re-positioning takes place. As Giddens says this memory work can act as a «live intervention» whereby we can transcend the «thrall of the past» and open up to new paths of development for the future.

In the process of detaching, distancing and development we construct new cognitive maps and contextual understandings. This new knowledge allows us to reframe and re-position our autobiographical memories.

¹⁵ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, 54.

¹⁶ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, 53.

¹⁷ R. Keegan, *The Evolving Self* (Cambridge Mass and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), 29.

¹⁸ Keegan, *The Evolving Self*, 22.

Work on the reconstructive potential of autobiographical memory is we think especially important for those exploring the learning and pedagogic capacities of memory work. We can begin to scrutinise the process whereby people dis-embed and reposition their primeval and ancestral memories in the on-going construction of autobiographical memory. These acts of reconstruction amount to a re-positioning of the self and hence may show us how transgression and transformation interweave in the process of personal change. By developing some cognitive distance on our inherited and inscribed memories we can begin to critically interrogate them and in doing so the process of personal change is supported and promoted.

Our view here is that the constant reconstruction of memory and narrative is actually a dis-embedding and repositioning of the self. They therefore sit at the heart of learning and pedagogy. To devise educational strategies which ignore this process is to ignore the potential for personal growth in favour of some vision of disciplinary socialisation or utilitarian functionalism. By this view critical pedagogy has to realise the considerable potential of this realm of memory and narrative work.

Autobiographical memory is worked on and processed throughout the life course —this means that our experiences and a view of self is in constant process and reconstruction. These acts of reconstruction of knowledge provide an important point for «pedagogic leverage» and learning potential. Hence autobiographical memory is a place, a space, where any learning or pedagogy that aims to dis-embed and reposition our on-going identity project might start.

Whilst I was a professor at the University of Rochester a group of colleagues developed collaborative research on memory, identity and agency. The group included Dale Dannefer, Paul Stein and Philip Wexler. One of my close colleagues Craig Barclay defined important work on autobiographical memory as a way of undertaking what he described as «composing the self». Writing in 1996 Barclay argued:

Autobiographical remembering is an improvisational activity that forms emergent selves which give us a sense of needed comfort and a culturally valued sense of personal coherence over time. One conclusion following from this line of argument is that losing or lacking the generative abilities to improvise selves through the functional reconstruction of autobiographical memories results in the subjective experience of alienation from others in society. In addition we

come to a sense of self fragmentation. Under such circumstances it becomes increasingly difficult to ground one's self in the past, to make sense of out of present experiences or imagined possible adaptive futures.¹⁹

Barclay then is expounding the importance of autobiographical memory at the reconstructive end of the spectrum. Intriguingly Barclay argues that we establish what he calls «proto-selves» through two processes:

The first is instantiation, defined as making public and explicit reconstructed past events (e.g. through rituals) that are objectified with some context... the notion of context presented here includes both private and public contexts. Society and culture are two important contexts within which autobiographical remembering occurs. Societies and cultures are changed by the activities associated with reconstructed remembering activities, especially if those activities occur among collectives working together for some common purpose.²⁰

The overarching cultural importance of these assertions is considerable in its scope and impact on our social landscape and memory. Moreover if Barclay is correct, and think he is, the cultural significance of memory work is considerable and the role of critical pedagogy within this frame is correspondingly highly significant.

At a broader level Barclay sees the contextual background as related to the reproduction of «history»: «History viewed here is the story we wish to be known that justifies our being, culture, or way of life. History provides a context within which local, national and world events are interpreted and understood».²¹

The reconstructive potential of autobiographical memory then works at a broad collective and societal level. But the relationship to each personal trajectory is profound and lasts throughout each individual life course.

McAdams has developed a life story model of identity which works in interesting ways with some of this more recent work on autobiographical memory. He says:

¹⁹ Barclay, «Autobiographical remembering...», 107.

²⁰ Barclay, «Autobiographical remembering...», 112.

²¹ Barclay, «Autobiographical remembering...», 112.

Identity itself takes the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme. In late adolescence and young adulthood, people living in modern societies begin to reconstruct the personal past, perceive the present, and anticipate the future in terms of an internalized and evolving self-story, an integrative narrative of self that provides modern life with some modicum of psychosocial unity and purpose.²²

This makes it plain that McAdams favours the reconstructive character of autobiography and life story. His work consistently stresses the role of «composing a self» in our on-going identity lifework and he focuses on the way in which individual refraction substantially mediates the cultural frame in which narrative work is located.

