



the

DESIGNED

SELF

Psychoanalysis

& Contemporary

Identities

CARLO STRENGER

THE DESIGNED SELF
Psychoanalysis and
Contemporary Identities

Relational Perspectives Book Series
Volume 27

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THE DESIGNED SELF
Psychoanalysis and
Contemporary Identities

CARLO STRENGER



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In memory of my father,
Dr. Enrico Strenger (1931–2001)



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Contents

Prologue	The Designed Self in the Global Village	xi
Chapter 1	The Self as Perpetual Experiment	1
Chapter 2	Nobrow: Forming an Identity in Urban Culture	25
Chapter 3	The Bobo Dilemma	51
Chapter 4	Failing Fathers, Failing Sons	71
Chapter 5	Finding Ethnic Identity and a Place in Western Society	99
Chapter 6	Psychoanalysis in the Age of the Designed Self	127
	Requiem to the Dream of Metaphysical Depth: An Epilogue	167
References		175
Index		181

Prologue

The Designed Self in the Global Village

❖ This book describes the impact of the far-reaching cultural changes of the last two decades on the process of identity formation. It does so from a vantage point that may seem slightly unlikely: the psychoanalytic consulting room, where people deal with their deepest hopes, fears, terrors, desires, and images of who they would like to be.

My clinical experience of the last decade has led to the hypothesis that the cohort often called Generation X (roughly corresponding to birthdates between 1960 and 1980) lives in a world distinctly different from that of earlier generations, including that of the Baby Boomers, who led the cultural revolution of the 60s and 70s.

Baby Boomers defined their identities through rebellion. They sought freedom in the sexual, intellectual, and cultural domains by conducting an emotionally charged fight against the entrenched values of Western culture. They questioned sexual mores, cultural canons, established authorities, and political realities. Their icons were political revolutionaries like Che Guevara, who fought capitalism; singers like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, who sang the praises of the new brotherhood of humankind; and artists like Andy Warhol, who rejected the rules of the artistic canon of the West. Their values were formulated by intellectuals like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who deconstructed the categories that had guided Western culture from politics to the arts.

For the Baby-Boom generation, sexual liberation and the use of drugs were acts of emancipation and a search for new freedom. While severely critical of parental, political, and academic authorities, this generation was engaged in an

emotionally highly charged fight against previous generations and their ideals. Having come of age in the unprecedented prosperity of the post-World War II decades, they rejected the values of discipline, austerity, and adaptation to society that had guided their parents. Nevertheless the Baby-Boom revolution was emotionally intensely engaged with the generations, culture, and values that they were fighting.

The children of the Baby-Boom generation, Generation X, were born into a new cultural reality. They no longer had to fight for liberties in the sexual and cultural domain. Their parents no longer took on the role of authorities that had to be and could be fought. The very concept of authority had lost its moorings.

Drugs have ceased to be a way to express rebellion. The use of anything from grass through acid trips to Ecstasy has become no more than a way to spend an enjoyable weekend. Sexual experimentation is no longer a way to define one's identity vis-à-vis one's parents, and it has lost the political subtext embodied in Woodstock's "make love, not war" slogan.

If the parents of Baby Boomers were still trying to impose authority on their children, Baby Boomers, as parents, are bewildered and lost. They fought for freedom and are wary of imposing themselves. As a result, GenXers, are not really engaged in a fight with their parents to define their identities. The ambivalent mix of love and hate, respect and disdain that characterized earlier generations in their rebellion against parents has given way to a faint sense of irrelevance.

GenXers are more likely to turn to the Internet to find out about what's in and what's out than to their own parents. Their cultural frame of reference has lost the vertical orientation that has characterized the transmission of culture through generations. They live in a cultural space created by their contemporaries.

If their parents represent neither present role models nor authorities that need to be rebelled against, what guides GenXers in acquiring personal identities? The answer, I suggest, is that the dominant imperative guiding their lives is "design thy self." Identity is not to be inherited through the continuity of ties to the family, culture, or religion. Global icons like blond British soccer star David Beckham can be an idol for Asians,

Blacks, or Indians no less than for British middle-class boys. TV, magazines, and the Web are more likely to provide GenXers with role models than are revered cultural traditions.

