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Introduction: Markings

Evidence of tattooing and related practices comes to us from the earliest human societies. For example, Egyptian mummies from the period of the Middle Kingdom have revealed an extensive culture of body marking. In a religious cosmology, the inalienable tattoos of this world could be bartered for spiritual privileges in the next. In these traditional cultures, tattoos generally functioned to guarantee good health and to ward off evil. Throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East, even after the spread of puritanical Islam, tattoos and amulets protected the individual from the evil eye (Hildburgh, 1955). In Hawaii, tattoos were also employed to memorialize deceased relatives and in Indonesia they were indicative of important secular accomplishments (Cohen, 1994). The period of 19th-century colonialism was when social anthropologists became increasingly aware of the relationship between Otherness and tattooing as ethnographic work in the cultures of Melanesia and Polynesia revealed an amazing tradition of body art. Anthropological investigations have uncovered the liminality associated with transitional stages in the life-cycle, where ecstatic experiences were produced by standing outside conventional roles. Tattoos are important in signifying these transitions.

These body marks in pre-literate societies were permanent, collective and largely obligatory. Because they were set within a shared culture of collective meanings, the significance of a tattoo could be read unambiguously. Tattoos in

traditional societies were not set within a cultural framework where ironic and simulated interpretations were possible. Following Mary Douglas's orientation to the principles of social membership as expressed through bodily modifications, body marks (which I use as a short-hand for tattooing, piercing, cicatrization, painting and so forth) indicate social membership through the metaphor of the human body as a space where we think about and constitute the body politic (Douglas, 1966). In particular, body marks designate political (specifically gender) identity at certain points in the life-cycle. They are significant in demarcating stages in sexual maturity. The ritual mutilation of the penis in Australian aboriginal communities is a dramatic illustration which designated male identity at a point in the life-cycle where boys crossed over into adulthood (Spencer and Gillen, 1997). Changes in the nature and purpose of tattoos indicate changes in the nature and purpose of social life. By contrast, the contemporary interest in tattoos is no longer confined, as in earlier periods of Western industrialization, to the working-class, youth culture or criminal communities, but extends through the social scale as tattoos are increasingly used to produce an aesthetic enhancement of the body. Tattooing is now more closely related to the commercial exploitation of sexual themes in popular culture than to life-cycle transitions. In short, tattoos have become a regular aspect of consumer culture, where they add cultural capital to the body's surface.

However, the need to imitate the body markings of other and earlier cultures in contemporary primitivism can be taken as further evidence in postmodern cultures of what we might fruitfully term the exhaustion of idiom. Because a culture of simulation does not easily produce, permit or accept 'authenticity', popular idioms are necessarily cliches. Traditional Maori or Japanese signs are woven into global consumerism, where they are endlessly modernized, producing a complex hybridization of signs and messages. Globalization has produced a melange of tattoos which are ironically self-referential and repetitive, and the very hybridity of tattoo genres playfully questions the authenticity of these commercial body marks. This erosion of the compulsory and serious nature of tattooing as a means of cutting social meaning and membership simultaneously into the flesh is a feature of the general secularization of society. It was Emile Durkheim who described religion as 'the serious life' and hence the playful nature of the modern consumerized body mark is an index of the death of God in the contemporary world.

My argument is that we need to understand traditional tattooing within the context of a theory which connects human embodiment to social processes, especially processes of production and reproduction, because tattoos measured the progress of individuals through the life-cycle. The reproduction of bodies

(through family formation in households) and the production of wealth (through the economy) are tied together in traditional societies (through laws of inheritance and patriarchy). The meaning of body marks had a certain stability because they were embedded in social processes (sexual and economic production) which were traditional, but in modern societies these social linkages are either broken or at least eroded by transformations in both gender relations and the economy. Love is no longer a prelude to marriage and in this sense romantic passion is a free-floating desire. Body marks no longer need to indicate or to define gender in the life-cycle, and so they become optional, playful and ironic.

