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More than a version: a study of reality creation

ABSTRACT

The work is a study of reality creation: it explores the problem of how thousands of young blacks in England were able to construct and maintain a conception of reality which was totally at variance with 'conventional' definitions. Berger and Luckmann's programme for the sociology of knowledge is used as a starting point for the analysis, which outlines the basic features of the Rastafarian conception of reality, documents the growth of the reality's purchase in the 1970s and delineates the mechanisms which operated in sustaining its subjective plausibility, a plausibility which was strengthened by the adherents' experiences in the wider society and their loss of affiliation to beliefs learned in early childhood.

Rasta is not a *version* of reality, as you say; Ras Tafari *is* reality.
Dennis, a Birmingham Rastaman, 1978

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE RASTAFARIAN REALITY

For thousands of English West Indians in the late 1970s the world of their parents became distant and somehow unrelated to their own situations. Increasingly, they came detached from this world and immersed themselves in the movement known as *Ras Tafari*. Here they familiarized themselves with new sets of beliefs, transformed self-conceptions and fresh, exhilarating ambitions. In short, they created for themselves a new conception of reality so radically divorced from that of their parents that it was almost breathtaking to imagine only one single generation separated them.

My purpose in this article is to investigate *how* the young blacks were able to construct and maintain their own peculiarly *Rastafarian* conception of reality in the face of the quite obviously conflicting influences of modern urban society. It is a study prompted by Berger and Luckmann's programme:

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> in so far as all human 'knowledge' is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations, the sociology of knowledge must seek to understand the processes by which this is done in such a way that a taken-for-granted 'reality' congeals for the man in the street. In others words, we contend that *the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality*.[1]

My attempt, therefore, is to understand the processes at work within the Rastafarian movement through which a version of reality was constructed and came to take on such a solidity that it possessed this 'taken-for granted' character for those who believed in it. For those members of the movement contributing to these processes the beliefs they accepted depicted a solid and intelligible world: there was little scope for doubt within Ras Tafari. As a Rastaman retorted, after I suggested that there were many ways in which we could interpret reality:

> Rasta is not a *version* of reality, as you say; Ras Tafari *is* reality.

Under Berger and Luckmann's spotlight the social world consists of a plurality of realities, some complementary, some competitive. Sociologies of knowledge, particularly those concerned with religious phenomena, regularly encounter alternatives to the 'conventionally-constructed' social order. Some of these, such as the Jehovah's witness' conception or that of the Hare Krishna movement are likely to be considered odd or even amusing.[2] Others might be found to be threatening and inimical, for example, Scientology,[3] the Family of God or the Unification Church ('Moonies'). Where dangers are perceived, powers may be invoked to ensure the groups subscribing to the reality are given sometimes insurmountable obstacles to cross. Berger and Luckmann remind us that '*All* social reality is precarious',[4] but just *how* precarious depends on the social structural position of the group espousing the conception of reality. Some versions have more strength than others by virtue of their authors' right of appeal to an institutional power base; expressed briefly, 'he who has the bigger stick has the better chance of imposing his definitions of reality.'[5]

The Rastas were entirely without sticks, yet they managed to construct and preserve a version of reality totally at variance with extant definitions and one which many found potentially threatening, particularly in the high immigrant areas of London and Birmingham where their presence provoked a scare of panic proportions.[6] The Rastafarian movement marked a total rupture with not only the social reality of first generation West Indians in England, the vast majority of whom adhered to conventional Christian beliefs, but also with the social order which this generation seemed to represent. Rastas sought to dissolve their allegiances to an order which they considered oppressive and injurious to the interests of black peoples and to comfort themselves in the belief that they were the true lost tribes of Israel incarnate and that

they would soon be returned to Africa, their rightful fatherland, a return to be organized and executed by their God and Redeemer Haile Selassie I, the late Emperor of Ethiopia.

