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LIVING IN THE ERA OF LIQUID MODERNITY

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

Pre-modern state neither knew of, nor practised citizenship. That did not prevent rebellions against injustice nor the promotion of models of postulated justice through refutation of the state of affairs considered unjust. But only some cases of suffering, as Barrington Moore Jr. had to find out, were likely to be proclaimed by the sufferers 'unjust' and so able to trigger rebellion. In fact, it was the 'surplus suffering' only, a suffering more painful than the pain suffered in the most recent, still vividly remembered past, that tended to be labelled 'unjust'. Feudal serfs rebelled in the name of the restoration of *Rechtsgewohnheiten* – the customary volume of demands on their labour and produce, however harsh those demands might have been and however painful they felt. That measure of pain had to be suffered meekly and placidly, since it was not considered to be a human creation, and for that reason beyond human power.

Through ascribing to the human species the ability to immaculately conceive, ever anew, its own condition and to be the sole manager of its own existence, modernity threw open the gate to dissent and resistance against all and any kinds of conditions found uncomfortable and experienced as painful. No suffering could, in principle, escape condemnation simply on supposition of its inhuman or supra-human origins or foundations. None of the conditions considered tolerable was from now on to be protected against the possibility (certainty?) of being redefined in the future as unjustified suffering (and there was nothing to stop such redefinition from being claimed). Setting the rectification/compensation in motion was just a matter of making the case sufficiently persuasive to attract required resources. As more and more varieties of human suffering were 'disenchanted' (that is, reclassified as man-made), the threshold of endurance and of tolerance to discomfort kept being lowered. Modernity was, after all, a promise of universal happiness and elimination of all unnecessary suffering. It was also a resolve to reclassify all suffering as unnecessary.

When seventy years ago (in *Das Unbehagen der Kultur*, 1929) Sigmund Freud penned down the portrait of modernity self-styled as civilisation (that is, as a mode of living together that puts more humane gloss on human fate), he selected freedom from pain and from other

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forms of unhappiness like fear or ugliness as the most prominent features of civilised existence. Freedom from suffering, and from fear of suffering, was hoped to favour the courage to experiment and to face the risks that the job of self-assertion requires – and thereby facilitate and safeguard the freedom of individual self-constitution. Self-management of the human species was to make every member of the species the manager of her/his fate. Since sovereignty of action lay in the state, it was the task of the legislating and enforcing powers of the state to accomplish that feat. As Jacques Ellul put it¹ – ‘who, according to the average modern man, should reorganize society so that it would finally become what it should be? The state, always the state’. From its inception, the modern state found itself burdened a daunting, indeed overwhelming challenge. There was no other force in sight, human or inhuman, which could be blamed for human suffering or for its too irresolute and sluggish cure: ‘ultimately all problems are political, and solvable only along political lines’. In Ernst Cassirer’s words,² modern political leaders were cast in the role of ‘the medicine men who promised to cure all social evils’.

The snag was that the task laid at the doorstep of the state as the sovereign agency and the ultimate embodiment of self-sustained and self-managing humanity was perhaps too heavy a burden to carry, but the self-reliance and self-responsibility suggested by the individual freedom from constraint proved to be even less bearable. That latter discovery prompted most insightful observers to conclude that ‘if man were simply to follow his natural instincts he would not strive for freedom; he would rather choose independence... [F]reedom is so often regarded much more as a burden than a privilege’ (Cassirer, *ibid.*), or that since growing aloneness is an unavoidable companion of all individuation, the accompaniment of individual liberation tends to be ‘a feeling of powerlessness and anxiety’ and so ‘impulses arise to give up one’s individuality, to overcome the feeling of aloneness and powerlessness by completely submerging oneself in the world outside’ (Fromm).³

Throughout most of the twentieth century a spectre haunted Europe of the all-powerful state ready to jump to the opportunity offered by the massive ‘escape from freedom’ and gladly offering that ‘submerging in the worlds outside’ which was a sweet dream rather

1 Jacques Ellul, *L'illusion politique* 1965. Here quoted after Konrad Kellen's translation – *The Political Illusion*, New York, Random House 1972, p. 186, 185.

