

The Rule of the Roles

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late 1980s

Everyday life is an orchestrated affair. Stage-managed and performed, an improvisation based on an array of presuppositions and patterns, it is becoming simulation. The organization of life, of social activity, is not immune to the modern ascent of representation, nor its ability to insinuate itself everywhere, becoming not only part of the fabric of society but the fabric of reality as well.

Representations are reproduced, inauthenticity perpetuated, as society reproduces itself daily. This includes the reproduction of the social relations that have come to define the individual in our society, and the reproduction of the socializing processes that form a psychic structure corresponding to the existing social order, an internalized representation of society, its divisions, its operations, its values, norms, and presuppositions. Molding the psychic structure of individual consciousness enables society to reproduce the forms of organization that predominate, and perpetuate a social life oriented towards economic growth, the development of society's productive forces, the reproduction of capital. Society is oriented towards this goal, and its achievement is given the appearance of a natural occurrence.

In a society organized for the reproduction of capital, individuals are valorized as commodities. Their exchange value is determined by their capacity for animating the roles they have assumed throughout their lives, the entire trajectory of the roles which make up their histories.

This trajectory is an education, a process of socialization: the accommodation of the self to roles in general and the tailoring required for any specific role. The individual learns how to handle his roles as well as develop the experience to interact with other roles within the enterprises and associations in which he participates.

The role is an inauthentic self; it's what makes the individual functional in capitalist society and its concentrated, state bureaucratic permutations. The role permits the manipulation of the individual as an object, suitable for authoritarian management, and more importantly (due to the cultivation of a psychology of dependence), incapable of self-management, a form of social life that would require the collective transcendence of the rule of the roles.

The role integrates the individual into the culture of domination and allows capital to colonize the individual through the entire artillery of ideology and the forms of organization that put the individual, through his role, in the service of the economy, of reproducing capital, creating wealth.

The role provides a context for the individual within the hierarchical enterprises through which social life is articulated and governed. The role is a home for those who have never gotten lost,

a haven for those unnerved even by that prospect, and a prison-house for those engaged in the project of role refusal.

The role is the self-objectified. It is a thing which can be acted upon, stimulated, and modified, and makes the individual vulnerable to the force, persuasion, and seduction of social exigencies and the "spectacular media assault" designed and erected by skilled technicians, by the masters of conditioning, by all the artisans of commerce and production constructing the discourse of capital. Skepticism and refusal are the only antidotes to this pressure and exhortation, but that stance can be exhausting. Most are worn out and surrender. Those who pride themselves on maintaining their defiance are doomed to eventually discover themselves also typecast, as rebels, outcasts, bohemians, or sociopaths. These roles may be marginal, and only loosely linked to the dominant culture, but they are roles nevertheless and represent modeled behavior.

The reproduction of capital requires the reproduction of the society which makes that orientation possible. This requires the reproduction of roles, for it is roles that are the basic units of our society; individuals are recognized by the roles they animate. Individuals must be stereotyped into modeled forms of behavior facilitating their placement in society in the service of social goals.

This modeling is the continuous denial and repression of individual subjectivity. The role is the objectification of this denial. In it one can locate all the habits, practices, predispositions, and programmed behavior patterns, everything which allows the individual to survive in a society governed by competing and complementary hierarchies of roles. Some roles embody the values of the dominant culture; they are role models, the very model of modeled behavior, and are emulated by others who see in them "positive" images, behavior to be reproduced. Even the unconventional is emulated and becomes conformism. To be different without being distinctive is one way of being the same. Through their roles individuals are able to live stereotypes.

The role mediates authenticity, preventing the experience of directly lived life. One does not experience any particular generalized activity, one experiences the responsibilities and duties demanded by one's role in that activity. If at times it appears social life permits individuals to transcend their roles, this is merely the assumption, the animation of another preexisting role, or perhaps even the creation of a new role, but it is not transcendence at all. It is a new context, a replacement into the hierarchically structured enterprises that predominate: a new role, with new, specialized duties, and the power to execute those tasks or ensure their accomplishment.

The powers lodged in a role do not belong to the individual; the individual mediates the power residing in the role. Roles require the lives of their players; they absorb the energy of the individual. The individual abdicates his self-power to the hierarchies in which he participates. Participation is contingent upon this renunciation. It is the roles which animate society, and orchestrated, stage-managed activity is experienced as authentic.

An awareness of separation from authenticity must be prevented from emerging. Individuals are compelled to identify with their roles. It's what allows the individual to be more than a nothing or a nobody, a nincompoop or nogoodnik. The power of roles is attractive, like the moon to a moth, and is seen as the only possible form of human power. One is denied power as an individual, but can partake in or mediate the power exercised and allocated by the hierarchies of roles. One can advance through the hierarchies, skillfully meeting the demands of the roles encountered, becoming those roles, believing in those roles and all others. In this manner the power of roles is internalized.

The legitimacy of a "superior" role is acknowledged when that authority is internalized by others as they abdicate power over that part of their life to the dominion of the "superior" role. By internalizing the authority of another's role, the individual also internalizes his or her own powerlessness; then he or she enunciates it, advertises it, but it is a silent pronouncement. It is obedience and acquiescence, accommodation and submissiveness; it is the glue that holds together hierarchical enterprises and activity, and ensures the survival, the reproduction of the dominant social relations, social relations mediated by roles. Internalizing the power of roles facilitates and reinforces the idea of the necessary domination of some men or women over others and makes the existence of this domination appear natural.

