– of language or of ordinary bodily action – are explored and altered. This is true creativity, a creativity that reveals.

In the general theatre of self, agency is likewise centred in a corporeal field in which meaning is always emergent or inscribed, never given or prescribed. The parallactic potential is always latent in performance, because the sub-text of all performance is nothing but the unprecedented act itself. There is no pre-text for action outside the motivated body inhabiting the ethnographic present.

Chapter 6

The inarticulate mind

On the point of awareness

Time past and time future
Allow but a little consciousness.
To be conscious is not to be in time
But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered.

(T. S. Eliot 1935)[1]

Having identified the living and acting body as the locus of cultural agency, we are left with a question of awareness. If the subject is not a mind sticking blindly to alleys of practical reason but a living person constantly reformulating her whole being through her doings, we are forced to reconsider our notions of consciousness.[2] We have to 'remind' ourselves about our inarticulacy, as it were. Even if it is axiomatic that humans are self-interpreting beings, we are left with a question of the limits to this self-interpretation, and – not less important from the point of view of the student of culture – the limits of expression and the significance of silence.

With consciousness we approach a field in which questions of ontology and methodology merge: how do people think and how do we know? How do we, as anthropologists, get access to those forms of consciousness that relate directly to the social space, by being both defined by it and being its defining capacity? There is no way in which we can fully grasp other people as subjects, but through structured imagining – often named intuition – we may still infer part of their implicit reasoning from its various

expressions. In the logocentric vision of the world one has often envisaged knowledge as directly, and exclusively, expressed in words. Taking the point of departure in experience rather than words and, by consequence, in the recentred self rather than the floating mind, knowledge itself becomes relocated accordingly. It is largely tacit and stored in the habit-memory, not solely in the brain. This implies a degree of inarticulacy on the part of human agents, even if still conscious of the environment of which they are part.

Questions of consciousness entail endless other questions, and to address them one enters an indeterminate field of enquiry. Indeterminacy is no reason to sidestep any question, however, but provides a particular challenge to find one's own way in the hope that it leads through places of general interest. The ambition, of course, is to eventually reach a clearing where one may rest and remember the moments of insight. The route I have chosen in this chapter passes from everyday violence in present-day Brazil to long-term misery in the Iceland of bygone centuries. This unlikely itinerary eventually makes some considerations on the ethics of inarticulacy apposite.

In her thought-provoking work on Brazil, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) is concerned with the silence of the poor inhabitants of a shanty town, and their apparent resistance to articulating their sufferings. Her narrative provides a kind of parable for the inarticulate mind with which I am concerned. I am not trying to reduce a painful reality to an allegory of a new version of a metaphysical reality. Rather, I am seeking to combine a powerful ethnography with an argument on collective consciousness, exploring at least a figment of the relationship between human agency and linguistic articulation, so eloquently dealt with by Charles Taylor within philosophy (e.g. 1985a, 1985b). In order to 'anthropologize' this agenda, I ground my exposition in a particular social reality. The empirical is still within reach.

My second example will be somewhat more elaborate and deals with a particular historical development in Iceland in a long time perspective; the idea is to substantiate the point that agency may be motivated by cultural models that are in many ways obsolete, and to show how the collective self-consciousness of a people may effectively block their awareness of a changing environment. The Icelanders of the period I am dealing with here were highly conscious of their cultural models, yet they cannot make claims

to awareness of the interrelationship between these models and history. Thus, in the course of my discussion, the focus of my argument sharpens on the place of awareness in social action.

With such terms as 'consciousness' and 'awareness' we are on slippery ground. We are still squarely within social reality, of course; if we cannot meaningfully explain people's actions without reference to such notions, then these are of course features of the real world (cf. Taylor 1989: 69). They may still call for conceptual clarification, however, even if in the form of *ad hoc* definitions. I would suggest that one operative distinction between awareness and consciousness can be made in terms of relative explicitness: awareness refers to an explicit understanding, while consciousness is largely an implicit vector of comprehension. Explicitness is what makes awareness social, rather than individual, since explicating something, if only to oneself, of necessity involves particular cultural schemes and values. There is no explication outside a conversational community, whether this is actually addressed or not in the particular instance. While meaning is certainly always emergent rather than prior to events or phenomena, it must still in some sense be shared. 'Mad' acts cannot, by definition, be understood (Vendler 1984: 209). The semantic features of language are public features: 'What no one can, in the nature of the case, figure out from the totality of the relevant evidence cannot be part of meaning' (Davidson 1984: 235). Meaning is collectively established even when it is individually elicited.

The emergent nature of meaning implies that it cannot be deduced from a pre-established code, nor is it accountable for in terms of directly observable features. This feature is shared with agency, which is also not derivative from the observable, physical features of the world (Vendler 1984: 207). For both meaning and agency this further implies that they are not directly explicable in words, even if awareness still belongs to the explicate, shared world.

Another distinction between the notions of awareness and consciousness can be made in terms of temporality. As suggested by T. S. Eliot in the lines quoted on p. 99, one may claim that to be conscious is not to be in time. In other words, consciousness belongs to a timeless dimension of (partly) knowing – the world and the self. I would suggest that, by contrast, awareness is in time. It relates to the historically specific moment, whether in the rose garden or in the shanty town.