The psychoanalytic consulting room was one of the cultural epicenters of the Western middle classes of the 20th century. Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex condensed the emotional reality of generations that grew up in the hotbed of posttraditional nuclear families. His patients suffered from repressions that were demanded by the restrictive bourgeois European culture of the European *fin de siècle*. Freud's iconoclastic role consisted in dismantling taboos that governed both discourse and the social practices of his times.

Freud's patients were suffocated by the sacred and by taboos: "A good child doesn't hate her parents." "A decent girl doesn't have wayward sexual desires." "A real man doesn't feel too much affection toward other men." The great themes were passion and guilt. Patients needed to come to terms with their ambivalence toward those they were supposed to love and respect unequivocally. Women, in particular, had to live with the fact that they had highly ambivalent feelings toward those who condemned them to restricted social roles with very little opportunity for self-expression.

The bourgeoisie was filled with the anxiety of being overwhelmed by desires for pleasure that would undermine the capacity for hard work that constituted the foundation for a place in the upper middle classes. Freud's concern was with the price to be paid for the *Kulturleistung* that made civilized existence (à la *fin de siècle*) possible.

Psychoanalysis offered those whose souls contained too many unnegotiated conflicts a safe, nonjudgmental environment in which they could import civilization into hitherto uncultivated areas of the psyche. *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden* ("Where id was, there ego shall be"). Psychoanalysis was the art of conscious renunciation, the colonization of the deepest layers of the psyche by civilization.

Many contemporary patients suffer not from an overabundance of sacred cows, but from the trivialization of an overwhelming array of possible experiences that have lost their distinctiveness. Videos with the most bizarre forms of sex are as readily available as Zen meditation classes; kabalistic instruction can be had

around the corner as easily as classes in French country-style cooking and Tai Chi.

I do not mean to add to the lamentations of neoconservatives who mourn the loss of old-time religion and family values. I am simply trying to address an objective, social fact that Kenneth Gergen (1991) has aptly called the saturated self. Since most potential clients in the big cities do not live in traditional societies, they must consciously choose their life styles. This is one aspect of what the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) has argued is to be a central characteristic of late modernity: reflexivity. There is no decision that can be made on traditional grounds alone. Late-modern persons are expected to make their decisions on the basis of conscious deliberation. The result has aptly been called the minimal self: a self without history, without tradition, without commitments that are a matter of course.

Historian of religion Mircea Eliade (1947), in his classic study *The Sacred and the Profane*, argued that the essence of the sacred is order: there is a hierarchy of places, objects, values. There is a hierarchical chain of being. It is this order that has been deconstructed in the three decades since 1968: liberation has succeeded, and the sacred cows are dead. As a result, urban GenXers are less likely to suffer from neurotic symptoms that express unresolved neurotic conflicts. They are, rather, prone to diffuse feelings of confusion, depression, and disorientation. While they do not have to fight established authorities, they need to live up to the demand to create a life that combines financial, professional, and social success, together with having loads of fun and a sexy persona.

If Freud's patients suffered from an overly restrictive upbringing, GenXers are likely to feel the emptiness generated by too many possibilities. Particularly those gifted enough to have many options live with the constant anxiety that they might fail to live sufficiently spectacular lives. In fact, the prevalence of depression and anxiety disorders has been explained by the psyche's inundation with icons of success (Buss 1993). It is much more difficult to maintain a sense of self-esteem when one is confronted daily with images of seemingly achievable sensational success ranging from Bill Gates's billions through soccer star David Beckham's world-wide popularity to Britney Spears's overwhelming success in her late teens.

REFLECTIONS ON FATHERLESSNESS

In 1967 the dean of post-World War II German psychoanalysis, Alexander Mitscherlich, published a book titled *Towards a Fatherless Society*. It could be said that, in an uncanny way, his title was prescient and that we are currently living in a fatherless society. This is sociologically often true in the sense that many children grow up without the physical presence of a father, either because of divorce or because they were conceived to be raised by a single mother to begin with.

Fatherlessness is a recurring theme in this book. Its preponderance reaches deeper than the particular constellations to be found in this or that family. The paternal role, as Lacan argued, is also a metaphor for a wide-ranging cultural function: besides having the biological and personal component, it is the symbol for cultural authority itself. Lacan (1977) argued that the sum total of linguistic and cultural associations embodied in a subject's language constitutes that person's unconscious. For people born into Western culture, this implies a huge tradition ranging from Judeo-Christian sources, through the tradition that reaches from Greek philosophy through Roman culture and law, through the canon of Western literature, art, philosophy, and science.