This psychological process of internalization legitimates the division of society into hierarchies of roles. Having thoroughly identified their role with themselves, those in subordinate roles tend to instinctively defend their position, their role. They believe they are defending themselves, for in the culture of domination the role is necessary for the survival of the individual. It serves as both a threat and a protective shield. It is the projected self-image of the individual, obscured, refracted, mutilated in the mediating process; it is the personal organization of appearances. The role is animated by the individual, who brings it to life, makes it breathe and move, and then mistakes it for a self. The individual rationalizes the role, justifies it, makes it amenable, important, necessary, and rejects the idea of role refusal, seeing in it only the negation of self and not the negation of roles, not emancipation from the forms of social organization that have required the sacrifice of self-powers, that have denied people the right to create the situations in which they might be engaged, and that have instead constrained the range of desires to a limited but ambiguous set of predetermined choices and opportunities.

The circumscription of individuals and their lives into limiting roles tends to prevent a view of the structure of society as a whole and the individual's role within it. This lack of a structural view of the organization of society, the organization of roles, instills in many individuals insecurity, anxiety, and frustration, predicating impotence in the face of forces originating from the centers of power to which the individual has at best only a one-way connection, through the enterprises and associations in which he participates.

The centralization of decision making processes, apparent especially in the wave of mergers and acquisitions recently preoccupying the financial world, tends to subordinate community and personal interests to the exigencies of hierarchical enterprises and the larger context in which they function, the economy. The individual in the mass is distanced from the origin of the forces that affect him. This has, no doubt, contributed greatly to the creation of a population including many who have lost their will for rational discussion and social action. They have had no practice, there are no arenas or forums where their influence can be asserted and registered tangibly. The instruments and mechanisms for participation have been awarded to the specialists, to "superior" roles, and individuals have become both spectators and bit actors in an improvised drama, reproducing the predetermined. Most roles have no projects of their own, but merely fulfill the routines that already exist. Immersed in role routine and regimentation, most individuals are unable to transform or transcend their lives through reflection and discussion and action. They are dependent upon the hierarchies, in the service of the economy, regulated to maintain stable growth in the development of society's productive forces. Every role is involved in this project: producers, consumers, and the massive support staff which perpetuates both and therefore also itself. This project is dependent upon roles, and roles are dependent upon it. Accompanying the role is a loss of independence, leading to eventually the loss of the desire for independence. This

is the achievement of capital: the reproduction of the organizational forms and social relations that make this mutual dependency possible and the establishment of the global hegemony, albeit in various guises, of these forms as the model of social organization.

Role routine limits the realization of desire, suppresses it, cleanses the individual for the insinuation of desires compatible with social organization ordering. Desires personal and private that are inconsistent with the role's function must be diverted or suppressed, and avenues for their realization reduced and eliminated, so that those desires, dangerous and unmanageable, can be forgotten without being missed. Desire is the source of the individual's will to act, to engage the self-power which has been relinquished. Without that engagement there remains a void unfulfilled and room for a certain dissonance, a tension between the role and the individual. A substitute must be found; individuals are reduced to searching for what could be the richest and truest part of themselves in the actions and functions of other roles, in the modeled behavior of other individuals. This search is a vicarious existence, lived through television, movies, and print media, through rumor and gossip and news. It is shallow, insubstantial, and inauthentic, yet succeeds in deflecting desire that would have to be sought outside the realm of the dominant forms of organization and social life.

The power embodied by roles and the hierarchies of roles originates in the living activity of humanity. Society is organized and reproduced by men and women everywhere, at all times. The hierarchies, the enterprises and associations, are not natural forces, but are man-made structures, contingent upon the renunciation of self-power, the denial of subjectivity, and the internalization of the authority of other roles, that proclamation of powerlessness.

These hierarchies can continue only as long as people continue to assume their roles by force of habit as well as perceived necessity. Allegiance to the rule of the roles in general, if not to any particular enterprise, is almost always given in exchange for a role. Some roles, however, are poorly constructed and are subverted as authenticity creeps through the cracks and fissures, exposing the role for what it is: an inauthentic self, an artificial construct, a representation reproduced.

Capitalist society is limited in its ability to organize all its members, including the poor and disenfranchised who are usually organized through social welfare agencies or the illegal, underground economy. If society bulges with potential "players" without roles—individuals swearing no allegiance to any hierarchy or enterprise—and the existing forms of organization can no longer sustain society, the rule of the roles itself will be doubted and seen as impeding the development of community. The ability of the hierarchies to deliver will fall into disrepute. The role-less and the role-weary will meet; at this juncture their interests coincide. Those willing to refuse their roles respond to the demand by the role-less that individuals begin to relate to one another without the mediation of roles, or the stultifying and corrupt hierarchies. Things invariably begin to fall apart, and this dysfunction is abetted by active intervention: direct action and agitation against the hierarchies, the forms of organization that predominate.

This will be a traumatic time for many. It is not an easy process, disillusionment rarely is, and those who refuse to abandon their roles before the hierarchies of roles perish will be condemned to perish with them. This process will, however, allow the emergence of new forms through which to articulate social activity, life itself.

Role refusal is the rejection of the stage-manager, the totality of mechanisms and structures presently organizing society. Through emerging new forms, the power once invested in roles is appropriated, and although the logic of the hierarchies may remain internalized, the roles themselves will be seen as no more than hollow, transparent shells, hiding something that no

longer exists. It will no longer appear that it is the roles that animate social activity, and the power of roles will no longer remain internalized. The legitimacy of the hierarchies and the previous powerlessness are extirpated as new forms of social organization are discovered, invented, and reproduced. The real-life game of role playing comes to an end. Representation can be superseded by authenticity, and the creation of a new social unity involving the totality of whole men and women engaging their self-powers in social activity, building community, can finally commence.

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