Originally, the movement developed in Jamaica in the 1930s, shortly after the demise of Marcus Garvey's *Universal Negro Improvement Association*, which sought to restore all blacks in the Americas to their native Africa.[7] Garvey's programme was pragmatically-based and he bought steamships to realize his vision of a mass migration. But it was the novel interpretation given to some of his ideas which prompted the emergence of the Rastafarian movement. Gone was Garvey's emphasis on the need to organize and prepare, for Rastas believed their fate to be in the hands of Ras Tafari, the Emperor's official title before his coronation, whose ability to instigate a wholesale transportation was predicated on the belief in his divinity; he was, in the Rastas' own words, *Jah*.[8] Such an attribution was based on a single, undocumented phrase of Garvey's: 'Look to Africa when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near.' Around this alleged prophecy, a total reality was to evolve.

In the revised interpretation of Garvey's messages the Bible, especially the book of Revelation, was to be read as an allegorical foretelling of the destiny of Rastas. The white world was to be regarded as Babylon whose destruction would presage the beginning of a new age for black peoples.

The presence of Rastas in England dates back to the 1950s. Sheila Patterson documented the early, abortive attempt of West Indian migrants to organize a Rastafarian *Afro-West Indian Brotherhood*, which made little impact on the black community and soon folded.[9] It wasn't until the late 1960s that a small Garvey-style *Universal Black Improvement Organization* run by a small number of blacks in London metamorphosed into the English branch of the *Ethiopian World Federation* ('local 38', as it was known). The E.W.F. was to become the first really effective vehicle for the dissemination of Rastafarian ideas and ambitions. By the early 1970s the organization had spread to Birmingham, and later, Manchester. Internal conflicts led to one of the London members splitting off to form his own Rastafarian group, the *Twelve Tribes of Israel*, the influence of which was to be confined to London.

By 1973, the English version of the movement had a rather loosely assembled organizational structure but no effective locus of authority, a state which Roy Wallis characterizes as 'epistemological individualism'.[10] It was this lack of personal focus and the concomitant lack of discipline which helped promote the enormous interest in Ras Tafari which followed.

It was not until after 1974 that the gestation period seemed to end and the movement really experienced birth in the English West Indian community. There followed what might warrantably be called a

Rastafarian renaissance and great chunks of the black second generation were swallowed up in enthusiasm as the Rastafarian movement vigorously manifested itself in England.[11]

Two sets of conditions made possible this renaissance: the existence of a relatively homogeneous and suggestible young black population; and the availability of Rastafarian ideas and the vehicles for their transmission. The first set was satisfied thanks to the life experiences of young West Indians, mostly educated in England but overwhelmingly dissatisfied with their treatment and pessimistic over their chances in a society they perceived to be severely inimical to blacks' interests. As a Rastaman reflected on the rest of society:

> certain pressures begin to bear on a man; especially in this society. You go for a job; you can't get a job. Why? *Because you are black.*

And another two comments reinforce this notion:

> Racialism is too deep. I see this in my work, in each day I face racialism; too much to wipe away.
>
> It is inevitable that we, as black people, were never and can never be part of this country where we do not belong; like a heart transplant, it rejects us.

In other words, young blacks, distressed at what they considered a lack of meaningful involvement in society, located the source of their distress in the wider society's rejection of them because of their blackness. This in turn fed an involution: young blacks either at or just after school leaving age began to crystallize into gangs and restrict primary group contacts to gang members only. A case study into this process concluded: 'this withdrawal into racially exclusive peer groups results from the pupils' realization of a common identity and shared destiny.'[12]

The gang structure, which became one of the enduring features of the second generation in the 1970s, facilitated the communication of Rastafarian concepts and categories which were filtering through to England via Jamaican *reggae* music.[13] Regular, stable interaction between gang members generated interest in the somewhat obscure messages of Rastafarian reggae; messages which told of the imminent destruction of Babylon, the return of Rastas to their rightful homeland, Africa, the black man's Zion, of the divinity of Jah, Ras Tafari and the importance of finding the real 'roots' of the black man.