This nexus is not just a collection of cultural associations; it also constitutes cultural authority. Western culture is based on canonical works that define what true culture is. The very notion of the canon is of religious origin. It defines the body of texts that are sanctified and thus authoritative; they contain truths that can be interpreted but not disputed. One of the central characteristics of contemporary global culture is that it is devoid of any such canonic notions. No work of art, writing, philosophy, or other cultural production has the status of being one of the definitive works of culture.

I am aware of the problematic aspects of Lacan's male-oriented equation of the paternal metaphor with the transmission of culture and civilization. I use the metaphor (to the extent that is possible) without assuming a nexus to the male gender. The paternal role in this sense is not connected to the transmitter's being male or female, even though, historically, the transmission of culture has been associated with biological fatherhood.

Fatherhood, as it represents a cultural heritage, becomes problematic once the very validity of such a heritage is called into question. If, indeed, as has been argued repeatedly, this notion of heritage and canon has ceased to be culturally valid, the paternal role per se is called into question. It is possibly no coincidence, then, that so much of contemporary cultural lore about how human beings develop focuses on mothers; here, at least, it seems that we are talking about a role that has been unquestioned and untouched by recent cultural developments.

The drama of the conflict between loyalty to one's parents and their tradition and the yearning for freedom is often assumed to be universal. Yet, when we look at the contemporary global village, this issue seems to have evaporated. Parricide seems no longer to be an issue, as the paternal function and the weight of great cultural traditions seem to have vanished. Contemporary global culture provides a stark contrast to the intergenerational dramas of even the recent historical past.



Anne, 24 years old, was referred to me by a friend of hers who had been in treatment with me some years before. During the first few sessions, she, somewhat haltingly, told me about her problems, which centered primarily on relationships with men. She was very good looking, and men would chat her up all the time. She would generally sleep with them soon after meeting them, but, more often than not, they disappeared. Sometimes, when a relationship began to form, the men would tell her after some months that they simply didn't feel her presence and would leave her. She was left with the dreadful feeling that no man who truly got to know her would ever stay.

I came to know only the bare outline of her history. Her father was American, her mother Israeli. They were married when they were rather young and moved to the United States. After about five years of marriage, the mother found out that the father was having an affair with a business colleague. She decided to take her two daughters and move back to Israel, where she had more of a support network. Two years later, when Anne was five years old, the divorce was finalized. Ever since, Anne saw her father, who had meanwhile married his business colleague, twice a year in the United States.

After the first four sessions, Anne began to find it increasingly difficult to talk. She asked me if I could guide her, ask her questions. I tried to understand what her difficulty was. Did she feel that I was critical of her? Did she feel intimidated? Did she feel that I was not interested in what she was saying? Anne simply could not tell me. In her paralysis, all she could feel was a gaping void. Nothing would emerge. I tried everything from expressing empathy for her plight through suggesting hypotheses about what was blocking her. Nothing helped. For a growing portion of the sessions, Anne could not talk much of the time.

I did have a vague idea about what was happening. Anne had told me that for most of her life the highlight of her year was to visit her father in the United States. Her father was an impressive man, physically and mentally imposing. He had built a successful career in the financial world and lived in an impressive apartment on Park Avenue in New York City. His new wife was beautiful and stylish, was emotionally remote, and cared primarily about their elaborate social life.

Anne would arrive in the United States, and her father would pick her up at the airport. They would enter the chauffeured limousine, and, once they sat down, her father would ask her the question that she dreaded: "So, what are you doing with your life?" Anne would inevitably either fall silent or begin to cry. She felt that she had nothing of interest to say to this man who lived with chauffeured limousines, who was sought after in the highest social and business circles, and led (or so it seemed to her) a fascinating life. What could she tell him? That she went to school? That she had friends? What she was considering studying in college? Nothing, absolutely nothing seemed to be a sufficiently important answer to her father.

I suspected that Anne's silence with me was a reenactment of her paralysis when she met with her father. But I simply could not find a way to explore this (or any other) idea with her. I was feeling more and more wary of the sessions with her and even came to dread them. I was out of my depth. I felt guilty: I knew that Anne, who tried to support herself, did not find it easy to pay for the therapy. I felt an urgent need to help her. Yet not only did I not help her, but we did not even manage to talk.