In order to clarify this distinction we may liken it to the relationship between recollection and memory, following Søren Kierkegaard. Recollections are outside time, eternally present in one's life; their imprint cannot be erased. Memories, on the other hand, are placed in time; they are remembered, narrated, reinterpreted, sometimes rejected and often forgotten. Recollections are unmediated experiences. Memory makes a critical difference to these: in being remembered, an experience 'becomes "a memory", with all that this entails, not merely of the consistent, the enduring, the reliable, but also of the fragile, the errant, the confabulated' (Casey 1987: xii).

Similarly, I suggest that we regard consciousness as indistinguishable from our permanent being between time past and time future. Awareness cuts us loose from this; just like narrative punctuates experience, awareness constantly arrests the flow of consciousness – to make room for action, as it were. Relating awareness to agency is to seek a theoretical understanding of motivation, constituting the link between culture and action. Motivation is the moving force between these (analytical) entities; as such it is timeless in itself, but by inducing movement it spills over into time and informs history.

DELIRIOUS EXPERIENCE: A CASE FROM BRAZIL

Nancy Scheper-Hughes has written an ethnography on the violence of everyday life in Brazil (1992).[3] It is called *Death Without Weeping*, thus immediately drawing our attention to an apparent silence in face of massive suffering. The people studied are shanty town dwellers in north-eastern Brazil, living in the shadow of sugar cane, and of a feudal structure. The poverty of these people is immense, and among other things it results in a child mortality rate that makes one shiver.

In this community there are two generative themes in everyday talk: thirst and hunger. People see their lives as doubly cursed by drought and famine, both of which are the virulent consequences of the encroaching sugar cane fields (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 69). Thirst and hunger seem to be master-motives in the local hierarchy of motivation. Most daily activities are related to the motive of relieving hunger. It is a conscious motive, outside time. It is ever present and serves as an experiential framework of almost any activity. Even the highly praised sexual vigour of

the people is interpreted in relation to this scheme. Says one woman: 'Sure I'm hungry. Almost everyday my house is without food. My compensation is screwing. You asked me if I take pleasure in sex? Of course I do! How else am I going to know that I'm alive if I don't screw? At least in sex I can feel my flesh moving around and I know that hunger hasn't killed me yet' (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 165). The delirious experience of hunger resonates with the sensuous experience of sex.

A common symptom and, indeed, a folk-diagnosis is *delírio de fome*, madness from hunger. It is the end result of prolonged starvation, the climax of the lived experience of hunger. The experience of starvation and the ethno-medical discourse fit together. *Delírio de fome* is a state of being that is part of the shared social experience, and to which no numbers, no calculations apply. The facts of starvation in the shanty town are unmeasurable; yet their hardness is witnessed and felt by the people, for whom they become part of the collective consciousness.

Deaths from undernourishment and dehydration among infants and children can be counted, of course, at least to the extent that they are reported. (For fear of organ thefts, parents often hasten to bury their children with only a minimum of bureaucratic intervention.) But the degree to which the shanty town dwellers are conscious of the omnipresent perishment from starvation is not a feature of numbers; it is a feature of experience and as such it is a theme that infiltrates any conversation. Even young children are often sadly aware of their living in a limbo between life and death. Once seven-year-old Edilson's mother told the anthropologist that the boy would probably soon join his dead siblings; the anthropologist advised her not to talk like that in front of Edilson, but the boy shut her up in defence of his mother: 'Hush, Mãe, hush. I'm not afraid; I'm ready to go there' (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 142). The readiness stems from a flow of lived experience with death.

The never-ending story of starvation still frames local life; yet a new kind of narrative intervention has become increasingly pertinent during the twenty-odd years that Scheper-Hughes has been involved with the shanty town. It is a narrative intervention that punctuates experience in a new and different way as a result of the impact of western medical science. The medical discourse is causal and curative and deals with bodies and minds as if

separate entities. The result is that with the gradual medication of Brazilian society the centre of gravity in the madness from hunger is being displaced. Starvation cannot be cured, but madness may be relieved; with medication 'mad' acts have required a new public meaning. *Delírio de fome* gradually collapses with the folk-concept of *nervos*, and ailments are sought to relieve this. Hunger is still part of experience, but the narrative focus is on the theme of madness.

> The madness, the *delírio de fome*, once understood as the terrifying end point in the experience of angry and collective starvation, is transformed into a personal and 'psychological' problem, one that requires medication. In this way hunger is isolated and denied, and an individualized discourse on sickness comes to replace a more radical and socialized discourse on hunger.
>
> (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 169).

A new illness narrative is constructed that breaks asunder social experience. Or, in the terms of the present argument, an awareness of individual 'nervousness' supplants the traditional and collective consciousness of hunger. This consciousness was outside time; it was an all-pervasive recollection, inescapably marking people's lives. Hunger was always a generative theme in the social talk, yet the stories never arrested the flow of that experience. They motivated no hope of relief. By contrast, the new medical awareness gives promise of curing, and people seize the opportunity to take fate in their own hands. The buying of useless medicines that leaves even less money for food than before has become an individual strategy to conquer the collective misery, however futile.

THE HABITUATED PERSON

To understand the specific impact of the western medical discourse upon the Brazilian awareness of their suffering it is necessary to study its derivation. The medical discourse derives from a particular world view, focusing on the individual and separating body and mind. With the insights gained – also from within medical science itself – scholars now seek to reunite analytically what was never ontologically separate. The body is in the mind; or, it is in itself mindful, as we have seen. Yet, the distinction

between body and mind still seems all-pervasive in the medical wisdom on 'selves', and in natural language, because of its sustained experiential fit. It will be recalled how, with the development of the first-person standpoint in western philosophy, knowledge or awareness became that of an individual agent. Thinking became internalized, and will became located in the mind. This, therefore, became the locus of rational agency. As we saw in the previous chapter, this gave rise to an ontological fallacy. It also violates the ordinary experience of embodied understanding so vigorously demonstrated by the notion of *delírio de fome*.