The archetypal Rastaman, Bob Marley, was the single most important figure in the dissemination of Rastafarian concepts. He was, as one young Rasta expressed it: 'gifted perhaps with much insight'. Another likened his role in the movement to that of John the Baptist. Marley constituted a very influential focus and, in many ways, enacted a part resembling that of Garvey, in whom early Rastas saw a man inspired by God. *Rara avis erat.*

But even Marley was not forceful enough to impose an unambiguous definition of what was to be accepted as the true doctrine. The common stock of Rastafarian knowledge congealed at only two linked points:

(1) The divinity of Haile Selassie
(2) His ability and intention to instigate the African redemption.

Apart from these, the determination of what was to be regarded as Rastafarian doctrine was largely up to individual interpretations and inferences. But, while in other movements, particularly those of a sectarian variety, such flexibility might undermine the basis of the realities on which they stand by allowing for doctrinal heterogeneity and therefore diversity of members' beliefs, the lack of a final authority beyond the individual members served to stimulate the growth of the movement.

To elaborate, entry into the Rastafarian reality came through four phases: the initial apprehension of disadvantage on what were considered racial grounds; the accompanying loss of affiliation to the parental culture of first generation blacks and the concomitant weakening of the 'plausibility structure' of parents' beliefs;[14] the drift into the movement; and the acceptance of Haile Selassie as God and Redeemer.

The first phases were permissive of the growth in suggestibility and the infusions of reggae provided the 'raw material', but it was during the drift and the acceptance that the constructive work of reality-building proper got underway.

I have adopted the concept of 'drift' from David Matza, who defines it thus:

> Its basis is an area of social structure in which control has been loosened, coupled with the abortiveness of adolescent endeavour to organize an autonomous subculture and thus an independent source of control . . . drift is a motion guided gently by underlying influences.[15]

The 'underlying influences' in this case were the streams of reminders to the potential Rastaman that the Rastafarian reality was genuine and correct and that the rupture with the parental culture was effectively an entry to the realms of an élite, members of which had realized their 'true selves', as they preferred to call the changed self-conceptions. By far the most important method through which the reminding got done was *reasoning*, the discussion and critical interpretation of virtually any topic, ranging from profound religious and political issues to less significant questions such as the price of reggae concert tickets. Quite literally any subject could be reasoned through and given a Rastafarian interpretation. World events and personal experiences could be fused with new meaning once a grasp of Rastafarian ideas had been achieved. And, prompted by the urge to learn more and the disintegration of old

beliefs, the individual progressively acquired the *insight* to comprehend the world through Rastafarian eyes. As a Rasta summarized the process:

> Maybe music was the inspiration for the movement, but through reasoning a better understanding was reached . . . insight comes through reasoning.

The group experience of reasoning stimulated new patterns of interaction. Gangs which had previously come together as a more or less spontaneous evolution of the rudimentary schoolboy gangs became the vehicles for a new type of socialization; the drifting Rastas came to internalize a totally fresh comprehension of the world and their place in the world. Reasoning sessions were occasions for vigorously debating and arguing about an endless array of topics and this served to solidify the subjective plausibility of the Rastafarian conception of reality.

The young blacks had no charismatic prophet to offer them a new interpretation of the world and themselves, only a loosely-defined parcel of concepts and symbols gleaned from reggae music. But, by utilizing these concepts through reasoning and applying them to personal and shared experiences, the youth was able to progressively assure himself and others that his increasing commitment was unshakeably correct. Michael Barkun writes of this mutually reassuring process:

> The individual who assures someone else that his act was right also assures himself. And when he sees the effect of his reassurance on the other, he is again confirmed in the rightness of his own position.[16]

The relevance of this is that during the late 1970s when the movement's membership grew quite dramatically, credence was constantly lent to the Rastafarian reality simply by virtue of the increasing numbers of black youths engaging themselves in reasoning sessions. 'Each new person won over provides supportive evidence for those won over earlier'[17] and the plausibility structure of Ras Tafari solidified with every new drifter. In effect, the volume of the movement itself functioned as a means of confirming the rightness of the beliefs. A Rastaman captured it perfectly when he instructed me:

> 'Look around you, man; can all these Rastas be wrong?'