In fact, the situation became progressively worse. After about half a year, most sessions had the same structure. I would show

her in and say hello; Anne would sit down; and then a thick, opaque, heavy silence would ensue. I had run out of ways to talk to her, things to say or do. We would sit in our respective armchairs for 45 minutes. I would ask her if there was something she wanted to tell me before we ended, and then we said good bye.

Sometimes Anne would, haltingly, relate another episode in which she had been dumped by another man. But we could do no useful work on it; any attempt at exploration made her fall silent. The only thing that kept me going was that Anne kept coming to the sessions. Week after week, month after month, she would come to these sessions, which, I suspected, were much more difficult for her than they were for me—and they were very difficult for me to bear. I felt that, if Anne could make the effort to come to the therapy, I could not give up on her. And so both of us kept waiting for nine months, during which time hardly a word was spoken. When I left for a vacation or a lecture trip, she would wish me a good trip, and I expressed my hope that she would feel fine. For the rest of the time, nothing would happen.

Then Anne wearily told me about a man who was courting her. He was good looking and warm hearted and seemed to take a genuine interest in her. And, strangely enough (for her), he was still there after two months. She fell silent and then said, "I'm almost disgusted with him." "Why is that?" I asked, surprised. There was, again, some silence. Anne looked at me intently (which she rarely did) and said, "He actually seems to love me. Anyone who loves me must be a complete idiot." I let this sentence sink in and asked Anne, "Are you aware of what you have just said? Do you actually mean that?" Anne again looked at me intently and said, "Yes, of course."

That session was to be the turning point of this therapy. After a few more weeks, Anne could finally tell me that the reason she could not talk during the sessions was that she felt she had nothing of interest to say, that nothing she could talk about was profound and deep, and that she was afraid of disappointing me, of feeling my disdain for her wasting my time.

Now we could finally talk about the way she experienced me and, in many ways, most men she valued. The similarity of this experience to how she felt toward her father came to the fore.

She could speak of how, for a lifetime, she had yearned for recognition by her father but dreaded not receiving it—and, indeed, had failed to do so up to this point. The therapy, after nine months of waiting, was finally born.

Anne was afraid of boring me or of bothering me with insignificant stories about how paralyzed she felt with some new lover of hers. It may be worth pondering the following questions: Why was she less afraid of sitting in my consulting room and saying absolutely nothing? Why was the terror of these hours and hours of silence more bearable for her than simply trying to talk to me? Why did she have to put both of us through this ordeal of silence before she could finally start talking?

From the therapeutic dialogue that was to ensue during the following years, we arrived at some understanding of what had happened. Anne was profoundly convinced that no man she could value would appreciate her. This, for her, was a nonnegotiable given. Nothing I could do or say could change that. Her mother, her sister, and she had retreated into being women who would be abandoned by men. Her mother, in fact, had never even tried to regain her husband's love. Accepting the verdict that he loved another woman, she had packed and left. And Anne's father had done nothing to stop his wife and his daughters from leaving. He seemed simply not to care.

Anne needed to put us through the ordeal of the long wait to find out if, unlike her father, I cared enough to suffer through the months of helplessness and confusion that I experienced. Nothing that I could say would convince her of the seriousness of my commitment. So she tested me by finding out if I would stay, patiently, even though I had no idea about what I was supposed to do.

Anne's father was, in many ways, the dominant figure in her life. He had established this dominance by being absent. There was probably nothing in the world that she wanted more than to be recognized by him as a human being in her own right. She wanted to be seen by him. Throughout her life she had felt that he saw through her, that she existed for him as an abstraction. She was, on paper, his daughter, but she had no distinct identity for him.

Anne was, psychologically speaking, a semiorphan. In a profound sense her father had ceased to exist in her life when she was three years old. Yet, as often happens when a parent disappears early, he assumed mythical proportions. For Anne he became a larger-than-life figure, the man who was the source of all value. Being recognized by him as a valuable human being (he always said that she was his beautiful girl—but that made her feel like a doll) became the mythical source of all value.

It was to take several years until Anne began to see him in a more realistic light, as a man incapable of making emotional contact. She began to see how much he suffered in his present marriage with a woman who was cold some of the time and hysterically angry at others. And, not surprisingly, she began to have real conversations with him.