2 Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, New York, Doubleday & Company 1955, pp. 362–3.

3 Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1960, p. 23.

than a nightmare of the lonely, abandoned and frightened individuals. Political reflection on the roads which nation-states were following, perhaps having already passed the point of no return, was in the case of observers like Hannah Arendt, full of sombre premonitions of the 'totalitarian tendency' surfacing ever again with each successive response of the State to new problems. Of 'new problems' there was never a shortage, while more still were expected to crop up in the turbulent world of inter-state wars and inner-state social battles. As Cassirer observed, 'in politics we are always living on volcanic soil. We must be prepared for abrupt convulsions and eruptions'.⁴ Others, like Otto Schmitt, welcomed the *Totale Staat* as all but a millennial event – the Second Coming of the lost or recklessly abandoned sacred order of the caring and sharing, but also all-embracing, all-regulating and all-devouring community.

Evaluations might have spread over the whole spectrum extending from unpolluted joy to the darkest of despairs, but *expectations* were amazingly similar. George Orwell's and Aldous Huxley's dystopian pictures of the future, often represented as diametrically opposed, differed indeed in every detail – but one: in both, an organ wielding supreme power was placed firmly and for all time beyond the reach of its subjects but penetrated every nook and cranny of their lives. It supervised every step its subjects took or could take and ruthlessly punished all who stepped out of line (that is, if previous drill did not nip in the bud the very possibility of such imprudent behaviour). Once the shocks of the bolshevik and Nazi totalitarianism have been fully absorbed and digested, Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (with its ubiquitous and pernicky surveillance, and its sharp division between the surveillors and the surveilled), rediscovered and recycled by Michel Foucault, has been welcomed by the enlightened opinion as the long sought, eminently accurate model of the contemporary state and of the tendency innate to all modern power.

The omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent State from which the final enslavement (or, for some thinkers, liberation) of the modern individual was bound to arrive was seen as over-determined. The cause of over-determination was the convergence of two separate, yet complementary tendencies: the subjects' resentment of the necessity to choose and the power-greedy politicians' zeal to reduce their choice to the minimum or prohibit it altogether. Theodor W. Adorno, in tune with the spirit of the time, profusely elaborated on both tendencies and their

4 Ernst Cassirer, *op.cit.*, p. 351.

ultimate encounter.⁵ With 'individual narcissism' simultaneously beefed up and frustrated, disappointed individuals seek compensation and find it in 'collective narcissism [that] restores to them as individuals some of the self-esteem the same collective strips from them and that they hope to fully recover through their delusive identification with it'. On the other hand, though – 'the religious theme of corruption of the human species since Adam's fall appears in a new guise, radically secularised already in Hobbes, distorted in the service of evil itself. Because it is supposedly impossible for people to establish a just order the existing unjust order is commended to them. What Thomas Mann in speaking against Spengler called the "defeatism of humanity" has expanded universally'. Individuals resented responsibilities they found well-nigh impossible to handle; the state rulers were eager to oblige and take individual responsibilities away, together with their subjects' freedom.

Few thinkers of the past century (and their number shrank as the century advanced in years) gave much credit to the chances of democracy portrayed by Aristotle as the union of autonomous polity with its autonomous citizens. Some bewailed the passing of the Enlightenment dreams; others shed few tears at the funeral of what they saw from the start as an abortive and doomed illusion, a bastard offspring of misguided hopes. But almost none foretold democracy a long, let alone cloudless, future. Sharp differences of opinion were underlain by a shared foundation: a broad agreement as to the prospect of expanding powers of the state and shrinking powers of its subjects. Observers agreed that the collapse of the democratic illusion may have been preordained by the individuals' endemic incapacity of self-assertion (particularly the self-guided, autonomous self-assertion of the kind democracy requires), but it is the State and its power-obsessed rulers that will ultimately deliver the *coup de grace*.

