

SHAKESPEARE WAS NOT THE FIRST to make the point, but perhaps he can be credited with popularizing it. In his comedy, *As You Like It*, the exiled Jacques muses that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances, / And one man in his time plays many parts” (II, vii). As an observation about the nature of our identities, this is an unsettling insight into the pretensions and contingencies of social life.

In 1959 Erving Goffman turned this observation into an entire theory of human behavior and social relationships. Indeed, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* stretched the analogy of “life as theater” about as far as it could go. His analysis of impression management, frontstage and backstage behavior, the dynamics of individual and team performances, conduct out of character, and so on was comprehensive, convincing, and, though humorous in parts, more than a bit disturbing. Goffman himself was relentless in his application of the analogy, insisting that even alone we play out performances in our heads and that sincerity is “merely being taken in by one’s own act.” The self was not, as we had thought, the inner reality of each individual expressed as a stable, consistent, and unique personality, but rather the various surface roles we play in life—and nothing more than that. The element of truth in Shakespeare’s adage became, with Goffman, pretty much the whole truth.

Except in certain academic circles, Goffman's work was fairly obscure, so it is impossible to credit (or blame) him for what followed. Nevertheless, in our present circumstances, the analogy has gone well beyond a clever tool of sociological analysis and has become a widely accepted description of common-sense reality and, for some, a moral ideal. In our time, the assumption that we each possess a "true self" is giving way to a sensibility that selves are constructed rather than discovered; identity is nothing more (and nothing less) than a fabrication of images created and sustained within the various circles of social discourse of which we are a part.

This is not just a matter of theory or of what academics say about identity; it also concerns how people experience themselves in daily life at the end of the twentieth century. Social conditions have made it increasingly difficult for us to establish who we are both in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. More than ever, we face the challenges of locating ourselves amidst contending life spheres where multiple and often incommensurable identities are operative.

For some, the destabilization of identity categories permits a relatively free experimentation with a range of possibilities. We have more sources from which to draw as we seek to make our lives and our selves meaningful. Celebrities and politicians often employ mul-

tiple self-presentations in their deliberate and frequent manipulation of their own personas in public and private. Among the economically privileged, self-identity is increasingly a reflexive project, involving experimentation with alternative images and styles of self-presentation and variable collective identifications. But a preoccupation with appearance and performance is by no means limited to elites. To various degrees, all experience the flux and fragmentation of life in a consumer society and the difficulty of sustaining qualities of character, a sense of interiority, and an order of enduring commitments in this social context.

Attitudes towards the destabilization of identity cover a wide spectrum. For some, the idea of a freely manipulable self offers new possibilities for personal liberation and creativity. For others, it embodies the most radical and troubling implications of contemporary cultural change. And for yet others, it is neither an ideal nor a danger but rather a byproduct of the social conditions of contemporary life—a response to the fragmentation of social experience, the plurality of world views, and the commodification of just about everything. No matter how one views these developments, questions of identity are among the most pressing and urgent questions of our day, worthy of sustained inquiry and focused attention in our current discussions.

—T.H.R.