Life stories are based on biographical facts, but they go considerably beyond the facts as people selectively appropriate aspects of their experience and imaginatively construe both past and future to construct stories that make sense to them and to their audiences, that vivify and integrate life and make it more or less meaningful. Life stories are psychosocial constructions, co-authored by the person himself or herself and the cultural context within which that person's life is embedded and given meaning. As such, individual life stories reflect cultural values and norms, including assumptions about gender, race, and class. Life stories are intelligible within a particular cultural frame, and yet they also differentiate one person from the next.²³

The intersection between autobiographical memory and cultural settings needs to be closely interrogated. So also does the manner in which particular selections and omissions work through into our constructions of autobiographical memory.

AN EXAMPLE OF CONSTRUCTING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

In this section, I will use my conversation with Scherto Gill as an example to illustrate a process of arriving at my own autobiographical memory. The following interview section deals with some of these issues. Scherto²⁴ is

²² McAdams, «The psychology of life stories», 101.

²³ McAdams, «The psychology of life stories», 101.

²⁴ Scherto Gill Research Fellow, Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace, UK.

concerned to establish the selectivism and partialities which underpin my own autobiographical memories and to explore the capacities of the «integrative self» to which McAdams refers.

SG In *The Ego Trick*, Julian Baggini investigated into the question about the nature of the self. To begin his inquiry, he used the metaphor of a pearl in the book to problematise notion of an essentialised self. What do you think? Is there such a thing as a core self that persists through time?²⁵

IG Well that depends what the pearl is of course. The post-modern critique is that there is no essentialised self, there is no centre, and we are just a shifting set of multiple selves represented differently to each people. I both accept that and don't accept it at all. I would say that most of us have some continuing sense of who we are and what we are about and that continuity element can be set alongside other discontinuities of self. But the continuity element is what I recognise as myself, vis-à-vis continuing preoccupations, personality advantages and disadvantages and defects that are me. And so I think that there is something that I recognise as «me» which other people may recognise in different ways and there are different «me>s over time, but there is also such continuity to me which I think will probably exist for much of the duration of my life. We can talk about what those continuities are and what the discontinuities are. Certain post-modern notions are too stressing of discontinuity and multiplicity, so I think in a sense both the modernist version and post-modern is partly right and partly wrong.

SG Where would you start if you were to answer the question of «who am I»?

IG Well probably one place to start would be some of the continuities of one's sense of space, place, time, purpose. I think there are certain continuities in my sense of purposefulness and in my search for meaningfulness and as Francesca of *The Bridges of Madison County* (Clint Eastwood: 1995) says, it always is a combination of daily detail, the details of life. She talks about the wonderful dreams of life and then going back into the details of her life when she returns from abroad, dreams of love with Robert, the photographer and ultimately she embraces the details of life. I would say there are many details to my life, but what melds the details together is a kind of continuity of aspi-

²⁵ J. Baggini, *The Ego Trick* (London: Granta Publishing, 2011).

ration around issues of social justice, egalitarianism —treating people equally on a daily basis as well as on an ideological basis. So there is a sort of continuity of belief, a continuity of aspiration which I don't always, of course, live up to, but that I can recognise early where that started. That belief that people should be treated equally certainly started in my origins which were in the margins of English society, as you know. If you are the son of a manual worker, you are to some extent on the margins of the establishment in this country and that sense of marginality is a great fortune in many ways. One of the skills, I think, is to turn what might look like social misfortune into enormous fortune because of course what it gives you is a great drive to understand the centre.

Having begun to establish a social context for the way in which my autobiographical memory is conducted, Scherto goes on to question me on the relevance of «coming from the margins» of English society. Here one outsider in his own culture, me, is trying to explain to somebody from quite outside the culture how margins «feel» —how the patterns of exclusion so strongly evident in English class society affect our «internal affairs» and «external relations». What is being developed here, in a small way, is a theory of context. Part of dis-embedding your inherited social script, we argue, is the development of a theory of context and this is often related to a particular «life theme» which integrated this search for understanding and purpose.

SG Could you give us a flavour of life in the margins? In other words, can you depict the «details of life» you just talked about by recalling your own?