To fathom the distance that separates the present generation and its fears from the generation whose fears Adorno, Arendt, Cassirer, Fromm, Huxley or Orwell articulated, we could do worse than take a closer look at the public spectacle called 'Big Brother' that has recently taken all broadcasting corporations, and their viewers, by storm. Overnight, it has become the *talk of the town*. One can be excused for guessing that its astonishing career would not happen were the kind of life the Big Brother (or the French show 'Loft Story', or the Anglo-American quiz 'The Weakest Link') portrayed has been already the most absorbing, perhaps the only *game in town*.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle*, 1963; and *Sichworte: Kritische Modelle 2*, 1969 (both Suhrkamp Verlag). Here quoted from Henry W. Pickford's translation, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, New York, Columbia UP 1998, pp. 118, 139.

Sometime in 1999, watching a group of people kept for a month enclosed in a glass dome in Arizona desert, John de Mol of Hilversum had, by his own admission, 'a big flash' of inspiration.⁶ He invented 'Big Brother'. His brain-child was shown initially on a small private channel 'Veronica', only to become an instant success and so to be snatched immediately by the biggest broadcasting corporations and since to be copied by 27 countries (the number is still growing fast), making its inventor the second richest man in Holland. The success of 'Big Brother' was phenomenal even by the standards of hype-guided ratings-boosting common in broadcasting. Of the French version of Big Brother (called the 'Loft Story'), Ignacio Ramonet⁷ wrote that 'never before in the history of the French media' was there an event that 'similarly inflamed, fascinated, shocked, agitated, troubled, over-stimulated and irritated the country' and that it overshadowed such contemporaneous, normally super-popular events as the Cannes festival and the football Cup Final. In Britain, estimated 10 million 18–25 year-olds were to vote for or against Big Brother competitors. That needs to be compared with 1.5 million people of the same age category expected to vote in the British general election.⁸

John de Mol's perspicacity was indeed remarkable: he had spotted an untapped demand – something that the hundreds of millions of men and women of 27 countries currently glued to their TV screens must have needed badly and impatiently waited for. Something that, also in a flash, they would welcome for making sense of their life experience, but first and foremost for legitimising the way of life that made them feel uneasy and for removing the stigma from the kind of life which they suspected they should feel ashamed of. 5.4 billion dollars for which de Mol's company 'Entertainment' were to be ultimately sold to the Spanish 'Telefonica', was a fair measure of the price that those millions were willing to pay for the coveted absolution...

No wonder: the spectacle of 'Big Brother' bears uncanny resemblance to the all-too-familiar experience of the spectators. In that show, twelve men and women of unknown past and divergent futures pass a few weeks in each other's company, faced with the task of weaving the mode of their togetherness from scratch and with no promise of durability. They know in advance that they are all meant to disappear from the company, one by one, and that their task is precisely to make the others disappear first... If they fail to do the job, they will be

⁶ See *L'Express* of 5 May 2001, p.64.

⁷ Ignacio Ramonet, 'Big Brother', *Le Monde diplomatique* June 2001, pp. 1 & 24–5.

⁸ See 'The Editor', *The Guardian* 2 June 2001.

kicked out by the selfsame others whom they spared or did not manage to force out in time.

Throughout that life-and-death competition 'as shown on TV', the rest of the world stays invisible; neither the players nor the witnesses of the game know exactly where food and toys come from and who have decided what the next test will be. 'Big Brother' is a generic name for that rest of the world – and it is demonstrated again and again how whimsical and unpredictable that world is, scurrying from one surprise to another and keeping cards close to its chest. This is – so the spectators may feel – what they have felt or suspected all along, but did not know how to articulate and make into a sensible story. Now they know. And they are consoled: they know now (or at least have been vividly shown) that what they thought to be the outcome of their own fault or bad luck, is the way the world is made and works...

