Sociology and the SCA: some brief thoughts

I have often been asked to explain to people various things about the sociology of the SCA. This is a long topic. This note is a brief attempt to discuss a few of the issues.

We live in a time that is generally classified as being either post-modernity or else late modernity (Crook, Pakulski and Waters 1992). The characteristics of this period are change and fluidity. Whilst some cultures are able to thrive on uncertainty, others are not (Hofstede 1997). For many people, the basic needs are intimately connected with security (Maslow 1970) and without some connection to a security there is an increase in anxiety and stress. If the connection with solid roots cannot be made through the socially accustomed modes of modernity (for example the definitions of work and career are increasingly under attack), then it must be achieved through other, and more accessible, means such as hobbies and lifestyles. (Gelber 1991). Many are able to find this solidity through a re-connection with roots, for example by identifying with an ethnic origin (Wallman 1983). Some of these connections with roots may be made through a search for the 'real' and the 'authentic' (MacCannell 1974, MacCannell, 1976 #58). For others it is achieved via a romantic longing for a purer past, free from the problems of today. Among other means this can be expressed in attention to environmental issues – seeking to eliminate the false by searching for a created image of an Earth-Mother (Jagtenberg and McKie 1997) or it could be expressed through a neo-Romantic quest for a medievalism (Eco 1987) that is an analogue of Victorian Orientalism (Said 1978).

As a part of this breaking down within society the old salient divisions of class and nation are rapidly disappearing (Pakulski 1993) and the populations of the more 'advanced' Western societies find increased numbers of their people deriving more and more of their identity from their choices of material and non-material consumption which are expressed through lifestyle choices. This has led to the formation of taste cultures (Hebdige 1994) of people with a commonality of choice in the matter of style.

One of these taste cultures contains persons who are interested in computers, science fiction, medievalism and conflict simulation games. What mix of these is adopted by a particular member of the taste culture will depend on exposure opportunities and a variety of other factors. The SCA fits within one of these taste cultures (Lenehan 1994).

By itself, the SCA has no apparent connection with the macro issues affecting society. However it is in itself and interesting exemplar of a trend. The people within the SCA partake of a shared attachment to a constructed reality called 'the Dream'. This is an inchoate (and oft debated) set of ideals that is expressed through the participant's attachment to our peculiar form of staged authenticity (Rojek 1995: 101). That is we have created an 'authentic' set of rules based around a created mythos. We have produced a version of the 'real' that works for us – even though many are aware it is distant from the actuality of our period of interest (as any such reproduction in such an anachronistic environment must be).

As an exemplar of Elias' concept of the civilising process (Elias 1982), the SCA has taken violence to a new level of mimeticism. In a direct progression from the social releases of violence such as the gladiatorial games and the tournament (Guttmann 1992), or more modern social forms such as football (Elias and Dunning 1986), violence in the SCA is ritualised to an unprecedented degree. The only comparable sport is Olympic Fencing, which has almost lost its origins and now has substitute weapons, which are pale imitations of their originals. The primary concern of the violence in the SCA is not to kill or injure your opponent, but to defeat them without causing harm. This mimetic violence can be seen as a part of an overall trend in society towards sports that are 'on the edge'(Beck 1992). Participants desire at least the illusion of danger as a means of coping with changes in the world around them.

One minor exemplar of the direct influence of the SCA (and perhaps its analogues) in contemporary society can be readily demonstrated. The post-modern rootlessness of societies under stress is often observed in seeking and especially risk-seeking behaviours. One expression of this can be seen in the rise of the drug cultures (no references at hand). Many persons, having found a touchstone to a form of 'the real' through the SCA use this as an enabling mechanism to leave the drug culture (Lenehan 1994: 31).

Another exemplar is in the proportion of people in the SCA who seek further knowledge through continued further education (Lenehan 1994: 22). This can occur either formally or informally through the club. Whilst this can be noted as evident, as no research has been done on this point, I do not wish to speculate on whether this is causal or a part of the mind-set that prompts people into membership of this particular taste culture.

One of the most appealing features of the SCA, for its members is its stress upon courtesy. This is a feature conspicuously lacking in a more 'rational' contemporary society where inter-personal contact is more use-oriented. The members of the SCA tend to take this courteous mind-set back with them into what they call 'mundanity', the 'normal' contemporary world.

As a sidelight, the division between SCA and mundane mirrors the ages-old division between sacred and profane and is an expression of the process of identity formation through the establishment of an insider / outsider dichotomy (Elias and Scotson 1965). Those within the SCA 'family' are often regarded as having many similar attitudes to each other. They identify together as a group (despite internal differences) and, when in SCA 'mode' often treat those outside the group as a homogenous 'other' to react against.

In the SCA we can also see a classic example of a rite of passage (Gennep 1960). These are the rituals that mark the transition from one life stage to another. Although these have largely disappeared from our modern world (we are left only with bowdlerised forms of the original in our wedding and funeral rites and some 'coming of age' events), the SCA has managed to recreate some in a full and formal sense. A classic example is the introduction of a person into an Order of the Peerage. Here a candidate is secretly asked into the Order (as people used to be inducted into the old mystery orders). When the time of their ceremony comes about, they are removed from the company of their fellows, it is important that this is usually done quietly. They are then secretly told the 'mysteries' – they ask questions of the elders of their Order, discuss its rights and obligations. At the ceremony they are then re-integrated into the general life-world with an increased status marked in a formal fashion.

Another interesting point is raised in regard to the concepts of the backstage and frontstage (Goffman 1959). If we look at those on the thrones (at any level) and in the Peerage Orders they are often on public display. Here they present an act, a staged performance, as part of the 'show' that they present to the populace. This is Goffman's classic 'frontstage' where a person has a persona that is presented to the world. At the same time people desire to have their private lives separated from their public ones. This is their backstage. Those viewing 'public' people, as a result of normal interest, naivete, curiosity and a variety of other reasons forget they the people they see up front would like to separate their front and back stages. Many people in prominent roles in the SCA also forget that, when they were younger they were in the same position. The Royals forget that, for many people, significant actors in the SCA are *never* out of the frontstage. This process can snowball when someone constructs a public frontstage and a public backstage – all the while attempting to keep their true backstage to a small group.

I could expand on these brief notes, but to draw too many examples would be to over-emphasise the role of the SCA. Whilst, for its members, it tends to be crucial in their identity formation process, and it serves as a valuable focus for their taste culture, it is but one of many foci. As well, while its taste culture is a rapidly growing one, it would only represent one or two percent of the general population of an advanced Western society. It must also be admitted that this is among the better-educated groups who have an increasing salience in many models of out time. Its main effect is not overt, and it is not out to change the world. It is evident through its members going, with changed mind-sets, into the mundane and occupying key roles in a technocratic culture. SCA members now occupy occupational niches as diverse as an Executive Officer on an American carrier, Chairs of Faculties in Universities, sports stars in American football and members of major rock groups as well as being truck drivers, storemen, sales assistants and especially students. I hope that I have a chance to repeats some of my studies on this subject when Lochac has been a successful Kingdom for around 20 years. The comparisons (and what new stuff arises) should be of great interest to us all.

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