So, the movement's growth was self-perpetuating and conducive to the consolidation of the Rastafarian reality. The disjuncture with the parental culture was completed with the acceptance of Haile Selassie; and this break represented the entry into the new reality. An endeavour which one Rasta characterized as the attempt 'to revive our true self and really know our ability by discovering our history' began in earnest once the rupture had been consummated; they could then reflect back on how their parents were 'misguided' or even 'brainwashed', as a Rasta sister expressed it.

> We believe that perhaps the majority of blacks in this country are still in a state of mind that can be described as not a conscious state of mind.

Although there was no ritual accompanying the break with the old order as represented by other blacks, comparable to, for instance, the Mau Mau initiation rites and oaths which involved extreme violations of Kikuyu taboos,[18] there was the suggestion of a total rejection of the past; for example: 'I now look at myself as a proper person'; 'I wasn't myself before'; and 'I and I didn't know ourselves . . . now we're making positive steps to find our true selves.'

The initiation of the revival of the true selves was not regarded as a religious conversion but as a progressive accumulation of insight, that ability to see and interpret the world through a Rastafarian grid. Members strenuously repudiated that they were 'converted' to Ras Tafari after successive reasoning sessions and would never concede that they were anything but Rastas. As a Rastafarian sister declared: 'It was in us from creation.' But the broadening awareness reasoning brought enabled the individual to develop and refine his insight until the stage was reached when he could wholeheartedly *accept* the divinity of Haile Selassie and, therefore, the inevitability of the redemption. I questioned Rastas about this and a typical reply was:

> When did I become a Rastaman? Well, you see, it is so that I has always been so . . . but it was when I come to accept His Imperial Majesty Selassie I that I realize this.

Acceptance of Haile Selassie was the consummate break with the old order and the start of a deepening involvement with a group which saw itself as an élite: 'only those with insight enough to see the light of Africa will accept the truth of Ras Tafari'. During the 1970s thousands upon thousands of young blacks broke with the order of their parents and surrendered themselves to a new reality, a reality replete with an explanation of why they had struggled in ignorance for years, why blacks had been downtrodden for centuries and why their parents were still labouring. And, indeed, why they had reason to be optimistic about their futures. Answers to these were found in the Babylonian conspiracy theory.

THE BABYLONIAN CONSPIRACY

Because of its relatively weak structural position, West Indian youth in England proved particularly vulnerable to upheavals and crises: familial fragmentation (due perhaps to one or both parents working long awkward hours); consignment to poor quality housing in racially patterned ghettos; under-achievement at school; limited employment opportunities. What is more, young blacks felt themselves to be

deprived, 'suffering' was the quintessential unit of experience for the Rasta; as one explained: 'it's *all* about suffering'. And another:

> Every day we confront those with white skins oppressing and making the black man suffer like they have for four hundred years.

Finding themselves denied what they considered full participation in society and continually suffering under the pressure of white domination, Rastas sought theories to help understand their current circumstances and reasons why they might change in the future; the problem of theodicy took on paramount importance.

The appeal of Rastafarian theory lay in the range of ill-effects imputed to a single malevolent cause, Babylon. This was the source of evil in the world and its destruction would portend what Rastas called 'the new age', the entry into Africa, Zion.