In hot pursuit of 'Big Brother' came 'The Weakest Link': another turn-of-the-century television hit, this one invented in Britain and soon after imported, for a huge sum, to the United States. 'The Weakest Link' repeats the message of 'Big Brother', but it also says loud and clear what 'Big Brother' only whispered: teams exist in order to serve the self-promotion of their most clever members, and have no value apart from that service. There are six people at the start of 'The Weakest Link' spectacle, but all know that only one person will survive to the end, pocketing all the money earned by other 'team members' who leave the show, one by one, empty handed. After every round of questions they need individually to answer, 'team members' throw out one of their team-mates, having proclaimed him (or her) to be 'the weakest link' – on the ground of adding too little money to the account destined to become the private gain of the last (unknown as yet) survivor. Each of the outvoted and excluded is put in front of the camera and asked to confess publicly the private weaknesses responsible for his (or her) failure. Overtly or implicitly, the wisdom and the justice of the story developing in front of TV viewers is confirmed. It is a tough world where the defeated suffer defeat because they have asked for trouble and where the failures have only themselves to blame and no right to demand compensation, or even as much as compassion, on account of their misfortune.

More than anything else, the two most popular television shows are public rehearsals of the *disposability* of humans. They carry an indulgence and a warning rolled into one story. No one is indispensable, no one has the right to his or her share in the fruits of joint effort just because s/he has added at some point to their growth, let alone because of being, simply, a member of the team. Life is a hard game for hard people. Each game starts from scratch, past merits do not count, you are worthy only as much as the results of your last duel. Each player in

every moment is for herself (or himself), and to progress, not to mention to reach the top, one must first co-operate in excluding the many who block the way only to outwit in the end those with whom one co-operated. If you are not tougher and less scrupulous than all the others, you will be done by them – swiftly and without remorse. It is the fittest (read: the least scrupulous) who survive.

The family of games that capture imagination of millions and keep them stuck to the screens (there is no end to the games' 'new and improved' versions in hot pursuit of the amazing success of the original, the latest addition, as I write, having been the American survivor, aptly subtitled 'Trust No One') came to be known under the generic name of 'Big Brother'. This used to be a painfully familiar household name to the generations growing in the dark shadows cast by the watchtowers of the 'Century of Camps'. Immortalised by Orwell, it stood for ruthless and unscrupulous power that fixes the routes everyone else must follow, prescribes the fashion in which to follow them and destroys everyone who dares to refuse or does not manage to fulfil the command to the commanding power's full satisfaction. Orwell's Big Brother wished everyone to behave according to his wishes. He knew exactly what he wanted them to do and wouldn't suffer disobedience, however minute, lightly. Orwell's Big Brother was the manager of his subjects' lives, from cradle to coffin. Big Brother was also known to demand gratitude and love from His victims; Big Brother ruled over a kingdom of duplicity and double talk. In that kingdom, slavery meant freedom, pain meant cure and oppression meant emancipation.

If that was what Big Brother stood for when George Orwell painted his portrait, 'Big Brother' as a name for the discussed family of television shows is a misnomer (it should rather have been called 'New Big Brother' – as in Tony Blair's 'New Labour'). If it is not seen as such it is only for the fact that the present generation has all but forgotten the old meaning of the term, and so the term has become an empty verbal shell fit to be filled with another experiential content. That shell was once used to gather and accommodate the fears haunting Orwell's contemporaries, and the memory of that function determines its present uses. It is still used for collecting and storing fears. Only the fears are now different.