IG The details of marginality... or... yeah... what the flavour is... is that you grow up in a home where you aren't taught to read. One of the reasons that you don't even think about reading is that there aren't any books in the home. Your father has trouble reading, doesn't really read; your Mum reads a bit, but she doesn't read to you, and she doesn't think teaching you reading is important because she thinks, quite rightly in many ways, that storytelling and the oral culture is what our group are about. So I learned to be a good storyteller, not a reader. So one aspect of marginality is that sense of early disempowerment if you see reading as empowerment, literacy as empowerment. But there are many other aspects of marginality in the home, in the sense that you don't see much of your father because he works six day a week, in my Dad's case sometimes Sunday morning. He is al-

ways tired when he gets home and he doesn't therefore talk too much because he is constantly exhausted and the only time you will see him is in the one week's holiday a year. Your mother also works, as a dinner lady or in the munitions factory, so you don't see much of her. In my case I didn't go to school until I was six anyhow, we didn't particularly believe in schools in my tribe, and schools were a place where everybody went and they all failed; where all that happened in the end was that you went into a factory anyhow. There was a deep distrust of schools in the community I grew up in. That's what marginality means. It means that all of the beliefs of the society —that literacy is a good thing, education is a good thing, schools are a good thing and so on, don't work because they don't deliver for people on the margins. They only deliver for people in the centre of the society. That is why so much of the discourse about the «big society»²⁶ makes no sense at all to me because I always view it (yes, I still do) from what it means on the margins.

Beyond this overall sense of social marginality Scherto is concerned to understand the «details of life». She is concerned to establish my daily «habitus», my way of living. This leads to an interesting exchange about daily life as inscribed by my memories:

SG That's an interesting broad stroke type of picture of living on the margins. Now, can we go a bit closer to that life? What is it like to enter the house of your home? What was it like living in it?

IG That's a good question...

SG Can you recall a moment in your early life at your family home? Once you pinpoint that moment, can you describe your house at the time? At this moment, what was your Mum doing? Your Dad? And what were you doing?

IG Well probably quite a solitudinal moment in some ways. I mean, not a conventional working class home in many ways which is a place where everybody mixes together. Umm, I was the only child, my father was the only son and had twelve sisters and my mother was one of eight...

²⁶ The term «Big Society» was originated by Steve Hilton director of strategy for the Conservative Party, and the idea became the flagship policy of the 2010 UK Conservative Party general election manifesto and formed part of the subsequent legislative programme of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Agreement. The stated aim was to create a climate that empowered local people and communities, building a «big society» that would take power away from politicians and give it to people.

Our house was a reasonably sized house. Dad was a very thoughtful and conscientious worker. He looked after his mother and had his own house. So, in some ways, it is a respectable working class family and quite solitudinal, as I said. I mean my prominent sense of the home would be Dad asleep in the armchair after a day's work; Mum probably at work or chatting to neighbours, or generally in a convivial space and myself probably out most of the time. I was a great lover of the street; I spent a lot of time in what was called the REC which was the recreation ground. From about seven onwards every evening I would be in the REC, playing football, playing cards, messing around, doing vaguely delinquent stuff. I was in trouble with the police a few times for messing around —sawing the Scoutmaster's bike in halves for example and watching delightedly as he got on it and one half of it broke... The police came round about that... So there were all sorts of small delinquent acts. I was a fairly street oriented kid, a pretty rough street kid really and all my friends were exactly the same.

The big rupture in my life if you could fast forward is that I did learn to read when I was eight. Because the teacher comes to the home and tells my Mum and Dad that they must try to teach me to read and they must buy me some books and in due course I do read and I quickly love reading and I become different from my friends in the sense that that happened... And then of course the 11+ comes up that you took at the time. Every one of the friends that I talked about on the street all went to the local school which was a secondary modern at that time and I passed the 11+... much to my own amazement and everybody else's... because I think only one other person in our village had ever passed the 11+... that's how totally marginal the village was and it was quite a big village.