The simple attribution of blame and causes of anxiety to a single source established a theoretical thrust which served as the basis of a number of other important formulations. To summarize them:

(1) The Rastas were the reincarnations of the ancient lost tribes of Israel who had been enslaved and kept in exile by their white oppressors, the agents of Babylon.
(2) The entire history of the black man since his contact with whites was to be understood in terms of a systematic denial of freedom, material and cognitive. Every event in the development of colonialism was a recycle of this pattern.
(3) This pattern was the attempt of the whites to oppress blacks' thoughts, energies and potentialities, generally.
(4) Haile Selassie was God but white slavemasters and missionaries concealed this from the black man by force-feeding him mistranslated versions of the Bible. Only Rastas had broken from this and were now re-educating themselves.
(5) Haile Selassie, though conventionally thought to be dead, was either in hiding, being held by whites, or had assumed another form (Rastas were not unanimous in this).

The mechanics of colonialism were thought to perpetuate the obfuscation and militate against the blacks' realization of their own gifts and capabilities. Because of their lack of resources, blacks had always been open targets for the militarily superior whites and could not withstand the impositions of western religions which served the exigencies of domination.

Once they were aware that a conspiracy was at work which robbed blacks of their culture, their achievements, their history and substituted in their place a relentless emphasis on white supremacy, the four hundred year cycle became fully transparent. Even their parents' failure to articulate anything resembling a criticism at their position of

disprivilege was understandable. The point was that the conspiracy had developed its own dynamic: blacks now accepted willingly their lowly positions because they had no alternatives available; whites had ensured that the black man was completely broken from his true African heritage. They had unwittingly internalized an image of themselves offered by whites. White bias in education, religions which held to a white God and worked as the handmaidens of colonialism and politics which excluded black people full participation were all rendered meaningful in terms of the encyclopaedic conspiracy theory. Further, all events in the modern world whether personal experiences or world-wide issues were to be made sense of with the use of the conspiracy.

The theory allowed the Rasta to understand the workings of the world and gave him knowledge of the deceptions at work to discredit him; what might otherwise have been mistaken as damaging items were made harmless and reduced to epiphenomena. The process resembled what Berger and Luckmann call 'nihilation', or negative legitimation, because the Rastas conceptually liquidated every piece of information which contradicted the conspiracy theory.

> nihilation *denies* the reality of whatever phenomena or interpretations of phenomena do not fit into that (socially constructed) universe.[19]

So, for example, when I confronted a group of Rastas with photocopies of newspaper articles reporting the death of Haile Selassie, they dismissed them with such remarks as: 'Imperial propaganda' and 'the lies of Babylon'. And any suggestion at the historical inaccuracy of equating Africa with Ethiopia (which Rastas did) was attacked as, to quote a Rastaman, 'Babylon trying to divide and rule the black man by covering up his true heritage.' All knowledge other than that complementing the Rastafarian belief system was thought to be insignificant. It was important, therefore, to establish the status or any information which ran contrary to Rastas' expectations; and if its source was connected with Babylon, then it could be regarded with indifference: 'Rasta don't care 'bout the wisdom of Babylon'.

The conspiracy theory had a total rather than segmental impact on the Rastas: it dictated their whole ideological orientation to the wider society and compelled members to group activity, to draw boundaries around themselves and preserve themselves from the noxious influences around them. Thus, primary contacts were severely restricted to members only; this élite which had access to the special and exclusive knowledge of the 'true' nature of the black man, as opposed to the whites' version. One Rasta expressed this in the words of Bob Marley: 'It's not all that glitters is gold, half the story has never been told. But now you see the light – stand up for your rights!' The Babylonian conspiracy theory revealed the hitherto untold half of the story: about how the whites had again and again sought to suppress the potentialities

of blacks, firstly through physical means and, later, more subtle means. But now the elect few had 'seen the light' and were aspiring to higher ideals.

But, while all Rastas shared a subscription to the conspiracy theory and attempted to restrict social contacts to those who had also reached the plateau of enlightenment, mere similarity of belief was insufficient to unite thousands of young blacks into a movement, as opposed to an aggregation of individuals harbouring the same theory about the world. What was needed was a belief to reinforce the sense of belonging. Rastas did not predicate their membership to an élite movement on just the sharedness of a theory, but on a much deeper, almost primordial commonality: the brotherhood.