It is useful to think about these playful marks as illustrations of the neo-tribalism which is described in Michel Maffesoli's *The Time of the Tribes* (1996) via a reflection on Nietzsche's Dionysus theme. Tattoos and body piercing are no longer functional, but indicate the social construction of traditional patterns of sociability in the modern world. Tattoos operate in a field of Dionysian desire and consumer pleasure, but consumerism has not produced its own (authentic) mythology or consumer theology, and therefore tattoos have no cosmic foundation from which meaning could be derived. Hence they are often parasitic upon the Other and the primitive; they consciously simulate primitive images of sexuality. While Maffesoli's work is suggestive in understanding the creative playfulness of consumer body marks, Nietszche's critique of mass society in the concept of 'the herd' and his commitment to the heroic struggle of the Overman against the modern tribe is hardly compatible with Maffesoli's playful postmodernism.

Drawing somewhat on Marshall McLuhan (1964) I develop a typology of society in terms of two dichotomies – thick and thin solidarity, and cool and hot loyalties. In traditional tribalism, membership was thick/hot and required obligatory body marks. In postmodern neo-tribalism, membership is voluntary (thin/cool) and hence marking is optional. Such a characterization of the division between tradition and modernity rests explicitly on Durkheim, for whom membership of primitive societies often gave rise, through ritual practice, to effervescence. Australian aboriginal society has played an important role in shaping anthropological and sociological views of society. The description of these cultures by B. Spencer and F.J. Gillen (1997) was fundamental in Durkheim's conceptualization of the sacred/profane dichotomy. Certain body modifications in aboriginal society were in fact voluntary. Tooth evulsion, for example, was optional. For the Arunta, tooth evulsion was partly a matter of personal taste and fashion, being performed before marriage. The removal of the tooth represents the arrival of a dark cloud. The tooth is thrown in the direction of the mother's camp but it has no initiatory importance. By contrast, circumcision has a general significance in marking the passage to adulthood and maturity. These rites mark

the various points in the life-cycle and hence these body marks are part of a compulsory set of stages in the transition to adult status (Berndt and Berndt, 1964). They indicate forcefully the separation between the collective sphere of sacred objects and experiences, and the everyday profane world of utilitarian actions. They contrast fundamentally with modern tattoos which are optional, decorative, impermanent and narcissistic.

If we were to develop a metaphor to characterize the fleeting and transitory nature of contemporary culture, then we could argue that postmodern society resembles an airport departure lounge where membership is optional (thin/cool) as passengers wait patiently for the next action to unfold through the exit doorway. We are all *flâneurs* when we survey others bodies for playful marks as we consume the surface of other bodies. Gazing at the lifestyles of other passengers becomes a pleasurable pastime, suitable to fill the time prior to departure. Reading body marks is, however, an uncertain form of textual practice because there are no necessary linkages between marks and roles. Body marks are typically narcissistic, being playful signs to the self. They are part of a personal and interior biography, and not an obligatory feature of collective memory.

Metaphors of Traditional and Modern Society

The social sciences operate through and by means of a series of powerful metaphors of society. In late 19th- and early 20th-century sociological imagination, the distinction between community and association played a major part in shaping German academic perspectives on the emergence of industrial society (Liebersohn, 1988). The original intention was to distinguish between two types of consciousness, but the typology has been used mainly to describe two contrasted forms of society and the impact of the process of modernization. Traditional society was defined in terms of the existence of a dense network of solidarity and commonality, a shared culture and system of rituals, and the dominance of collective over individual arrangements. Broadly speaking, traditional societies are rural, tribal, nomadic and politically stationary. By contrast, modern society is urban, industrial, individualistic and dynamic; its culture is, at least formally, secular, individualistic and unstable. This 'ideal type' construction was elaborated by many generations of sociologists through the 20th century in, for example, Durkheim's contrast between mechanical solidarity in traditional society based on shared rituals and organic solidarity in modern society based on the social reciprocity which flows from the division of labour. Max Weber's description of the iron cage of bureaucracy, Theodor Adorno's notion of the 'administered society' and Michel Foucault's concept of the carceral can be interpreted as part of the