Big Brother of the TV shows has no face. He does not need one – since he now, unlike his previous avatar, does not demand love or for that matter any devotion or loyalty. This Big Brother is an eminently useful fellow (he is, after all, 'the rest of the world' and there would be no world without the rest), but he does his job on condition that his wards abstain from all interference with his works and accept his moves without being curious, let alone inquisitive, about their motives. On that easy to accept and not particularly cumbersome condition Big Brother

supplies his wards with everything they need to play their own games – a fully equipped stage, beds and bed linen, food and cooking facilities – even the toys and ideas of new games to keep the boredom away and the inmates entertained and happy. He provides the playground and sees to it that it is equipped with gadgets you need to play. But the rest is up to you. Big Brother is one of those ‘don’t ‘phone us, we’ll ‘phone you’ types. There is no point in questioning or protesting his decisions. Appeals would remain unanswered. Big Brother does not care what you do with the toys and the gadgets you’ve got, how you use them and to what effect. He does not care either whether you win or lose and which one of you ends at the top and which one at the bottom. Big Brother is *impartial*. You cannot call him cruel and so there is no reason to fight him. But if you call him ‘just’, that may mean only *indifferent*. So there is no reason to charge him with a deficient or misguided justice either.

The rest, let me repeat, is up to you. That rest is a zero-sum game. You’ll gain as much as the others lose, not a penny more. And those others’ gains will be your losses. There is little point in joining forces and acting in concert, therefore – unless what you have in mind is an admittedly temporary alliance, a step on the ladder that you climb and no more needed once you’ve gone one step up. Alliances are good as long as they help you to advance. They become instantly redundant or downright damaging once they don’t. From assets they turn into liabilities, and woe to those who overlook the moment when they do.

‘Big Brother’ is a game of exclusion. Excluding others instead of being excluded oneself (that is, excluding others before your turn comes to be excluded) is the name of success. At the start of the game all competitors are equal. What you have done in the past does not matter. It has left no trace; it did not spoil your chances, but it gave you no advance start either. Each game is, truly and fully, a new beginning. Whatever skills you may have and whatever untapped potentials hide inside you waiting to be released, they need to be dug up and used here and now – otherwise they don’t count. Everybody here is, for a moment, a complete stranger to everybody else, and so it is from now on that you need to exercise all your wits to win friends and influence people (only to be shortly abandoned once the friendship and the influence will have done their job). Everyone around knows as well as you do that in the end but one person (or a couple, as in the French ‘Loft story’) will stay on the battlefield and pocket all the spoils. And so everyone is aware that alliance, if struck, is but ‘until further notice’ and will not survive the end of gratification.

And then comes the daily ritual of public confession (the confessional is in the shows reduced to a chair in which the penitent sits by the end of the day – with the TV camera deputising for the absent confessor). Those who emerged victorious or at least unharmed from the

day's battles confess alongside the humbled, the browbeaten or defeated. All report what they felt during the battle and what they feel now at the end of the round. Stories they tell are different, but the message is monotonously alike: there is no one but yourself (your acumen, cunning, wit, richness of emotions) to be thanked for the success, and nothing but the absence or the faults of some or all of those resources to blame for the failure.

And there is another message, similarly illuminating: a sobering message, one may say. That 'Big Brother' who sets the scene for all games of life is a mysterious creature who sometimes, at the moments of his choice, talks to you. But you may not talk back; what would be the point in trying anyway? Big Brother is like the God of late-mediaeval nominalist philosophers. Like Him, he is 'capricious, fearsome in His power, unknowable, unpredictable, unconstrained by nature and reason and indifferent to good and evil'.⁹ He is, fully and truly, a Big Brother *absconditus*. You know (everyone knows) that 'he is there', but nothing practical follows from that knowledge. When it comes to the nitty-gritty of the day-by-day worries, you are still on your own.

This is why the millions cling, bewitched, to the unravelling saga. No point, indeed, to send to know for whom this particular bell tolls. It tolls for them – for any one of them. The competitors of 'Big Brother' or 'The Weakest Link' retell again and again their viewers' story. This is how the viewers felt they lived all along, but now they 'see it vividly and clearly, reduced to bare essentials, shown in a laboratory-like purity that leaves nothing to imagination and even less to doubt. The shows articulate the logic behind their joys and sorrow – however logical, or otherwise, that logic may be. Above all, they put in words and in graphic images the fears that haunted them, but whose nature they were at a loss to pinpoint. The shows do not just explain all that: they explain what is there to be explained... They tell their viewers *what* to think about, and *how* to think about it.'