To understand, for Descartes, involved disengagement from our own material selves, those uncontrolled sources of error and moral vice. To achieve pure knowledge one first had to achieve self-purification; self-mastery became a matter of controlling bodily sources of error, rationality became a matter of instrumental control. The medical discourse epitomizes this. The shanty town dwellers seek to fulfil the demand for instrumental control by subjecting themselves to medication; their 'will' has taken the shape of a pill.

It is a decidedly modern refraction that the mind can be seen as independent of society, and consciousness as disengaged from cultural values. In this view of the world, the 'self' operates on a notion of actual autonomy, and on an internal scale of good and bad. By consequence, agency is conceived of as a feature of the disengaged mind suggesting the right course of action. This is an essentially utilitarian view of agency that seems incompatible with anthropological insight. There is no practical utility defining the correct course of social action independent of symbolic schemes and cultural values (cf. Sahlins 1976).

For the people of the shanty town, the notion of a disengaged self makes no sense. There are no selves engaging in objective discourses on utility; there are persons experiencing unbounded material and social misery. They act, not on the basis of an individual and detached Reason, but on the basis of a process of collective and experiential reasoning. They, like other people, are agents all the same. Agency cannot be reduced to an individual disengaged mind; it is deeply enculturated and as such it has become sedimented in the body. 'Outside of the continuing conversation of community, which provides the language by which we draw our background distinctions, human agency . . . would

be not just impossible, but inconceivable' (Taylor 1985a: 8). As we have seen, the conversation in the shanty town is firmly grounded in shared bodily experience of hunger and in the consciousness of madness deriving from it. This is where agency takes off.

The anthropological concern with agency must break away from the naturalism and behaviourism implied in the utilitarian perspective. To be a competent human agent is to exist in a space defined by distinctions of worth, not only by words and practical reason (Taylor 1985a: 3). Such distinctions are socially and historically constructed, and become part of the habitus of people. The disengaged self must yield to the habituated person. As observed also by Scheper-Hughes, the displacement of the experience of hunger is not sufficiently explained by 'false consciousness' or metaphorical delirium. It rather points to a new form of embodiment, or body praxis. 'Embodiment concerns the ways that people come to "inhabit" their bodies so that these become in every sense of the term "habituated" ' (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 184). The people of the shanty town have inhabited famished bodies for a long time; their minds embody this experience. The consciousness of hunger has become part of culture – as incorporated.

The incorporation of culture implies a process of sedimentation during which cultural models and values become part of the hidden, or recessive, faculties of the self. In this sense, culture becomes naturalized by way of experience. Our habits are formed in the process:

> The phenomenon of *habit formation* sorts out the ideas which survive repeated use and puts them in a more or less separate category. These trusted ideas then become available for immediate use without thoughtful inspection, while the more flexible parts of the mind can be saved for use in newer matters.
> (Bateson 1972: 501)

The lived space of the shanty town people has become naturalized as one of starvation. The naturalness of the lived space is related to 'the way our own body is the vehicle, the stage, and the object of experience at the same time' (Hanks 1990: 5). The body is motivated by this experience, and as such it is the locus of agency. It allows for little flexibility; the consciousness of hunger in the shanty town has sedimented and is available for immediate understanding.

When the experience is mediated by words, it is transsubstantiated as nervousness. The delirious experience has solidified while a language of psychological distress has free play on the surface. This language follows its own course, adorning reality with particular arabesques, and intervening into the social by arresting consciousness in a blind alley.

ICELANDIC SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

People are habituated by culture, sometimes to a destructive degree. In this section I shall substantiate this claim by referring to evidence from my own extensive analysis of Icelandic history over a millennium.[4] One of the important lessons from historical anthropology is that the modes of producing 'history' differ from one context to the next. There are obvious differences in environment, economy and social organization. But the making of history is also in part determined by local ways of thinking about history, or by kinds of awareness of change. The conceptual and the material form a simultaneity in the experience of the world. This implies that there is more to time and causation than chronology and sequence. It also implies that a single society may construe its history in a way that seems to blur the western historical genre.

These points have been extensively substantiated by the history of Iceland. This history displays a remarkable long-term vacillation between a highly structured, well-organized autonomous society in the Middle Ages and a disintegrated, dependent and crisis-prone condition in the centuries 1400–1800. Paradoxically, the shift between flourishment and abatement and the correlated distinctive periods in the social history of the islanders appears to cover an equally remarkable conceptual continuity. Through the centuries there is a conspicuous coherence and unity in the image of 'Icelandicness' which, and this is the point, has had a decisive influence upon the actual course of history in this North Atlantic community. Evidently, part of the framework was already given; we cannot and should not overlook the role played by such objective features as subarctic climatic conditions, geographical isolation and political submission. But even such features are subject to a particular local interpretation and a social reaction that transmutes objectivity into relativity. The irreversible is not

the same as the inevitable, and the sequential is not coterminous with the causal.