legacy of the use of *Gesellschaft* as a narrative of modernization. In its essential connotations, *Gesellschaft* is the market place of anonymous strangers who come together to celebrate modernity but under the constraints of personal alienation, moral estrangement and social anomie. The metaphors of modernity in sociology have therefore been primarily nostalgic (Turner, 1987).

We can view the concepts of risk society and McDonaldization as attempts to provide a new understanding of modern society based on the principle of *Gesellschaft*. Modernity is seen by George Ritzer (1993) to be highly regulated and controlled, whereas for Ulrich Beck (1992) reflexive modernity is characterized by unobserved and uninsured risk. However, they both describe a world characterized by the meeting of strangers in an unfamiliar environment where trust is paramount, albeit a form of trust which is more assumed than perceived. We have seen that 'market' was a traditional metaphor for associational relationships which are open and anonymous, but perhaps the best metaphor for such a society, as I have indicated, would be the airport departure lounge. Richard Sennett (1994: 349) observes that the we live in a world 'whose architectural emblem is the airport waiting lounge'. The flight departure lounge is an arena of strangers, nervously but nonchalantly awaiting their turn to depart. They have no commitment to each other or to their place; their social relations are fragmented and fleeting. Because they have no intention to stay or to settle, they are the ultimate 'lonely crowd' (Riesman et al., 1950).

The lounge itself is highly regulated, and yet uncertain and hazardous. Things tend to go wrong despite the confident and simulated charm of the ground staff. Flights are delayed and cancelled; staff may go on strike; there are the routine risks of food poisoning and viral infections from other travellers. There can be more spectacular risks, such as hijacking, international terrorism and mid-flight crashes. In periods of international instability, passenger craft may be shot down by both friendly and enemy fire. Modern international travel involves a mass transport system which is characterized by high risk, and therefore by minute and detailed control and surveillance. The notion that society as a whole could be metaphorically described as an airport departure lounge is useful for this general debate, because airports combine the perspectives of both risk society and McDonaldization. International travel perfectly illustrates Beck's notion of risk because travel is a function of modernization and international travel systems multiply and extend risks. As a result they require heavy regulation and control through Taylorism and Fordism, namely through McDonaldization. The airport can act as a metaphor of the whole because many activities have this quality of individualism, time-out, alienation and pointless leisure – such as channel-hopping in which the passive viewer recklessly (one might say) skips through the imaginary world

of television. The couch in the television room can act as the focus of domesticated ennui as one's personal departure lounge.

We can expand this metaphor to begin to develop what I want to term an ironic theory of communication (Turner, 1998). We can initially elaborate the *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft* typology along two separate dimensions. Let us first assert that forms of solidarity can be either thick or thin. As I have indicated, thick solidarities perfectly describe the world of the Arunta people of Durkheim's mechanical solidarity in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Durkheim, 1912). Their social world involved closed communities, roaming over a virtually unlimited terrain in search of food. Their social relations were solid, permanent, emotive and effervescent. By contrast, modern societies organized around the industrial corporation and the market place are based on thin solidarities as described for example by Georg Simmel (1968) in his account of urban mentalities and the stranger. Modern urban society is the world of the stranger who is geographically mobile and socially transient.

The next theoretical distinction is drawn from McLuhan's notion (1964) of hot and cool communications. In his studies of modern communication systems, McLuhan argued that radio is a hot form of communication whereas the telephone, which offers a unidimensional communication with high definition, is cool. I wish to modify this notion to suggest that we can define social commitments or loyalties as either hot or cool. Strangers have a limited and superficial attachment to local communities; their involvement is always predicated on uncertainty and psychological distance. We can characterize this mode of commitment through the postmodern liberalism of Richard Rorty (1989), who describes postmodern liberalism in terms of systematic doubt about the validity of 'final' vocabularies. An ironist always holds her view of the world in doubt; it is always subject to revision and amendment. In short, the society, or at least our picture of it, is provisional.