- SG It is indeed hard to imagine that growing up in such a working class family as you described, you could end up passing the 11+. Your story is very unusual. Tell us more about your village and what happened to the other person who also passed (11+).
- IG The place is called Egeley near Reading which had a huge overspill council estate where many people had relocated from London and other places. So it was very kind of working class commuter town/village or progressively suburban village where I grew up. It became more suburban and you got more and more kids there and the pattern of there only being one or two kids at grammar school probably changed. But when I grew up I can remember the only other boy who passed (11+), was a boy

called David Cripps. There were only two of us and he never finished at grammar school anyway. He left to become a builder. So I was the only one in a way from that whole village who left the village to go to the grammar school which was 4 miles away and I took a lot of pressure for that because it divided me from my mates.

SG So from being a streetwise boy who was hardly at home, playing happily with other boys, having practical jokes and so on, to becoming the only boy to finish the grammar school, it must have been a huge transformation. Let's first return to an earlier moment when you realised that you could read. This was something your parents were never able to do. How did you feel?

Asking this question Scherto evokes incredibly strong memories for me. It is Proustian sensation. I would suspect this is because she is taking me back to a place of «transgression», a place of «border-crossing». For the first time in my life I am going outside the confines of my own tribe. Geographically I am beginning to journey—the library is outside our village (which doesn't have one), the school I am heading towards is miles away from our tribal territory. She is taking me back to a point of «rupture» which is vividly remembered:

IG I remember now, as we speak, the smell of the boards in the library, where my mother took me to get the first book. I remember the first book by Leonard Gribble which I took off the shelf and read and I can remember the smell and the excitement of books. I can remember Mum taking me to William Smith, a book shop to buy books because my parents had been told to buy me books. And being allowed to choose two books, I bought Malcolm Saville's *Lone Pine 5* which I have still got and I remember then sitting and reading... When I talk about the rift, there is a rift between this raffish streetwise kid, and I was a snotty nosed kid basically who loved to be kicking about with footballs and going out with girls, I loved all that and still do, and this other me that was alone, reading and absolutely absorbed in the world of *Lone Pine 5*, just taken to another place by a book.

So from the beginning, there is a strange double-side to my personality which continues today: one side is this great love of raffish, romantic street life and the other, a profound isolated scholarly kind of solipsism. They are both part of me.

SG How did these two aspects of your persona exist simultaneously in you after you stepped outside of your village? You referred to that moment as a kind of rift, or a rupture. Looking back, how would you consider the impact of such transgression on you and your family? Do you see yourself break away from the fundamentally deprived working class life? Had this new journey set you apart from your family and the others in the village?

IG Well... we talk about various sorts of other people, but I suppose the relationship I spent the most time thinking about as an 11 year old child when I began to go to Grammar school was my father who I loved passionately. Of course for him this was a real difficulty because it was like having a cuckoo in the nest really. You've got this little bird that you've brought into the world and then suddenly the bird is doing a range of things which could challenge your sense of competence in the world. A lot of the things about me came from that moment, for example, from the fact that I never wanted to have my Dad's essential competences challenged. So his essential competences include that he is very good with his hands, he drives a car, and various other things like that. And I always thought the best way to handle this is for him to have his own expertises and for me to have a different set of expertises and for us therefore to be equal, for him to be unchallenged by my unusual emerging competences. So the fact that I still don't drive, and I'm useless with my hands and so on comes back from that moment. Of course, most people would have learnt to do those things some time later, but for me, I hold onto these strange moments of rupture in some strange pathological way.

And as far as my Mum goes, in what I have come to understand, is that she was a profoundly intelligent woman as was my Dad in a way, but would really have loved to have had a creative, academic life. And I was always aware of that, and felt really sorry for the frustration that she felt with her life as she lived to 104 and was still trying to find a way to be creative. So I think in some ways, my life project was partly related to her sense of frustration, partly guided by it as well. So each of the parents, both of whom are very dear to me (obviously when you are an only child you know your parents in that particular way), had influenced the way I responded.

The difficulties which border-crossings posed were considerable within the working class family. They were echoed and exacerbated when played

out in the wider working class culture. At this time it is important to stress the culture was well-established and broad-based. In my case these tensions were part of the «negotiations» with my own band of mates. The rupture of going from the village to the grammar school posed particular problems for my gang of mates.