THE BROTHERHOOD

A prominent feature of the Rastafarian movement was its lack of formal organization which would have facilitated the establishment of channels of communication and the possibility of internal control. The two institutional forms, the E.W.F. (later to become the *Ethiopian Orthodox Church*) and the Twelve Tribes, developed somewhat rudimentary organizations, but the majority of Rastas affiliated to neither group, preferring to dissociate from any organization; as a Rastaman explained: 'it is not dishonest that I, as a Rastaman, belong to no organization, for my faith is within I and goes with I everywhere'. But, there was absolutely no antagonism between organization members and nonaffiliated Rastas, though mild resentment occasionally surfaced; an E.O.C. member commented on the majority of Rastafarian adherents:

> Being Rasta is more exciting than going to church and doing constructive things, and that.

But this was the extent of the resentment and, for the most part, Rastas refused to criticize each others' preferences and comforted themselves in the belief that they were all united in another, more important sense: they belonged to a pervasive brotherhood, or fraternity of brethren.

Rastas understood themselves to be linked by the existence of God in man, expressed in the Rastafarian vernacular as 'I and I', which meant that subject *versus* object distinctions were dissolved where fellow brethren were concerned. 'You and I' had little meaning for the Rastas simply because God was in all of them and they were all 'one people'. As a Rasta elaborated:

> I and I is an expression to totalize the concept of *oneness*. It is derived from the expression that always addressed himself by when he speaks of himself as on high. You know, so when Ras Tafari speak of himself as 'I' he means it in a sense of total uplifting of one's self, total dignity of one's self and expresses that so his fellow brethren is the same as

himself. He says 'I and I' as being the oneness of two persons. So, God is within all of us and we're all one people, in fact.

Haile Selassie was thought to reside in all men, irrespective of colour or country of origin. What separated the Rastaman was his realization of this; his enlightenment placed him in a privileged position relative to the rest of the world for, not only had he uncovered the conspiracy at work to discredit him and all black peoples, but he had gained insight into the future; the return to Africa. Accordingly, the brotherhood was to be regarded as an élite group, the chosen few who would be saved come the holocaust: 'I-man[20] realize his true self, *his destiny*'.

The brotherhood defined boundaries on the basis of this enlightenment, or insight. Realizing the true self and embarking on the roots-searching enterprise was a precondition of membership and this prompted a strong sense of in-group solidarity, or 'we-ness'. Although lacking in formal organization, the movement held together *as* a movement because each Rasta felt himself to be linked to the rest of the members through this unifying bond of brotherhood. In a sense, the belief replaced formal organization as a means of agglutinating the membership in a collectivity, as opposed to a heterogeneous aggregation. Believing God to be in one's self and in all Rastas functioned to tie the members together; it also allowed for Rastas who may never have seen each other before – possibly from different parts of the country – to enter into what an outsider would consider an intimate relationship, without any suggestion of inquiry into background; the only background they were interested in was that they all came from Africa in the first instance.

An implication of this common belief in a brotherhood was that it imposed restrictions on the members' relationships in the wider society. Those linked together by the realization of Jah's inherence perceived themselves to be the enlightened forerunners of the new age and so sought to shut themselves off from a society whose structures were designed to suppress them by any means possible. Commenting on the insularity of the movement and the seemingly deliberate policy of non-contact with whites, nor any 'outsiders', a Rasta: 'don't want no part of that world'. For them, Babylon was doomed: 'We see that it is written in Revelations . . . this is the last days.'

But the restriction of primary contacts introduced a strain in the Rastas' relationships with outside groups: other blacks became suspicious, Asians anxious and whites rather apprehensive (especially in Birmingham where the West Midlands Police Force commissioned a report on the Rastas' activities in Handsworth).[21] For the Rastas the breakdown in relationships merely confirmed suspicions about the proclivity of Babylon to oppose them: 'the black man has been trodden on for four hundred years and there's no reason why Babylon won't try

to keep it that way'. The reactions to the existence of Rastas lent empirical referents to the Babylonian conspiracy theory.