Now this culture of ironic reflection appears to describe perfectly the world of postmodernity as characterized by thin solidarities and cool commitments. If modernity involves thick solidarities (nationalism) and hot loyalties (ideological certainty), then the postmodern world is one of shifting or thin solidarities and ironic or cool loyalties. Such a world is described sociologically by the development of the revisable self and the negotiated community of temporary loyalties. Its primary style of communication is ironic, tentative and reflexive; it will eschew ideological hotness and moral certainty, in favour of more relativistic and hesitant opinions and attitudes. Its predominant rhetoric will be couched in terms of questions and provisional statements rather than assertions of irrefutable fact and dogmatic logic. Irony is all too conscious of the risk that what

we take to be a confident description of reality today may appear absurd tomorrow.

These theoretical arguments provide us with a useful matrix of social life. As I have argued, cool loyalties/thin solidarities express and describe the world of postmodernism where attachments to social reality are ironic, because they are incompatible with 'grand narratives' (Lyotard, 1987). These reflexive attachments are the exact opposite of political nationalism (hot/thick), where social relations are bifurcated around the contrast between Friend/Enemy. In the language of Carl Schmitt (1976), the political is defined by the violence between insiders/outsiders, a conflict which makes political life moral and meaningful. We can argue that cool/thick relations might be typical of how enthusiastic utopians describe the new Internet communities or virtual groups. Passing enthusiasm for various aspects of popular culture could be described as hot in commitment but thin in terms of forming lasting communities. Because boundaries and borders in contemporary Western societies are not marked by exclusionary body rituals, tattoos become superficial marks.

In a historical context, we can claim that the rise of the nation state from the 17th to the 19th century as the principal administrative unit of modern politics required a more intense pattern of loyalty as the traditional solidarity of religion declined. The new solidarity was nationalism which sought to replace religion as the basis of solidarity in the form of hot commitments and thick solidarities. This period saw the rise of modern citizenship in its nationalistic form as the primary mechanism of hot/thick attachments; it was also the period in which bourgeois civil society as the arena of rational communication was triumphant. This dream of a solidaristic nation-state has been challenged by modern processes of globalization and modernization which drives the political community in the direction of cool/thin modalities of organization. National governments have to presuppose an ethnically homogeneous society, which of course is a state of affairs constantly contradicted by multiculturalism, indigenous people's movements and labour migration.

Tattooing during the period of nation formation was often part of an oppositional culture in which working-class males expressed their class solidarity or occupational solidarity through body marks. State strategies of governmentality interpreted tattoos as part of the culture of the criminal or underclasses. Body-marking was now used for classification and stigmatization. For example, in France criminals were branded with letters to mark their particular crimes (Falk, 1995). In German concentration camps, Jews were branded under National Socialism with numbers as a mark of their expulsion and subordination. These marks were bureaucratically cool, but they also indicated the presence of thick

social groups defined by blood and descent into Jews and not-Jews. Branding became part of a routine bureaucratic process of scientific governmentality.

The airport departure lounge captures metaphorically the consequences of globalization for commitment and loyalty, but it also captures the temporary and fleeting nature of modern social relationships. Travellers have multiple commitments, weak affiliations, loose associations and tentative arrangements. Just as flights can be cancelled and re-negotiated, so everyday relations of intimacy are open to negotiation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Adultery rates could be said to communicate this sense of the temporary nature of commitment. In the postmodern world, flight destinies are open to negotiation and are not permanent or compulsory. Social space, like social relations, can be sampled and tested prior to occupancy. The departure lounge captures the uncertainties of modern life, its ennui, anxiety and fragility. The exit sign offers departure, relief and an escape from boredom and routine. It is an arena of risk and uncertainty, but it is also highly regulated; it offers the promise of regulated and normalized excitement.