Of course, the story comes to the viewers pre-packaged, complete with interpretation, though in images interpretation is more difficult to spot and set apart than in written, read or listened to texts. Besides, even if the interpretation has been noticed and duly separated from the happening itself, it would have hardly baffled or prompted disagreement. After all, the explanation offered by 'Big Brother' shows may be clearer, but it is not novel. It is the kind of explanation of the all-too-familiar ups and downs of an individual's life that one hears over and over again from almost every quarter. The noisy and cacophonous world of ours is bursting with messages – different and often

⁹ This characterisation comes from Michael Allen Gillseppe 'The theological origins of modernity', *Critical Review* 1–2 1999, pp. 1–30.

contradictory messages – but the recurrent, relentlessly repetitive motif comes through loud and clear. It was Peter F. Drucker, the guru of the new neo-liberal political and business classes, who first (in 1989)¹⁰ crisply articulated that motif: ‘The last western politician of the first rank to believe in salvation by society was Willy Brandt’. ‘No one, except perhaps the “liberation theologians” in South America believes any more in the power of social action to create a perfect society or even to bring society closer to such an ideal... [A]nyone who now proclaims the “Great Society” as Lyndon Baines Johnson did only twenty years ago, would be laughed out of court’. In short, ‘the belief in salvation by society is dead’, on both sides of the now dismantled ideological barricade, in palace’s and in hovels, in ‘gated communities’ and in urban ghettos. The Big Brother of the ‘reality TV’ shows (this is how the producers have branded the likes of ‘Big Brother’, ‘Loft Story’ and ‘Survivor’ spectacles with an unqualified consent of the viewers) is Drucker’s ‘New Reality’ transcribed for the stage. Big Brother *absconditus* stands for *societas abscondita*.

The world we inhabit and daily re-create is not, of course, a TV ‘Big Brother’ drama projected on the large screen of society. ‘Big Brother’ is not a photograph, copy or replica of present-day social reality. But it is its condensed, distilled, purified model; one may say it is a laboratory in which certain tendencies of that social reality, elsewhere hidden, diluted or repressed, are experimented with and put to the test so that their full potential is made visible.

Hannah Arendt¹¹ pointed out that the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes were ‘meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also served the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behaviour and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing... Under normal circumstances this can never be accomplished, because spontaneity can never be entirely eliminated... It is only in the concentration camps that such an experiment is at all possible’. Much the same can be said of the family of ‘Big Brother’ shows. If the camps served as laboratories in which the limits of the totalitarian tendency endemic to modern society but ‘under normal circumstances’ tamed and attenuated were tested, ‘Big Brother’ shows do the same for the ‘new modernity’ – our modernity. Unlike those experiments, though, the contemporary testing of tendencies is conducted publicly, in the limelight, in front of millions of spectators. After all, what is tested now are the limits of deregulated, privatised and

¹⁰ Peter F. Drucker, *The New Realities*, Mandarin 1990, pp. 9–15.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London, Andre Deutsch 1951, p. 438.

individualised spontaneity; the inner tendency of a thoroughly privatised world.

State governments, to be sure, have neither packed up their belongings nor intend to close their offices. Far from it. Governments are today no less, if not more, busy and active than ever before in modern history. But they are busy in the TV Big Brother's style: letting their subjects play their own games and blame themselves if the results are not up to their dreams. Governments are busy hammering home the 'there is no alternative' message, the 'security is dependency' and the 'state protection is disempowering' messages, and enjoining the subjects to be more flexible and to love the risks the flexible (read: erratic and unpredictable) life-setting is fraught with. As Pierre Bourdieu put it¹² – 'all direct and deliberate intervention, at least one that comes from the State, for whatever reason, is discredited in advance...' The ministers who contemplate such intervention, and dare to vent their intentions in public, risk being deprecated and condemned as (at best!) unforgivably ignorant of the 'laws of the market' or 'economic interests'. The ministers likely to be praised for their insight, acumen and proper service to national interests are those (much more numerous) among them who – through the regularising of the state of deregulation – partake of the 'institutionalisation of insecurity', making 'of social insecurity the positive principle of collective organisation'.¹³ A new form of domination is emerging in our times that breaks with the orthodox method of rule-by-engagement and uses deregulation as its major vehicle: 'a mode of domination that is founded on the *institution of insecurity* – domination by precariousness of existence'.¹⁴