In Iceland in the period 1400–1800, there seems to have been a remarkable discrepancy between social experience and local awareness. A key example is provided by the development of the modes of livelihood of which there were always two supplementary kinds in Iceland, farming and fishing. As formulated in 1786 by Skúli Magnússon, a renowned Enlightenment reformer, 'the Icelandic economy is founded on only two gifts of nature: cattle-breeding and fishing, holding out their hands towards one another, since the latter gets life and power from the former, which again is supported by the latter' (Magnússon, 1944b: 37). There is no doubt that these reports reflect an actual complementarity between farming and fishing at the level of subsistence: the two support each other. The Icelandic annals provide additional evidence that both economic activities were absolutely vital to the Icelanders. If failure occurred within one of the domains, hunger was likely; if both failed, the consequences were fatal to the population. Each individual household was founded on the dual economic pattern, which seems to form a structure of *la longue durée*. Although recognized as complementary at the level of consumption, farming and fishing as two distinct systems of production did not occupy equal positions in the minds of the Icelanders. They were never simply alternative ways of making a living, because they held asymmetrical positions in the (social) system of classification. This undoubtedly contributed to the misery of the Icelanders during the period of main concern here.

The domestic unit had been based on farming ever since the first settlements in the ninth century, when Norse immigrants took land on the virgin island. Land rights were specified in detail, and distinctions between infields, outfields and commons were strictly adhered to. There was a fine balance to maintain between arable and stock farming; grain was grown in the early period, but mostly hay, the latter being vital for the livestock. Natural grazing was adequate only from June to September; for the rest of the year, the animals had to be kept at the farmstead on stored hay. The balance between animal numbers and labour input in the fields was, therefore, delicate. Grain-growing was soon abandoned, however; it is mentioned for the last time by Oddur Einarsson in 1589, when it is reduced to a rare occurrence in a small corner of the island (Einarsson 1971: 126). With it

disappeared the plough. This means that during the period 1400–1800, farming was principally a matter of hay-growing and animal husbandry at a simple level of technology.

At the time of the settlements in the late ninth and early tenth centuries Iceland was covered with a primary forest of low birch. Although only one-tenth of the Icelandic soil was actually arable, land appeared abundant and rich to the Norse settlers, who were allowed to claim as much land as they could encircle on horseback from sunrise to sunset – according to legend. As population pressure increased, land became more scarce. Large tracts were laid waste, partly due to soil erosion. The erosion was owed both to the grazing animals and the cutting down of the vulnerable primary forest. The wood was used in house construction and for fuel. Soon the houses had to be almost entirely constructed from stone and turf, and animal dung replaced the firewood. In turn, this made manure for the fields a scarcity, and the delicate balance between the numbers of people and animals on the one hand and the size of the manured fields on the other was under permanent threat. In turn, this made the Icelanders more dependent on another natural resource: the sea.

Fish had always been plentiful, and provided an additional resource for the farming households. During the fourteenth century fishing became a necessity; it also became favoured by new external markets. The Hanseatic League replaced Norway as Iceland's main trading partner, and a new market for dried fish opened in Europe. The net result was an economic upswing that again favoured a separate development of fishing. The old trading ports, which were nothing but temporary landing places, now turned into tiny villages, and a category of 'professional' fishermen emerged. While earlier there had been no specialist groups at all, the late fourteenth century witnessed an incipient division of labour between farmers and fishermen.

In 1404, *fiskimenn* (fishermen) appear for the first time in the documents. Significantly, it is also the last. The Black Death had ravaged Iceland from 1402 to 1404, reducing the population by some 40 per cent (Kristín Bjarnadóttir 1986). Farm labour had become scarce. This was the reason behind a law of compulsory farm service being passed in 1404, obliging *fiskimenn* and workers to settle at a farm and work for a landowner. If they refused, they were to be exiled (*Lovsamling for Island*, vol. I: 34–35). Thus, when fishermen are first mentioned as a distinct group, they

are immediately subsumed under the farming structure. This is one of the first hints of the conceptual asymmetry between farming and fishing in the local definition of 'Icelandicness'.

Fishing continued, of course, out of sheer necessity, but fishermen vanished from the records. They became subsumed under the general category of *vinnuhjú* (servants) defined by their position within a *bú* (household) headed by a landowner or a well-to-do tenant on Church or Crown property. Generally, fishing and fishing rights were defined in terms of land rights, which were apparently always given conceptual priority.

This can be inferred also from the fact that farmhands engaging in seasonal fishing were to return for the hay harvest, quite irrespective of the catch at the shore. During the fifteenth century, when the Icelanders still had a clear recollection of the potential surplus created by fishing, the local court passed one law after another that was designed to make fishing less attractive to people. Thus, fishing with more than one hook on the line was banned, explicitly on account of the farmers who feared that fishing, if returns increased, would be too attractive to their servants (*Alþingisbækur Íslands*, vol. I: 432–434; vol. V: 122). Sinker lines were likewise banned, and a prohibition on using worms as bait was issued. It was not until 1699 that part of these restrictions were lifted, when sinker lines with several hooks were again allowed, but still only during the season: outside this period it was prohibited because of its allegedly damaging effects on farming (*Lovsamling for Island*, vol. I: 564–567). By then, the Icelanders seemed to have lost the motivation, however; a century later, in 1785, the afore-mentioned Skúli Magnússon noted how lines with just one hook almost reigned supreme, and he made a strong case for the reintroduction of sinker lines with up to 30 hooks, giving a detailed description of how to make them (Magnússon 1944a: 55–56). Generally, he complains about the conspicuous deterioration of Icelandic fishing (Magnússon 1944b).