THE REALIZATION OF A NEW IDENTITY

The establishment of a mutual identification between Rastas through the nexus of brotherhood, plus the formulation of a theoretical basis on which to interpret all events in the world provided members with a sense of, not only living in an exclusive world of their own and sharing each others' being, I and I, but also a feeling of being subjected to the same treatments from the wider society. The world of Ras Tafari was posited as an objective reality and the individual member, by becoming a part of this reality, came to internalize the roles, attitudes, assumptions and perspectives of the Rastaman. In other words, he came to look at the world through Rastafarian eyes and himself as a true Rastaman; he acquired a subjectively plausible self-identity, based firstly on the appropriation of significant others' changing attitudes towards him, acquired through progressive reasoning, and, after acceptance, his own reformulation of the 'true self'. The process fed a congruence of subjective and objective realities, because in appropriating his true self-identity the Rasta, by implication, created his own specific location within an objective social world. Expressed another way: the formation in consciousness of a self-identity coincided and congealed with the apprehension of reality of which that identity was part; establishing a place in the world simultaneously established the reality of that world.

I have mentioned how the Rastas became fugitives from the world of their parents and retrospectively interpreted the way in which previous generations had been misguided by the conspiracy. They were also able to understand how, prior to accepting Haile Selassie, they had laboured with hopelessly distorted images of themselves. Two reflections indicate the extent of the transformation:

> I now look at myself as a proper person; I wasn't myself before.
>
> Before I and I didn't know ourselves . . . now we're making positive steps to find our true selves.

The steps taken took the form of reading literature on the history and politics of Africa, sometimes instruction in the Amharic language, even Bible classes, but principally through sustained social interaction, reasoning. Casual conversational exchanges in a stylized patois which enabled them to communicate with fellow brethren in allusion rich in meaning but quite abstruse to outsiders promoted a strong sense of kinship. It opened semantic fields peculiar to the Rastas and maintained the flow of vectors of reality-generation, whilst at the same time precluding too much opportunity for doubt about the correctness of the Rastafarian definition of reality. Remember the opening quote: 'Ras

Tafari *is* reality.' Effectively, the significant other members of the brotherhood mediated the reality of Ras Tafari to the individual and at the same time provided him with a new definition of himself.

Berger and Luckmann have theorized that: '*All* social reality is precarious'[22] and this is particularly so when the group maintaining the reality lacks the resources to be able to impose their definition in a credible fashion and, further evokes the suspicions of the wider society. The Rastafarian reality was wide open to challenge and so, therefore, were the Rastas' self-identities. And here the ways in which the three elements combined to concretize the Rastafarian reality becomes obvious: the theory of a conspiracy providing an interpretive platform on which to make sense of events in the world; the existence of a brotherhood held together by the bond of God; and the transformed self-identity.

Given the tightly-enclosed nature of the movement and the restriction of contacts, the onus was on significant other brethren to maintain the congruence between subjective and objective realities. The identity of the Rastaman was at the intersection of these realities: he conceived a reality which was objectively solid and subjectively plausible and allocated himself a place in that reality. In order to remain convinced of who he actually was, he looked to other Rastas for confirmation and got it through reasoning. If he looked to whites, non-Rastafarian blacks or any outsiders he was likely to have received ridicule, dismissal or attempted disconfirmation. *But*, by reference to the Babylonian conspiracy, he could infer that these negative reactions were ploys or strategies in the wider plan to destroy the credibility of the movement and re-enslave its members in the same conceptual manacles as other, less enlightened blacks; 'mental enslavement', as some Rastas called it. The negative responses of the wider society were assimilated in terms of the conspiracy.

