

IDENTITY

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-Anticiv.net Collective

This system could not perpetuate itself if we were able to see it clearly, or even if we allowed ourselves to think about it clearly. If we did, we would not perpetuate it. We could not. But instead our attention must be constantly diverted from real problems to those that parasitize, trivialize, and make diffuse the outrage we would otherwise feel. If these parasitic problems are made to resemble the real problems, they keep people from every looking at the system itself. All of this is as true for dysfunctional families as it is for dysfunctional cultures.

Here's an example of this sort of distraction. George Spent a couple of summers working in a salmon canning factory in Alaska. "Health regulations" requires workers, including George, to cut their long hair. All of the hippies he worked with were outraged at this violation of their personal freedom, complaining bitterly about this as they worked long hours at these difficult, tedious, dangerous jobs. Workers were losing their fingers to the knives and gears of the canning machinery but worried about their hair. To be forced by a company to cut their hair was seen as an outrage, yet to be forced by an entire economic and cultural system to work a job they didn't love (or, for that matter, to work a job at all) went as unnoticed as the hours that slip away in one's so s-short life. The outrage that might have been aimed toward the whole system was (and is) diverted toward a vastly smaller, less threatening problem.

All of which brings us in a roundabout way to “identity theft.” Anybody who’s read a newspaper or seen a television these last few years has probably heard the horror stories. Someone obtains identifying information about you such as your social security or credit card numbers, and begins to impersonate you (at least financially), then to steal your (financial) identity. The next thing you know, your bank account is empty, your credit card is maxed out, your credit rating is down the toilet, and you may be wanted by the cops for passing bad checks. That’s when the bill collectors start calling at seven in the morning.

Here’s a case study. Three years ago Philip Cummings spent three months at a desk job at Teledata Communications, a small software company on Long Island. During that time he was able according to an MSNBC analyst, to “raid the nation’s entire credit reporting system. And in the process, if the charges prove true, he could have sold virtually any American’s digital identity.” Before his ultimate arrest, he had sold the credit reports of thirty thousand people, including bank account information, credit card numbers, and former and current addresses. As the analyst notes, “It’s always been easy to steal credit card receipts from restaurant customer or garbage cans. But thanks to the Internet, criminals can steal them by the thousands now; and more importantly, they can sell them by the thousands to other criminals. Nearly every Internet-based crime, from auction fraud to child pornography to stalking, starts with an identity theft...[W]e now know the crime is so common that complete digital dossiers sell for only \$30 a pop on the black market.”¹

Do you want to know Attorney general John Ashcroft’s social security number? How about that of CIA Director George Tenet? How about their home addresses? You

can get all those for \$26 each. To get someone's bank balance costs a little more, about \$300. As privacy advocates have been pointing out for a long time, just about all of this information is available for sale on the internet.

According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) ten million Americans have had their (financial) identity stolen in the past year, and twenty-seven million in the last five years. Identity theft cost the victims \$5 billion and various businesses \$48 billion.³ The FTC's study reports that two thirds of the victims had their credit cards misused, 19 percent had their bank accounts pilfered and 12 percent had charges placed on their telephone or Internet accounts.

Half the victims don't know how their identification was stolen; the rest knew it had been physically lost or stolen from their wallet or mail, or during a financial transaction involving their account numbers. Twenty-six percent of the victims knew who the thief was, and 9 percent of the victims knew the thief was a family member or friend.

When people had their identities stolen, 43 percent contacted their credit card company, 26 percent reported the incident to local law enforcement agencies, and 22 percent reported the incident to a credit bureau; 38 percent did not report the incident to anyone. About half the victims reported the theft if it cost \$5,000 or more. The average theft cost the victim \$500 and about thirty hours to resolve-a total of \$5 billion and 297 million hours in the year 2002.

What can we do? Well, there's the obvious. Don't give out your social security number. Carefully monitor your bank statements and credit card bills. Shred all documents with financial account numbers on them.

Beyond that? Not much. As one privacy consultant commented, "The problem is a

little bit in the intractable category. For the most part, we rely on the good intentions of companies {that have customers' personal data}. But the empirical evidence says you cannot rely on that anymore. Bad things will happen...Soon or later it's going to happen. I don't know if there's really much we can do."⁴

The key to stopping this sort of identity theft, according to privacy advocates, is to stop trafficking of information among corporate affiliates, "because some companies have hundreds of businesses under the family umbrella. For example, a banking corporation might have a number of insurance, securities and real estate affiliates it does business with and financial data might be swapped among all." One advocate said, "if you cannot stop the traffic in your information among corporate affiliates, you don't have the privacy in this nation."⁵

There's not much we can do about having our identity stolen.

I'll say.

But the real thieves aren't people like Cummings. When it comes to stealing one's identity, Cummings was a piker.

When someone from the corporate press or the FTC (or even you or I) talks about identity theft, what are they (or we) really talking about? We're talking about someone gaining access to your bank account and your credit cards. We may even be talking about someone stealing your (electronic) money. But what are they (or we) literally saying? That someone has "stolen your identity."

What just happened here? They (or we) are now identifying us with our bank accounts, with our credit cards, *with our finances*.

Who are you? Are you the bills you've racked up? Are you the money you have in

the bank (or to be precise, the magnetic blips on hard drives that are translated as money in the bank)? Are you your credit cards?

Who are you *as a person*? What are the qualities that make you who you are? What makes you part of various groups? What makes you different from all others? What identifies you and your individuality, your personality, personhood, character? Who is the real you, in the flesh?