The decline of fishing technology had a parallel in farming, where a collective loss of skills can also be documented. We have noted how the plough fell into disuse, and we can add how the fences separating the infields from the wilderness disintegrated. Fences were compulsory to protect the precious infields against stray animals; the laws of fencing had always reflected the farming interests, but the peasants nevertheless failed to keep up with the requirements. In the eighteenth century this became a major issue

in the redressment of the Icelandic conditions of living, having reached an absolute rock-bottom by then. In 1776 an ordinance was issued by the Danish king demanding of the Icelanders that they reconstruct their fences, offering the threat of fines and also a promise of rewards (*Lovsamling for Island*, vol. IV: 278ff.). Judging from later decrees it was not an easy task to convince the Icelanders of the necessity of the restoration. It was even suggested that exemplary fences be built in all regions for the people to study (ibid., vol. IV: 426). The old technology was apparently forgotten, while the material (stone) had remained plentiful.

The collective loss of memory is witnessed also in the fact that hay-barns went out of use. In medieval Icelandic society, hay was stored in barns, as archaeological evidence shows. In the later period, hay was just stacked out-of-doors and subject to rather moist conditions. The result of these developments was a lesser yield from the scarce fields, and a greater vulnerability to just one bad winter. We know from the Icelandic annals that of the 400-year period under main concern here at least one-fourth must be classified as lean years by their entailing famine and death (Finnsson 1970).

In short, one of the salient features of Icelandic society in the period 1400–1800 was a failure to keep up with the implicit requirements of social reproduction. The failure to exploit the fishing potential, allegedly to protect farming, entailed increasing material poverty. This was correlated with a remarkable degree of collective amnesia as far as local technological skills were concerned. The result was that the Icelanders became increasingly prone to forces beyond their control. As time wore on, the experience of the Icelanders was one of increasing impotence in all domains of the social; survival had replaced influence as the most important item on the agenda. The idea of human causation in history, as embedded in old notions of fate, faded and gave way to ideas of external and largely uncontrollable causes of all changes. The economy deteriorated, the merchants exploited and the distant Danish king subdued the people. 'The wild' approached from all corners, as the fencing of Icelandic society disintegrated.

To understand how this could happen, since it is by no means an immediate consequence of material factors, we must look into the Icelandic way of thinking about history.

UCHRONIC VISIONS: REALITY IN PAST TENSE

If the production of history is related to the thinking about history there is all the more reason to explore the local notions of change and tradition in Iceland.

First of all we note that no conceptual distinction between history and story was made. The notion of *saga* referred to anything that was 'said' of history; as such, it contained its own claim to truth (Hastrup 1986b). In this particular case a one-to-one relationship between the words and the world was claimed. When the main corpus of Icelandic sagas was written in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, their objective was to tell Icelandic history. Although certainly literary products, they were perceived as history proper. This was true also for the reconstruction of the ninth- and tenth- century events and characters in the *Íslendingasögur*, 'stories of the Icelanders'. In these sagas, which have rightfully remained famous, the pre-Christian past of Icelandic society is recast in the shape of a *Freiheits-Mythos* (Weber 1981). The original 'free state' of Iceland is celebrated, and the entire literary activity of the thirteenth century may in fact be seen as an attempt to raise local consciousness about the Icelandic achievements in *terra nova* (Schier 1975). Freedom and the taking of new land are tokens of original Icelandicness.

One of the consequences of the particular Icelandic conflation of story and history on the one hand and of the peculiar atomistic social structure on the other is a remarkable conflation also of individual and collective history. As observed by one scholar: 'There is no sense of those impersonal forces, those nameless multitudes, that make history a different thing from biography in other lands. All history in Iceland shaped itself as biography or as drama, and there was no large crowd at the back of the stage' (Ker 1923: 315).

If the individual Icelander was unable to control his own fate during the 'dark' centuries, he was equally unable to influence the larger history of Icelandic society. The actual history originated in a space beyond control, while at the same time the Icelandic dream was recreated in an Icelandic Uchronia.

Uchronia is nowhere in time. If Utopia is a parallel universe, Uchronia is a separate history. It is a history out of time, so to speak. In Iceland, Uchronic visions were part of the collective

representations of the world, and as such they deeply influenced the response of society to its own history.

With modernity, a vision of history as linear growth emerged in Europe; this was to remain the distinctive feature of the western historical genre, and the (largely illusory) basis for the comparison between 'Europe and the peoples without history' (Wolf 1982). In contrast to the old view of a qualitatively defined time-space, the new chronology and linearity implied that any stage in history was temporary. These features also indirectly sustained the idea that history could not go absolutely wrong because it had its own directional logic. Iceland resisted modernity until recently, and the development of Icelandic society teaches us that the vision of history as linear growth was alien to the Icelanders. Even in modern Europe this vision remained elitist for a long time, and may actually still alienate the rank and file from history in more ways than one.

The conceptual discrepancy between two views of history, if not actually between two histories, makes room for Uchronic imagination on the part of the people. Where this is found, and certainly where it achieves the proportions of the Icelandic case, it reveals a feeling of incapacity to influence actual history. It also points, however, to a failure on the part of the dominant historical discourse to incorporate the experience of ordinary people. The gap between the two histories leaves people in a void.

In Iceland, this observation is acutely relevant. With no experience of a progressive history, the Icelanders knew that history could go wrong; the degree of misery that it entailed locally had no logic. In the fight between fire and ice, or between the hot and the cold conditions of history – to invoke Lévi-Strauss – the Icelanders retreated to an imaginary time when history was 'right'. This gave rise to Uchronic visions that were at odds with present social experiences. Uchronia had its own reality, of course, but from our point of view this reality was hypothetical.