On the other hand, Rastas were committed to the presence of the brotherhood, members of which shared a common understanding of reality. They were bound to look to brethren for explicit confirmation of their identities; and they received it. Brethren occupied a very special position in the maintenance of reality in supplying day to day reaffirmation. Non-Rastas also occupied special positions but in the process of supporting the conspiracy thinking. No amount of antagonistic response on the part of the wider society could outweigh the positive responses of the brethren; they could only complement them (see Figure 1).

Those West Indian youths attracted to the Rastafarian movement immersed themselves in a bizarre definition of reality, predicated on a glorious ancient Africa which would once again be restored in accordance with the will of Haile Selassie. Ostensibly, it was a fragile conception open to the inconoclastic forces of modern industrial society. But the Rastas evolved methods for defusing potential

challenges and maintaining the plausibility of their reality. Through these methods the Rastas were able to prepare themselves, conceptually at least, for the future. Hence, the resources for the movement's perpetuation were in place, and, since it was the new reality rather than the old which appeared more credible, the Rastas were unlikely to surrender clarity for opacity. As Robert Pirsig puts it: 'no one is willing to give up the truth as he sees it'.[23]

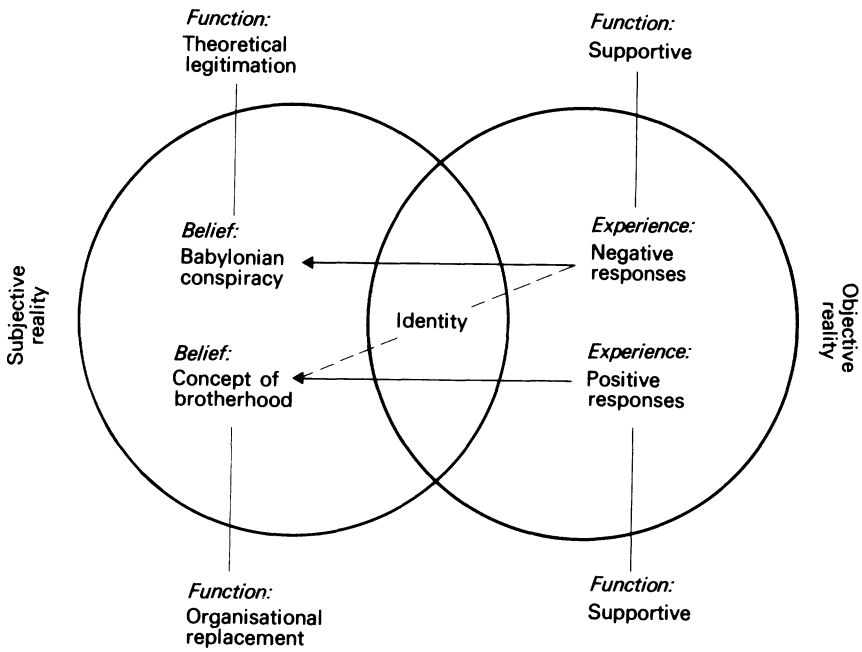

FIGURE 1
Elements and processes in the Rastafarian reality.

Obviously, there are problems in trying to draw out any conclusions from this single study; the Rastas held to an exotic, almost bewildering definition of reality quite anomalous in the context of contemporary England and totally unlike that of any other movement. It would be hard to introduce parallels. The overall point is, however, that where groups exist which have become disenchanted with the wider society, to the point of disengagement, there open up possibilities for reflective analysis of the reality internalized in early childhood. In the Rastas' case, its plausibility deteriorated after such analysis. They turned to a ready-made alternative.

But, like all groups holding to deviant definitions, they had to develop and refine procedures for preserving their conceptions in such a way as to not only retain the credibility of their own, but to destroy

utterly the credibility of other versions. Deprived of the type of resources which might have worked to improve their definition with more urgency, Rastas devised ingenious methods for coping with harmful phenomena and reinforcing their own definition.

Ernest Cashmore

NOTES

1. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, London, Penguin, 1972, p. 15.
2. James Beckford, *The Trumpet of Prophecy: a sociological study of the Jehovah's witness*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1975.
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