IG The biggest problem though was of course my mates and probably to understand the continuity in my sense of self you'd have to really think about what it is like to be the one boy in the village who dresses up in a blue venetian coat with a yellow hat with tassels on, to ride through the council estate to go to school. I can still hear them yelling out «grammar grub» and throwing mud pies at me on my first day of going to school. And of course the second day, I took off the coat, took off the hat and just rode to school. What I was always able somehow to do was to confront that reaction, which is a collective fear of otherness. There, the tribe was expressing that one of the «buggers» was trying to escape the tribe and that was me, and I was elected to do that. And how did I handle that? I suppose that's the key to understanding me now –I handled it. Within weeks, I was on the same page with them again and they never commented again. Indeed my best friends, when I got to uni, used to take me out drinking and would not let me pay –they would say it's for you to get through university. So I kind of found a way of negotiating my difference and so I probably have an exaggerated sense of valuing people like that– ordinary people who can cope with your difference and in a sense, your trajectory of escape and deal with it with such beauty. So I am trying to honour those people, I think, ever since. I valued their response because it was so generous spirited. If somebody is trying to escape you would think it would be mud pies forever, but within weeks it was, «Hi Iv, how you doin? Good luck at school». And that negotiation, that capacity to carry people with you, is something I think I've learnt.

SG There is a general tendency to celebrate social mobility and presumably, for any educational system, it is to see more kids from working class backgrounds become young Ivor. That might be considered the ultimate success for some. So looking back, did you recall families in the village telling their children: «Look, Ivor has made it! If you work hard, you will make it too». In other words, did the people in your village see going to a grammar school an escape-route and a path to upward mobility for them?

Looking back, it is hard to re-evolve the feel of working class culture in the 1950s. There was a strong sense of solidarity of shared purpose. There was also a sense that the group was «on the march». That history was on its side. The 1945 election victory and the enormous achievements of the post-war Labour government had left a mark on the sense of esteem and purpose of the working class. My own uncle George had a workers-of-the-world-unite flag over the fireplace and was forever lecturing us on «Labour's March to Victory». So notions of solidarity and shared destiny set against notions of the individual meritocratic advancement.

IG Well this is where I think it is difficult to re-evolve historical periods. I was born in 1943, so we are talking about England in the early 50s, a very, very poor country with huge solidarities among the working class communities and a sense of their own growing power. You've got to realise that in 1945, the Labour government celebrates ordinary people and tries to build a world for them a new Jerusalem with a welfare system; build schools and hospitals that would be good for everybody. So there is a strong sense of a class of people that were winning, on the march and therefore a class of people you'd have to be mad to escape from. So social mobility in such a context is a rather odd move and I would say in some ways it still is. But you now face a situation where that sense of class solidarity and class success has been dismantled like the factories. So now all you face is a kind of impoverished lower class from which everybody would want to escape. But in those days, no. It was not normal to wish to escape and it was not even thought to be terribly smart.

SG How did you feel at the time, when departing from your «tribe» and from that sense of optimism and esteem?

IG Well, let's fast forward. I'm 15. Do I want to go to university? Certainly not because all my mates are coming home with big wage packets from the factory while I am riding about on a second-hand cycle. They have all got large motorbikes with girlfriends on the back and they've got the fastest fashions. They have got everything I want —the motorbike, the clothes, the girlfriends. I am just the boy at the grammar school, still cycling through the council estate, doesn't have a penny in his pocket when he goes out with his friends, they have to buy the drinks, they have to pay for the food. No I didn't feel at all smart. So what did I do at 15, I left school to work in a factory. So in fact, I didn't feel privileged as a grammar school boy except for that

other me that I talked about —the sheer joy of learning which never left me. But in terms of its social usefulness, in terms of the attraction, I had very little at that time.

SG Before you go on recalling your life stories, could we just pause for a brief moment? I want to ask you something here: do I hear a tension in the way you described «the life on the margins»? The tension, to me, lies between a picture of marginality, in particular, low level literacy, labour-intense employment and a general sense of deprivation, and a depiction of working class pride and dignity, a sense of solidarity and optimism. Do you not see the tension yourself?

IG No, not really. It's seen as the margins by the establishment in the country. They don't see solidarity-based working class people as deserving of pride and dignity, but within the class we were still marginalised. I mean this proud class was not actually ever going to get the commanding power that it thought it was, but my point is that it thought it was on the march, it thought it was heading for power and it thought it was building a new Jerusalem. But in effect, none of that happened because the privileged groups which are now currently in power again made sure that didn't happen. They wanted to keep that group marginal and they successfully did it. And not only did they marginalise it, they virtually emasculated it in the 80s and 90s. That's what I've had to watch that the group I've honoured has been smashed by political forces, quite deliberately. That's a source of enormous sadness to me. I can't even describe how sad that still makes me, and to see such forces in power now, and to see the way they are clearly behaving in the same way, it's quite bizarre, as a bunch of corrupt monsters that I always thought they were...