This is the 'reality' characterised, as Ulrich Beck shows in his successive studies,¹⁵ by 'subjectivisation and individualisation of risks and contradictions produced by institutions and society'. In such reality 'history shrinks to the (eternal) present, and everything revolves around the axis of one's personal ego and personal life'. The individual may be more than ever before dependent on the play of market forces which s/he comes nowhere near being aware of, let alone understanding or anticipating, but s/he will have to pay for her/his decisions individually taken or not taken. 'How one lives becomes the *biographical solution of*

12 Pierre Bourdieu, *Contre-feux: Propos pour servir à la résistance contre l'invasion néo-libérale*, Paris, Raisons d'Agir 1998, p. 117.

13 Pierre Bourdieu, *Contre-feux 2: Pour un mouvement social européen*, Paris, Raisons d'Agir 2001, p. 30.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

15 Ulrich Beck, *Risikogesellschaft: Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*, 1986. Here quoted after Mark Ritter's translation, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London, Sage 1992, pp. 135–7.

systemic consequences' – or rather this is what hapless individuals are authoritatively told and come to believe to be the case (in fact, a 'biographical solution of systemic contradiction' is an oxymoron. It may be sought, but cannot be found). Not just the washing-their-hands politicians dump the systemic contradictions on their subjects' shoulders. The expert counsellors share in the guilt: they 'dump their contradictions and conflicts at the feet of the individual and leave him or her with the well intentioned invitation to judge all of this critically on the basis of his or her notions'.

The main reason for which the experts' advice will help their clients little, or at any rate not enough, is not the scarcity of individually absorbed knowledge or weakness of the individuals' rational faculties. Even assuming (counterfactually in many, perhaps in most cases) that the expert advice on how to 'take things in the individual's own hands' is sound and that it may, if put into practice, add to the individuals powers of control over their lives – there still remains the big question of resources without which the advice cannot be taken up and even less put to good use.

The subjects of contemporary states are individuals by fate; the factors that constitute their individuality – confinement to individual resources and individual responsibility for the results of life choices – are not themselves matters of choice. We are all today 'individuals *de jure*'. This does not mean, though, that we all are individuals *de facto*. More often than not, control over life is the way in which the story of life is told, rather than the way in which life is lived.

Paradoxically, the call to take life in one's own, individual hands and the pressure to do just that may rebound in *less* individual control over its course. That call and those pressures divert the minds and the deeds of the individual from collectively set conditions that determine the agenda and the chances of individual choices and efforts. That call and those pressures play down the significance of common causes and solidary actions and remove the state of society as a whole from the factors considered relevant to life calculations. That call and those pressures insinuate that nothing can be gained from joining ranks and acting in unison; that, moreover, while the individual plight can be moulded and kneaded at will, the way society works has been decided once and for all and is no more amenable to conscious reform. Individual life is a bunch of alternatives, but there is no alternative to the shape of society in which that life is lived. Above all, 'the private' and 'the public' are set in different worlds, each incommunicado for the other. The two spheres are subjected to different and virtually untranslatable logics.