We cannot ask the Icelanders of bygone centuries about their imaginations, but we can infer them from a whole range of historical evidence. As a vision of another time, Uchronia connects otherwise disconnected elements and adds a level of comprehension to our historical narrative. The history out of time entertained by the Icelanders was informed by their view of the past. The past was over, yet in narrative form it was continuously

reproduced and invoked by the Icelanders, in search of meaning in the void between two histories.

The reproduction of the old images of Icelandicness consisted in a strong literary tradition dating back to the Middle Ages being continually renewed. Young people learned to read from the old lawbook, and the saga literature was consumed during the institution known as *sagnaskemmtan* – saga entertainment – which was a reading aloud of the old stories as a general evening pastime on the farms (Pálsson 1962; Gíslason 1977). As we have seen, the individual farmsteads represented society in miniature; there was no distinction between elite and popular culture as elsewhere in Europe (Burke 1978), no urban populations set apart from peasant culture. Although mass literacy was not achieved until some time around 1800 (which is still relatively early by comparative European standards), there is strong evidence that at most farms at least one person was actually able to read (Guttormsson 1983). What is more, the stories of sagas also formed the core of the *rímur*, popular verses, that were orally transmitted for centuries. The old images were thus continually reproduced by a recasting of the old myths of creation and of the past virtues of men. Through this recasting, the Icelanders were perpetually confronted with an ideal order nowhere in time.

One could even argue, that while other peoples invented traditions to match new historical situations (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983), the Icelanders reproduced the images of the past to invent themselves.

The Uchronic imagination was concurrently sustained by this invocation of the past. Because the Icelanders had no real 'others' to identify 'themselves' against, the mirror-image of themselves in the past tense had major social repercussions. Living in the imaginary world of Uchronia, the Icelanders had no symbolic exchange with others, and no way of obtaining a position from where they could see themselves and their situation in realistic terms. Due to their virtual isolation in the North Atlantic, the Icelanders lacked a contemporary comparative reality against which they could measure their own culture (cf. Boon 1982). Paradoxically, this meant that the present escaped them; they felt this and stuck even more firmly to Uchronia, which at least preserved a sense of injustice in the existing world.

The Icelanders lived between two histories, or between an empirical and experienced history of decline and decay on the one hand and an imagined Uchronia implying permanence and antiquity on the other. Rather than defining a new reality and shaping it in language, the Icelanders defined the present in terms of a past of which only the language remained real. Experience itself was discarded as anomalous because it no longer fitted the old language. Whatever creative skills the people possessed were directed towards a recollection and a continuation of 'proper' history – as story – at the expense of a comprehension of present realities.

Uchronia represented a structured world nowhere in time that strongly contrasted with the experiential space. Uchronia was a dream about a primodial society, and about a timeless history when man was fully human.

CULTURAL ECCENTRICITY

Culture is the implicational space that gives meaning to social experience. By way of closing the argument on historical awareness, I shall here briefly discuss Icelandic culture in the period 1400–1800, since this is what gives consistency to the disparate realities of society and Uchronia.

The disintegrating fences around the infields provide an apt metaphor of the actual development in this period. Nature encroached relentlessly, diminishing the socially controlled space. The cosmological centre had always been locally represented in the *bú*, the household, which was society writ small and concretized in the landscape. The controlled central space was inhabited by free, sedentary farmers. On the periphery the uncontrolled forces reigned. In the classical period, a concentric cosmological dualism firmly distinguished between an 'inside' and an 'outside' world. Inside, humans were in control; outside the wild forces reigned. As time wore on, more and more humans were alienated from the centre and merged with the wild – because of poverty, vagrancy or fishing. An increasing proportion of reality was beyond control.

'History' itself became split into two: an externally induced and uncontrolled succession of movements, and an internally emphasized repetition of traditional values. The repetition owed its force to the reproduction of past images in a discourse that mirrored the negativities inherent in the contemporary Icelandic world. With no symbolic exchange with real others the Icelanders could

engage in no relationship of identification other than with themselves in the past tense. In a manner of speaking, they became 'others' themselves. As such, they were alienated from the larger history – and ultimately from their own present.

This alienation was correlated with a particular pattern of event-registration. As we know, events are happenings that are registered as significant according to a particular cultural scheme, which is constantly subjected to risk by social action. But in Iceland the scheme persisted in a remarkable degree of cultural self-consciousness. The Uchronic vision was intimately linked to the reproduction of the past – in voice and in action. The literary image of the free farmer was proudly read out to everyone, and the image was confirmed in action by the Althing's decisions to concentrate energy in the reproduction of the farming households, at the expense of industrious fishing among other things. Due to the reproduction of an outdated cultural scheme, actions became anachronistic, and contemporary happenings failed to register as events. In contrast to the event-richness of the past – as collectively memorized in history as conventionalized in the local genre – the present appeared event-poor.

Some social spaces or some periods always seem to generate more social events than others. As we know, this is not primarily a mensurational feature, but a feature of registration: for events to be registered as such, they have to be significant from the point of view of the definer. The Icelandic world of our period did not single out many happenings as significant social events. The social space was event-poor; movement, change and innovation were relegated to a non-social space where events did not register. In the period 1400–1800 Iceland was in a state of event-poverty. By comparison to the event-richness of the previous period, contemporary reality was marked by absences. While the Icelanders certainly *had* a history during the event-poor centuries, they only indirectly *produced* it. Poverty was both material and symbolic; the two levels merged in the experience of the people.