We can conceptualize modern societies in terms of different segments of the class structure by reference to their degree of incorporation in the global economy. With the growth of tourism and global travel, larger sections of society adopt personality types which are associated with fleeting, thin and fragmentary relations. The growth of global corporate labour markets has been driven by the emergence of what Robert Reich (1991) has called the 'symbolic analyst'; these professional, white-collar workers include the cluster of professional, business and academic elites who control, develop and manage symbolic, knowledge and information systems. The symbolic analyst is the mental worker of the new global corporation; their loyalties are to international firms and their solidarities are dispersed and fragmented. Because they are ironically cool about social commitments and loyalties, their political orientation may indeed be close to disloyalty. The new lumpenproletariat or underclass who inhabit the unskilled or deskilled casual labour market are neither culturally nor physically mobile in the world economy. Because they are stuck in a sector of the market which is underdeveloped, they are more likely to adopt a neo-tribal mentality which fits their wish for therapeutically thick/hot communities. Gang-land, football clubs, the 'local community', and British pub rock bands are expressions of local solidarity, but they are also partly simulated forms of traditional communalism. Where their neo-tribalism spills over into genuine fascism, their version of belonging can become overtly hostile to the cosmopolitanism of the global market. Tattoos survive in this group as a primary mark of hot/thick loyalties. In traditional working-class occupations, tattoos often unofficially marked occupational membership such as sailor or soldier. Tattoos indicated membership of a male

culture of work and hardship. In the modern world of unemployment, tattoos on hands or foreheads which proclaim 'Hate' are indicative of alienation and separation rather than masculine mateship. By contrast, discrete and aesthetic butterflies and flowers on the shoulders and backs of fashion models and middle-class professional women are sexual consumer images; they are removeable adornments.

The Return of Dionysus: Maffesoli's Tribes

The playfulness of sexual imagery in modern society is produced by the separation which has taken place between reproduction, household and economy. In traditional societies, the link between the body and economic wealth was made obvious by laws of inheritance, especially through the principles of primogeniture and patriarchy (Turner, 1997). In feudalism, the social accumulation of landed property within dominant families rested on a system of successful marriage alliances. This pattern of inheritance was backed up by Catholic theological doctrine with its emphasis on female chastity, virginity, filial piety and social duties (of reproduction). Confession of (sexual) guilt functioned as a mechanism of social control to enforce these patterns of reproductive behaviour. In medieval times, monastic celibacy stood alongside and contrasted with domestic debauchery, because marriage was a necessary evil. Even among the refined court of knights, true love in the tradition of the minstrels and Arabic lyric poetry was adulterous love. The Protestant ethic (Weber, 1930) transferred the sexual ideology of the monastery into the domestic sphere, enjoining discipline on all. It was from this historical transition that contemporary theories of Western sex had their origin in a contrast between Dionysian pleasure and Apollonian control, namely in the work of Nietzsche, Weber, Freud and Adorno (Stauth and Turner, 1988). Capitalism required ascetic control and self-discipline, and hence sexual neurosis was manifest in female hysteria, masturbatory insanity and agoraphobia. As a result, women became the principal objects of bourgeois sciences of sexual conduct.

This strict relationship between reproduction and economics has broken down with capitalist industrialization. For example, there is no longer a clear relationship between ownership and management control; the banks play a central role, not families, in providing loans for investment; and family capitalism has been partly replaced by the international corporations. These economic changes provided the background to the transformation of the nuclear family, the rise of the romantic ethos, the sexualization of youth culture and the political emancipation of women. The romantic youth complex brought in a period of sexual

experimentation, high rates of adultery, divorce and remarriage, and installed the contemporary fascination with love and intimacy. Youth culture dominates consumer culture to such an extent that there is no clear demarcation of age structures; life-cycle and consumption have no precise relationship. The democratization of love (Giddens, 1992) has followed this great corrosion of the linkage between economic production and sex. The contemporary impermanent 'paint-on' tattoo is indicative of the transferable loyalties of the postmodern passenger.