At this stage in our conversation I have veered into my contemporary sense of the world. I would stress that there are continuities but Scherto rightly takes me back to an earlier place she is trying to get me to re-evaluate the process we call «location». Location is the process whereby we come to understand our own individual life in its cultural and historical settings. We develop a cognitive map, or the «theory of context» as we call it, of the cultural and political possibilities for living our life. If we do this, it is possible to deconstruct and reconstruct the script —the expectation which society has for us based on the space and the place we came from. In my case, that script pointed clearly to the factory where all my mates ended up or on the dole queue! The rupture came with the unexpected passage to the grammar school. But in the new

situation the landscape of the social order became somewhat clearer to me particularly I think because my out-of-school social milieu still remained the local estate and all my friends at the secondary modern and in the factory. So although I had been educationally re-located my gaze remained firmly a view through the eyes of my group, my tribe, my mates.

SG So shall we return to the point when you started the grammar school —now you were wearing jacket, tasselled hat and riding from your council estate to a different world. Can you recall the other children in the grammar school? In your eyes, what were they like at the time?

IG The school is between Wokingham and Egeley, both of which were quite respectable middle class areas. So only a few people, literally, physically came from the margins of working class villages or council estates. So you are probably talking about five per cent of the school being made up of anybody who was recognisably in my tribe. There are a number of clear distinguishing reasons for that —there are two places you could buy the jacket: one you got blue venetian cloth at Jacksons which was a high class outfitter, or you could get a rather shoddy blue jacket from the Co-op. So the five per cent of us, my shoddy blue jacket, I know, was paid for on HP. So from the beginning, it was clear who the five per cent were and very quickly the shoddy blue jackets lost their blue and became threadbare so that was all very clearly badged from the beginning. In my class there was one other boy who spoke with very clear Berkshire accents where you drop your «h»s and that's how we talked.²⁷ I used to love phoning my Dad up and we'd talk like that together. I've lost it to some extent, but, as I say, when I'm drunk I go straight back to it. So it's obviously an editing process has taken over my accent. But we were the two boys in school who talked like that, constantly being told to sound our «h»s and not to speak like that. So the result was that he and I were, there were twenty-seven kids in the class, twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh in every exam. We took our «O» Levels, I took nine and passed one; he took nine and failed them all.

SG No doubt it was quite a contrast to your early success when you went to your village school where you were able to pass the 11+.

²⁷ In Berkshire, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight and Oxfordshire it is possible to encounter similar accents. H-dropping: initial /h/ can often be omitted so «hair» and «air» become homophones. This is common in working-class speech in most parts of England.

IG Well I was among my tribe there you see. I didn't need to realise it as it was shoved right up my nose that I was the wrong kind of a kid to be at grammar school.

SG Are you saying that the kind of environment at the grammar school didn't really motivate you to do well?

IG No. It motivated me enormously —to resist with every bone in my body everything they were trying to do. So in English I would not speak the way they wanted me to, so I failed English; I would not accept that grammar and I would not lose my dialect. I would not, in other words, betray my tribe. I just wouldn't. I've always been stubborn like that.

It's more complicated than that because two or three of the teachers in the school were not conventional grammar school teachers. They were Socialists. One of them was a Welsh Socialist, Dai Rees who was a really brilliant man. Another one of them was Joe Pettit who was head of the local Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. So there were two or three deviant teachers inside the school who desperately wanted to take the working class kids forward. In fact, after I left school at 15 to work in the factory, Dai Rees essentially was the one who came to the factory and asked me to come back to school. He kind of adopted me. I spoke to him maybe twenty years ago to thank him for everything and he said: «Christ, you were a difficult kid but you were clever. I could see it, I could see you were a noble savage and I was determined that you wouldn't fail, I was determined that they wouldn't force you out».

So I mean it wasn't a monolithic social class system to purge us, the reproduction of the middle class, but there were some teachers, as there always are, who were prepared to rebel against that, and to try and nurture some of the noble savages from the working class that crept through the door. So there was a coterie of us, but I was the only one who stuck it out. I was the only one who went to sixth form and then I was the only one who went to university.

