

# BOOK REVIEWS

## THE PROTEAN SELF: HUMAN RESILIENCE IN AN AGE OF FRAGMENTATION ROBERT J. LIFTON, 1993

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Robert J. Lifton is an interesting author. He is a psychologist who utilizes his patient interviews the way an anthropologist does, drawing generalizations and tendencies out of the individual and applying them to the cultural. The main theme of this book is the "Protean Self", named after the sea god Proteus that could take many different forms. The protean self is a defense mechanism, a way of coping with the modern fragmentations of self and society in a quickly changing (both materially and culturally) world. The way in which the individual deals with this chaotic social system is the "calling forth (of) the innate plasticity of human development and behavior" (p. 230).

The book deals with the malleability of the modern self which "emerges from confusion, from the widespread feeling that we are losing our psychological moorings" (p. 1). Lifton presents three factors which contribute to this modern protean self: historical dislocation, the mass media revolution and the "end of the world" influence of nuclear weapon proliferation and religious end time scenarios associated with millennialism.

These three themes become ethnographic through Lifton's presentation of psychiatric case studies in order to corroborate the influence of these three themes on the individual people. The psychology of the social activist provides most of the insight into personal motivation for public action. The presentation of these biographical vignettes, told through psychoanalytical sessions, demonstrate how personal events can cause people to react to social, political or economic events and ally themselves to groups for the solving of them (pp. 93-119). The relationship of the individual to family as well as other groups can also provide the motivations for personal changes of the protean nature (pp. 120-136).

The rebellion against protean fluidity is brought into question by the matter of religious fundamentalism (pp. 160-189). Here Lifton employs the ethnographic convention of psychoanalytical vignettes in the description of how religious fundamentalists maintain their belief structure in the face of competing ideas in a multicultural system. The goal of the fundamentalist's teleology is to create a static and fixed self that is concerned with rejecting influences considered "contaminating" and by viewing outsiders as agents of that "contamination" process. Though Lifton does not dwell on the distinction in his psychoanalytic vignettes in this chapter he does view (and I am in considerable agreement with him) that fundamentalism is not only a religious phenomenon but a political one as well.

The author presents fundamentalism as a philosophic construct that incorporates the post-enlightenment views of rationality but rejects the modernist maxims of "science will save us all." Lifton does a wonderful job of teasing forth the philosophical constructions (often made on the spot in the same way that that protean philosophical constructions are) in using the pointed question of whether nuclear weapons are part of the Millenarian God's plan for the apocalypse. Through varied responses from his informants he was able to present a case for the internal protean nature of the static fundamentalist model of the self that on the one hand takes the Bible as an authoritative truth and on the other hand has to expand the literal in order to make it "fit" the social norms and issues of the present.

In Lifton's study of protean malleable self taken to a "formless" extreme (pp. 190-212) he is able to cast insight into the "dissociative" issues of abnormal psychology. By presenting the psychoanalytic case histories of poor urban blacks that have been subject to very antagonistic (to say the least) environments of violence and criminality he is able to make a very strong case for the functional influence that one's socio-economic surroundings can have on the formation of the self. This is also true in the longer section on Gordon Parks' autobiography (pp. 151-159) in which the ever-changing person of Parks is seen to undergo many stages of identity as was necessary to deal with his environment.

I enjoyed the book tremendously and am in agreement with the author's central thesis of the protean self as a response to the changing post-industrial world of multiculturalism and mass media. The issue of nuclear proliferation and the fear that they engender was of particular interest to me as an American citizen who was born in 1975 and had to deal with these fears in my early youth. Considering the current fears about nuclear programs in North Korea and Iran this book transcends its timely references of the early 1990s and has much to say about the current public mindset today.