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How is our identity stolen, worn down, erased? Who steals it, wears it down, erases it? How much of our identity is lost-stolen-in year after year of school, sitting in rows, begging the second hand to move faster, listening (or rather not listening) to the teachers drone on and on about this or that fact or rule that doesn't matter to our own lives, to our identities-to who we are-as we absorb the main lessons: do not talk out of line, do not ask difficult or troublesome questions, always give ourselves away to those with the power to send us to the principals office, to take away our recess, to give us bad grades, to hold us back in school if we do not toe (and tow) their lines?

And how much of our identity is lost or stolen when later we give ourselves away to bosses, to those with money or their surrogates, to those with the power to give us this money with which we have come to identify, to those who can fire us, who can make us homeless if we do not toe (and tow) their lines? How much of our identity do we lose with each advertisement we see, each doctored photo that makes us loathe our bodies, our faces, makes us wish we were someone else? How much is lost each time we are told another lie by the corporate press, when each time we know it is a lie but cannot bring ourselves to believe our own truths? How much of our identity is torn away each time we

actively tolerate the intolerable (the breast milk of every woman on the planet, for example is contaminated not only with dioxin but 350 other chemicals such as heavy metals and those in perfumes, suntan oil, and pesticides)?

How much of our identity is lost or stolen as we give ourselves away-and this is especially true for those of us who still care to oppose all of this increasing control over our lives-to those who can arrest and imprison us if we don't do what they tell us? American Indian writer Ward Churchill recently talked about how everything in the United States (which calls itself the most free country in the world) is strictly regulated, and he challenged the audience to name any action a person could take that wasn't regulated by some law. Someone in the audience shouted out, "Smiling." Ward responded by citing a case where a man had been charged and convicted of "disorderly conduct" on the testimony of a police officer who, when asked what constituted the charge, replied, "Well, he smiled a lot."

How much of our identity is lost or stolen (or maybe just slips away) when we do not resist those whose policies are destroying life on this planet, those who believe their providence-their God, their Science-is leading them towards some strange utopia of absolute knowledge, absolute surveillance, absolute control? How much of our identity do we lose when we fear we are being watched by those at the center of the Panopticon? How much of our identity is necessarily stolen by the Panopticon's mere existence?

Each and every one of us is both victim and thief whenever we identify not with our own bodies, not with our humanity, not with our animality (we so often forget that we are animals, that we are primates), not with the landbases that support us, but rather with the very system that exploits us, that is killing us. To lose one's identity is to say, I am not

a human whose body is rotten with the wastes of the industrial system, and whose mind is similarly polluted. I am not a human who loves this person and does not love that person, who has gifts and desires and insecurities and strengths and weaknesses all my own, but rather I am my job. I am a writer. I am an engineer. I am a scientist. I am an American. ("What do you think about our invasion of Iraq? Are you worried about our troops?" I ask, to which you may reasonably respond, "what do you mean? I didn't invade Iraq. They're not my troops. I do not identify with the U.S. government.") More simply still, I am my financial transactions. I am bits and bytes on hard drives all over the world. I am both simplified and fragmented. I am someone who lives in the outer ring of the Panopticon, hoping and praying-to whom?-that I do not do anything to attract the attention of the all-seeing eye at the center, the all-seeing eye on the back of the dollar bill-the dollar bill with which I have come to identify, the dollar bill that will almost undoubtedly soon have RFID [Radio Frequency ID] chips in it. I am someone who wants to get through the day-get through my life-without unduly attracting the attention of those who have the power to punish me. this is how it is in school. This is how it is on the job. This is how it is in the culture at large. This is how it is and must be in the outer ring of the Panopticon.

Everyone and everything is unique. No thing-no being-is identical to any other. Every ponderosa pine is different from every other. Every caterpillar, dragonfly, human being, gust of wind has its own unique identity.

Numbers are predictable, therefore controllable. Unique and willful beings are neither. The transformation of living beings to numbers, or rather our own transformation from people who perceive others as willful beings with unique identities to subjects who

perceive others as objects-whether through science, economics, or the issuing of identity numbers-is all about control.

Electronic blips on hard drives are so much easier to control than wild and uncontrollable human (or nonhuman) beings. How much easier we make it for those at the center of the Panopticon if we allow them to rob us of our complex and willful identities, of our unpredictability, if we agree to identify ourselves with those numbers, and not with our bodies, our loved ones, our communities, the land where we live. We have become accomplices in the theft, snitches in the prison."

Notes:

1. Bob Sullivan, "Why We're All at Risk of ID Theft," MSNBC, January 21, 2003, <http://www.msnbc.com/news/758896.asp> (Accessed September 5, 2003).
2. Jennifer Kerr, "Group Gets Private Data on U.S. Officials," Associated Press, August 28, 2003, http://story.news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/ap/20030828/ap_on_hi_te/privacy/concerns_5.
3. The following statistics are all from U.S. Federal Trade Commission, *Identity Theft Report* (McLean, Va.: Synovate, September 2003), 4, 6-7, 12, 28, 30-31, 50, 54, 59, <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2003/09/synovatereport.pdf>.
4. Sullivan, "Why We're All at Risk."
5. Kerr, "Group Gets Private Data."
6. BBC News, "Health: Beast Milk studied for Toxins," BBC Online Network, July 12, 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/391514.stm> (Accessed November 5, 2003).