Event-richness is a feature of space, and it is identified in the synchronic dimension. In the diachronic dimension, relative event-richness is transformed into relative historical density (Ardener 1989c). In the representation of history, historical density is a measure of the relative memorability of particular events. For events to be memorized and to become part of 'history' they must have been experienced as culturally significant.

This apparently self-evident point covers a fundamental truth: the structuring of history, and the selective memory, are not solely imposed retrospectively. Contemporary event-registration always serves as the baseline for the trace of experience left in history.

For Iceland this implies that the event-rich period of the early and high Middle Ages was matched by a historical density in this period. This contrasts with the unmarked reality of the later period. The continuous attention paid to past events made the present seem insignificant. The comparative historical density of the past also made the present look like not history at all. The reproduction of culture impeded the production of history. Inadvertently, the Icelanders themselves contributed to the destructive course taken by the development. 'History' had become 'myth' – and therefore beyond influence. What we are witnessing here, in fact, may be read as yet another instance of the inherent antipathy between history and systems of classification (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 232).

If culture, generally, encompasses the existentially unique in the conceptually familiar (Sahlins 1985: 146), this had a particular truth in Iceland. The strength of the conceptual scheme actually entailed a failure to register the uniqueness of present existential conditions. In other words, if 'culture' is an organization of current situations in terms of the past (ibid.: 155), in Iceland the 'current situation' hardly registered, because the 'terms of the past' were so vigorous. Having lost control of their own social reproduction, the people were left without a proper historical appreciation of the main cultural categories. The unreflexive mastery of the traditional cultural system made the Icelandic 'habitus' the basis for an intentionless invention of regulated improvisation that was quite out of time (cf. Bourdieu 1977: 79; Sahlins 1985: 51).

The strength of the traditional language entrapped the Icelanders in a state of refracted vision. Their world view was focused on another time, on another history. Their culture became increasingly eccentric due to their Uchronic vision. The cultural eccentricity was instrumental in the permanent crisis of Icelandic society. The particular way of thinking about history influenced its actual course; causation in history conflates the material and the conceptual.

THE DESIRABLE ORDER

Motivation is not found in the disengaged mind or in utilitarianism, as we have seen. The hunger-stricken shanty town dwellers and the misery-prone Icelanders teach us that instrumental reasoning cannot explain the actions taken. In both cases there was a high degree of consciousness of the state of affairs, yet for the shanty town people there was nothing to be said that could alter it, and in the case of the Icelanders, they were caught in a web of illusions about themselves that was actually counterproductive to social reproduction. The cultural models motivated action but somehow obstructed an awareness of the deteriorating social conditions.

We should distinguish between motives and intentions, as we have noted before; the former are largely implicit frameworks for action, the latter explicit rationalizations of it. Intentions and motives relate to what Taylor has called first- and second-order desires (Taylor 1985a: 15). What makes us fully human is our power to evaluate our first-order desires, and thus to act on the basis of relative worth. This introduces a distinction between weak and strong evaluation. With weak evaluations we are concerned with outcomes, while strong evaluations define the quality of our motivation.

There are no selves beyond a particular social context. Phrased differently, identity is intimately linked to orientation in a moral space (Taylor 1989: 28ff.). This implies that 'social actors not only acquire a sense of what is natural, they also acquire strongly motivating senses of what is desirable. They not only know, they also care' (Strauss and Quinn 1993: 3). In practical life, knowledge, so often isolated as cognition in theory, is not independent of emotion and evaluation. In Iceland, people knew themselves as farmers, even while fishing, because of the uneven values attached to these categories.

Evaluation, or the sense of relative worth, infiltrates social action. Facts and values are two sides of the same coin (Putnam 1990: 135ff.). 'Facts' cannot be identified without an implicit scale of evaluation. Taking this a step further, we realize that experience and description are bound together in a constitutive relation that admits causal influences in both directions: 'it can sometimes allow us to alter experience by coming to fresh insight; but more fundamentally it circumscribes insight through the deeply embedded shape of experience for us' (Taylor 1985a:37). The lived experience of the famished circumscribes their insight in their powerlessness. The dislocated medical description of their delirium does not allow for an alteration of experience.

> Because of this constitutive relation, our descriptions of our motivations, and our attempts to formulate what we hold important, are not simple descriptions in that their objects are not fully independent. And yet they are not simply arbitrary either, such that anything goes. There are more or less adequate, more or less truthful, more self-clairvoyant or self-deluding interpretations. Because of this double fact, because an articulation can be *wrong*, and yet it shapes what it is wrong about, we sometimes see erroneous articulations as involving a distortion of the reality concerned. We do not just speak of error but frequently also of illusion or delusion.
>
> (Taylor 1985a: 37–38)

Illusion or delusion may be the result of failure to revise the givens of culture: when too much is taken for granted, flexibility is at risk. Significance becomes distorted as meanings fossilize. This is one major reason for the disintegration of Icelandic society in the period 1400–1800.

It may also be offered as a reason for silence in the face of death in the shanty town. There is no meaningful way to articulate the continuous experience of starvation. The desire to eat is a first-order desire pervading the daily concern with the practical outcome of action. The second-order desire of ranking is completely conflated within this. If it is generally true that 'the strong evaluator has articulacy and depth which the simpler weigher lacks' (Taylor 1985a: 26), the absence of articulation points not to a lack of consciousness of the values or desires implied but to a lack of means to act upon them; in the face of enduring misery and practical impotence, an awareness of particular desires cannot be allowed to arrest the consciousness of the general order of the desirable.