Through Anne we have encountered one of the most obvious forms of fatherlessness. Divorce often leads to loss of a father (even though it need not do so)), and, given the dramatic rise in frequency of divorce since the 1960s, broken family ties are a theme that often plays a role in the life histories of those who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s.

We will get to know other forms of fatherlessness throughout this book. Fathers can be absent because they do not know how to relate to their children. Others feel that they have nothing to give. Still others are so preoccupied by their sense of personal failure that they cannot nurture and guide anyone else. And there are fathers who feel that they simply do not understand their children's world, and they are afraid of being authoritarian—so they retreat.

Children and adolescents are flooded with cultural icons and products created by people who often are in their 20s themselves. As a result, GenXers grew up in a cultural universe defined by their contemporaries. As I said before, they often do not even conceive of earlier cultural traditions as something worth relating to. In addition, as we see in chapter 2, the images of the life worth living generated in the mass media and in advertising are largely geared to adolescents and postadolescents. The fashion models that define the iconography of beauty and the stars that dominate Hollywood's universe mostly have an

aura of youth. As a result, the process of maturation does not carry many positive connotations but is defined primarily by loss, particularly the loss of sexual attractiveness. The impact on the subjective experience of the life cycle is momentous (Edlis 2003), and the intergenerational nexus that has been at the center of much psychoanalytic theorizing has been weakened considerably.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS AND TOPICS

In the chapters that constitute this book, I tell the story of my encounters with five extraordinarily talented people who, at the time, were between their early 20s and mid-30s. Each has a unique biography; each carries the unconscious memory of interactions with his or her parents; each was born with a potential that struggled to realize itself. But all of them were also shaped by the cultural forces that surrounded their adolescence and early adulthood. I try to capture their individuality in my descriptions, but I also place each of them within the cultural context of the last two decades.

THE SELF AS PERPETUAL EXPERIMENT

Generation Xers are guided by a new imperative, one partially inherited from Baby Boomers: experiment with yourself. Growing into an identity that is preestablished by one's ties with family, nation, and ethnic group is no longer considered valid. It is no coincidence that the group of sports that GenXers have developed runs under the heading of extreme games. These sports have little in common with classical athletic disciplines. They are derived from urban pastimes like rollerblading, skateboarding, and riding BMX bicycles. Their movements are elaborations of ways of playing in the contemporary urban landscapes, or, more precisely, they push those modes of play to the extreme.

Living a life and shaping the self is supposed to be a form of extreme games. Anything from one's professional career, to one's hair color, to one's body shape, to one's sexuality is subject to experimentation. Lives and selves are there to be designed, and contemporary urban culture presents a wide array of styles

that can be used. The 60s ideal of “let it all hang out” authenticity has been replaced by the ideal of designing the self.

The darker side of this new space of freedom is located in the high demands it puts on life. If the categorical imperative is to make one’s life as interesting and experimental as possible, nothing but high excitement will do. It seems as if only the combination of adventurousness, embodied in anything from snowboarding to bungee jumping, linked to experimentation with nonstandard sex and plenty of drugs, makes a life truly fulfilling. Too many GenXers feel that they have missed the opportunity for a worthwhile life and that they have settled for nerdhood and mediocrity.

Iris, the protagonist of chapter 1, was a young woman who sought my help because she was caught up in a pattern of relationships with men who patronized her. After a first installment of therapy resolved much of this pattern, she returned some years later for further help. She had transformed from an earnest young woman to a flamboyant participant in bustling Tel Aviv nightlife. I place her search for a sense of authorship over her life against the background of a salient feature of contemporary urban culture: the desire to experiment endlessly with the self.

NOBROW CULTURE

John Seabrook (2000) has argued that an essentially new culture—Nobrow culture—has emerged, which has effectively erased the distinction between serious high culture and popular culture. Whereas Baby Boomers rebelled against the idea of a superior Western canon, GenXers do not even see the Western canon as something that is worth fighting against. They seem to live in a universe that has lost any sense of cultural continuity: they live in a nonrelationship to the past, with very little sense that there is a cultural tradition that is either worth fighting or preserving. Fareed Zakaria (2003) has defined this tendency through his formula of the democratization of culture. As opposed to the canonic conception, Nobrow culture does not ask who appreciates a work of art, but how many appreciate it. Hence the subtitle of Seabrook’s book: *The Culture of Marketing and the Marketing of Culture*.