In metaphorical terms, the airport with its thin/cool relationships contrasts with other possibilities in the matrix of social positions. In modern societies, there is a revival of 'neo-tribalism' (Maffesoli, 1996) and, as aspects of utilitarian individualism are challenged by new versions of subjectivity, emotive communities such as football crowds contrast with the sober discipline of industrialized factories. While modernization brought about both individuation and separation, affective groups survived in everyday society as sites of collective solidarity. These 'little masses' are distinguished by their special clothing, sports and adornments, including tattoos. These emotional communities have resisted the processes of rationalization and bureaucratization which are typical of the public sphere based on the social contract. Maffesoli identifies these neo-tribal groupings – football clubs, working-class gangs, social movements and primary groups in the everyday world – as sites where Dionysian affective and orgiastic experiences are possible.

These neo-tribal configurations might correspond to the survival of hot/thick ensembles of social relationships in a mass society, which are quite different from the thin/cool relations of globalized social communities in the airport. Metaphorically the virtual community (Rheingold,1993) is seen to be a web homestead, where solidarities are possible but through a series of loyalties which remain cool. TV evangelism by contrast has a hot message, but it cannot form the thick solidarities which characterized 19th-century sectarianism. However, one can also argue that these affective relationships are themselves highly simulated and artificial. Working-class football clubs are quickly incorporated into global financial interests, 'communities' are organized by town-planning processes in the interests of protecting 'neighbourhoods', oppositional styles such as Punk become part of the consumer culture of late capitalism, and tattoos are sold as the commercial designs of an aesthetic lifestyle. These elements of cultural commercialism are, however, far removed from Nietzsche's vision of Dionysus as a dangerous and violent god. Nietzsche employed the image of the orgiastic god primarily as a criticism of traditional scholarly views of classical Greek society as orderly and rational, and his sense of a revitalization of culture through music is not compatible with Maffesoli's everyday emotionalism. In any case, contemporary

society is 'postemotional' society because individuals no longer respond effectively to the cues and signs of emotion (Mestrovic, 1997); they may be emotionally unable to respond to the neo-tribal habitus.

Conclusion: The World of the Ironic Passenger

The principal theme of this article is the emergence of ironic consumption, the evolution of thin/cool social relationships and the transformation of body marks from compulsory rituals to optional decorations. The modern tattoo is an expression of the growing individualism of contemporary society. The tattoo is simply another sign to be read within consumer culture, but these signs are ironic. They require cool reading, which does not encourage engagement with or contamination by the sign itself. Rational debate within the traditional political space did not encourage irony, parody and bathos. Traditional political and social realities assumed that the social actor was serious and had a capacity for commitment. I have suggested through a discussion of metaphor that if social relations are becoming thin and cool as a result of globalization, then irony and scepticism about grand narratives are produced by the very processes of reflexive modernity which are described in Beck's version of the individualization of risk society. In my terms, the postemotional actor is a member of the airport departure lounge, in the sense that she is blase, indifferent to traditional signs of commitment and remote from the conventional signs of caring. Her tattoos are surface indicators of identity and attachment. Furthermore, the modern tattoo is merely a cliche, borrowing from and adapting Polynesian patterns, Japanese motifs and Chinese military emblems. The aesthetic and sexual tattoo of the middle classes is a product of the thin/cool relationships of a postmodern culture in which there is an exhaustion of idiom. In such a culture, primitiveness must necessarily be simulated and ironic. It is doubtful that being a serious primitive is possible, because committed primitivism is no longer a feasible option.

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