All people are aware of some environment, and offer articulations of it. In so doing, however, they lay out different features of the world and of human action in some perspicuous order. Awareness, like memory, makes room for error or illusion; the experience of hunger may be confabulated as a psychological problem, and the desire to overcome it may be relieved by way

of medication. By contrast, consciousness cannot be manipulated: like recollection it is inerasable and cannot be wrong. The desirable order of things is collectively sensed, even when silence prevails and part of the embodied knowledge is overheard. It is one of the tasks of anthropology to reinstall the areas of silence as an integral part of human agency.

THE ETHICS OF INARTICULACY

It remains to be discussed why it is that anthropology can make a claim to a kind of higher-order understanding than can local knowledge. One way of evaluating different schemes for understanding is by their relative position to achieve more or less perspicuous orders of comprehension. A claim of this kind can, according to Charles Taylor, be made by theoretical cultures against atheoretical ones (Taylor 1985b: 150). The former invariably catch the attention of the latter when they meet. The success of western scientific culture is a case in point, but certainly not the only one. If we replace 'cultures' with 'schemes' of a more general kind, we have a way of assessing the force of the anthropological argument in relation to local knowledge.

This is not a correlate of objective or absolute understanding versus subjective or relative knowledge. I agree with Bourdieu when he claims that this distinction is the most ruinous to social science (Bourdieu 1990: 25). Whether cast as objectivism or subjectivism, both are theoretical modes of knowledge, 'equally opposed to the practical mode of knowledge which is the basis of ordinary experience of the social world' (ibid.).[5]

A prerequisite for theorizing in this sense is a degree of self-reflection which amounts to St Augustine's 'radical reflexivity' mentioned earlier, or perhaps to Paulo Freire's 'critical consciousness'. Theoretical knowledge implies an understanding of its own condition, as well as its possible impact upon practical knowledge. This is how anthropology may be said to have a dual legitimacy, as a field of knowledge and as a field of action. Awareness and force are intimately linked in anthropology as well as in culture; knowledge by itself has no power, while an argument may. The *raison d'être* of anthropology lies precisely in its being theoretically aware of the context of local awareness, and its intricate relationship to social agency. This includes a profound theoretical awareness of the fact that the self is not fixed but an ever-

emergent being, whose identity is at stake in moments of choice and deliberation. At times this staking of the self may be too threatening and the deliberations repressed, as in the shanty town, or subjected to eccentric notions of reality, as in Iceland – with fatal consequences for individuals. In both cases, what is articulated is neither a utilitarian self, governed by practical reason and instrumental rationality, nor an irrational mind, governed by bodily cravings and weak will. What is expressed is a collective lack of awareness of the degree to which cultural models are obsolete and block out the flexibility necessary to radically alter the miserable situation. This is not to blame the victim, but to demand of anthropology that it takes its share of the global responsibility.

If able to deal convincingly with this complex situation, anthropology may become a site of resistance. Giving voice to silent memories is neither to force people to speak, nor is it a matter of replacing 'false' consciousnesses with correct ones. It is to respect local silence and provide a theoretical context, including the historical situatedness, of whatever awareness people may have of their own situation. This may, then, be offered for the inspection of the people involved.

The anthropological interpretation may arrest the collective consciousness and place it squarely in time; a new awareness may result. People are never just victims of social forms, because social forms owe their shape partly to the fact that they are inhabited by people thinking about social forms (Hollis 1985: 232). And, as said before, thinking implies caring. Moral deliberation is an integral part of self-understanding and self-formation (Johnson 1993: 148).

Transculturally, there is equity as far as awareness and rationality are concerned; or, in other words, people have equal reasons for assuming the correctness of their view of the world. This is no plea for a mindless relativism. There are claims to relative truth to be made; transcultural insight precisely provides a basis for judgement, which blind ethnocentricity *and* relativism both negate. This is one, potentially controversial, reason for pursuing anthropology as a theoretical mode of global awareness.

Likewise, it is the basis for refusing to accept moral relativism as the net result of the anthropological involvement with people. The ethics of inarticulacy implies that anthropology should seek to re-articulate the strong evaluations that have been silenced by

unfortunate social circumstances or hegemonic historical positions, but which are, nevertheless, integral parts of local consciousness and motivation. Re-articulation in this sense means giving 'momentum' to consciousness by reinstating it in time:

'Only through time time is conquered'

Chapter 7

The symbolic violence
On the loss of self

Silence is packed with meaning and, in many ways, to respect it seems at odds with the anthropological task of reaching people's self-understanding as a first step towards the theoretical comprehension of its context and premisses. In the domain of human misery, which was used to illustrate the limits of articulacy in the previous chapter, the ethnographer's probing and insistence is particularly painful. The starving may rightfully turn his back to the inquisitor; she, in turn, must realize that solidarity sometimes means silence on her part as well.

It is part of the performative paradox of anthropology, however, to pursue a knowledge project that in an important sense transcends the lives of individuals. In any fieldwork this means keeping up a certain pressure on the 'informants' to have them say what they think. The imposed articulacy may for ever alter their own awareness of the social space of which they are part. In short, we should not too hastily demand articulation; people have their own reasons for evading the words that may explicate their consciousness and thus intervene in their lives. To illustrate this, I shall relate a personal account, by way of which I want to rehearse the play between the ethnographer and the informant from the point of view of the latter.[1]

TALABOT

In September 1988, the Danish theatre group, Odin Teatret, showed *Talabot* for the first time.[2] *Talabot* is a play about the last 40 years of world history told through the biography of a woman anthropologist born in 1948. She is Danish, with an international professional training, fieldwork experience in India and,