I loved the sixth form, I absolutely loved it. It was the thing I could not suppress in myself, even though I could read the social implications of everything, I think, not everything but some of it, I couldn't suppress my deep fascination with learning. When I was able to do History and Economics with this guy, Dai Rees, so that the two things were brought together, he wasn't ambivalent about my nasty class background and his fascination with learning. The fascination with books and history just took me into another zone. So in spite of my social

resistance, my sense of marginality, my fury at the way the school ran, I, nonetheless, became a good student.

FROM DIS-EMBEDDING TO RE-LOCATING – THE JOURNEY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY

What this interview extract illustrates is an emerging sense of how we begin to place ourselves in a cultural setting. It also shows how the on-going construction of our autobiographical memory plays out and inscribes our own changing view of the world. The autobiographical memory is an active intervention and interpretation of the social world as well as a site of learning, pedagogy and politics. Slowly as I progressed through school I began to see how I was perceived and located in the social order. The «badges» of my class position made «reading the social context» fairly easy. I was a son of manual workers with a marginal position in society and slowly I developed a «theory of context» relating to this location. Moreover at the time I began to develop a «course of action» which responded to that theory of context. My own take on «social mobility» involved simultaneously «holding on» while «moving out». This is not a unique response as many working class stories evidence. The following extract is from an interview with Melvyn Bragg who has become an official commentator on class and culture in Britain. At the age of seventy-two Lord Bragg says this about his autobiographical memory:

I think the working-class thing hasn't gone away and it never will go away. I don't try to make it go away. Quite a few of my interactions and responses are still the responses I had when I was eighteen or nineteen.²⁸

Likewise Frank Kermode²⁹ has written about the strange autobiographical positioning which comes from such social locations. Not only was he a working class scholarship boy but coming from the Isle of Man, so he

²⁸ C. Cadwalladr, «It's not where you come from...», *The New Review, The Observer*, 12 (2012).

²⁹ Sir John Frank Kermode FBA (29 November 1919 – 17 August 2010) was a British literary critic best known for his work *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, published in 1967 (revised 2000), and for his extensive book-reviewing and editing. He was the Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature at University College London and the King Edward VII Professor of English Literature at Cambridge University. Kermode was known for many works of criticism, and also as editor of the popular Fontana Modern Masters series of introductions to modern thinkers. He was a regular contributor to the *London Review of Books* and *The New York Review of Books*

had a double sense of being an outsider. Despite being internationally recognised as a literary theorist and holding many of the most prestigious professorships in his field, he retained his sense of marginality. The title of his autobiography epitomises this continuing sense of himself and his trajectory. It is called *Not Entitled*.³⁰ Whatever worldly success he achieved he continued to hold onto a sense of himself as marginal, «outside» and without an enduring sense of entitlement. This narrative settlement was based on a finely honed «theory of context» which he developed and his narrative ruminations on the meaning of life have enormous sophistication. He saw the narrative quest, in his felicitous phrase, as «a search for intelligible endings».

The process of dis-embedding is strangely ambivalent as my own story and that of Melvyn Bragg and Frank Kermode testify. For whilst the urge to dis-embed involves a quest for «something beyond», an understanding of the social location and situatedness of a life, it also quite plainly involves a «holding on» to the meaning of that location. For some that is the case, others of course in the more socially sanctioned version of mobility dis-embed and move on out to another social location.

For many, though, we follow the insight of Clive James on his migration to England when he says: «I had to go away to know what was there». I believe narrative journeys have a similar flavour. In some ways they are a pursuit of «knowing what is there» and then pursuing the narrative and existential consequences of that knowledge. In our terms, to develop «a theory of context» is to «come to know» our social history and social location in order to determine how we should be and act in the world. Only if we do that we can make any assessment of the crucial moral question of «whose side we are on» and begin to draw up a narrative of social purpose or as we call it later «a life theme».

In a sense we return to the spectrum. For some autobiographical memory is a rendition of what happened and that which happened often, following fairly closely the «birth right script» the person was handed. This is a less agentic, more socially passive version of lived experiences. For many, though, autobiographical memory provides a platform for social investigation and dis-embedding and provides key opportunities for learning. ■

³⁰ John Frank Kermode, *Not Entitled: a memoir* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).

Note on the contributor:

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