That impression is created and sustained by the forceful individualisation of concerns, projects and pursuits on one hand and

fading powers of the nation-state on the other. The present day political sovereignty of the nation-state is but a shadow of the many-faceted, political/economic/military/cultural autonomy of the states of yesteryear modelled after the pattern of *Totale Staat*. There is little that the sovereign states of today can do, and even less that their governments would risk doing, to stem the pressures of globalised capital, finances and trade (including trade in culture). If pressed by its subjects to reassert their own standards of propriety and justice, most governments would retort that there is nothing they can do in this respect without 'alienating the investors' and so threatening the GNP and the welfare of the nation and all its members. They would say that the rules of the game in which they are compelled to play have been set (and can be revised at will) by forces over which they have minimal, if any, influence. What forces? As anonymous as the names behind which they hide: competition, terms of trade, world markets, global investors. Forces without fixed addresses, extraterritorial unlike the eminently territorial powers of the State, moving freely around the globe unlike the agencies of State that for better or worse, stay fixed to the ground. Shifty and slippery forces, elusive, evasive, difficult to pinpoint and impossible to catch.

And so, on the one hand, there is receding interest on the part of individuals in their joint/shared affairs. This wilting of interest is aided and abetted by the state only too glad to cede as many of its past responsibilities as possible to private concerns and worries. On the other hand, there is the state's growing impotence to balance the books inside its frontiers or to impose standards of protection, of collective insurance, ethical principles and models of justice that would mitigate the insecurity and alleviate the uncertainty that sap individual self-confidence, that necessary condition of any sustained engagement in public affairs. The joint result of the two processes is the widening gap between 'the public' and 'the private' and the gradual, yet relentless demise of the art of the two-way translation between private problems and public issues, that life-blood of all politics. Contrary to Aristotle, it seems, the notions of good and evil in their present-day privatised form no more generate the idea of 'good society' (or of *social* evil, for that matter); and whatever hope of a supra-individual goodness is conjured, it would hardly be vested in the State.

Learning is a powerful, perhaps the mightiest of human weapons – but only in a regular environment, in which certain conduct is as a rule, always or nearly always, rewarded – while certain other conduct is as a rule punished. Human capacity to learn, to memorise and habitualise a type of conduct that proved to be successful (that is, bring reward) in the past may be however suicidal if the links between actions and results are random, short-lived and change without notice.

Richard Sennett¹⁶ revisited recently the employees of a New York bakery whom he studied thirty years ago. He found out, with the benefit of hindsight, that the 'routinized time', of which the New York bakers complained in the past and which they then detested, created nevertheless 'an arena in which workers could assert their own demands, an arena of empowerment'. Routine, Sennett concludes, 'can demean, but it can also protect; routine can decompose labour, but it can also compose a life'. But routine is the last thing likely to be found in the present regime of domination that (to recall Beck) sets the scene for the search of biographical solutions of systemic contradictions. Conditions now change abruptly, defying all powers of reasonable prediction, without following a steady logic or legible pattern. The resulting experience of disjointed time, staggering from one unanticipated episode to an unexpected one, threatens 'the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives'. Older workers may remember that in their youth life-plans used to be long-term and so were commitments and solidarities, but they wonder whether any reality content has been left in the idea of the 'long term'. They are at a loss when it comes to explaining its meaning to their juniors who do not share their memories but draw their knowledge of the world from what they see around. As one of Sennett's conversationalists confessed, 'You can't imagine how stupid I feel when I talk to my kids about commitment. It's an abstract virtue to them; they don't see it anywhere'.

Under the old regime of domination, both partners of the power relation knew well that they were bound to stay in each other's company for a long time to come, since they couldn't 'do it alone'. Commitment was *reciprocal*. In the archetypal 'Fordist factory', that ideal type toward which all institutions of 'solid modernity' strove, Henry Ford depended on his workers for his wealth and power as much as the workers depended on him and his aides for their livelihood. Both sides knew that they would meet again – next day, months and years to come. This time perspective allowed them to perceive their relations as 'conflict of interest' (there is no conflict between mere passers-by), and prompted them to set earnestly to mitigate it, make bearable, and even try to resolve it to mutual satisfaction. However antagonistic, unpleasant or irritating cohabitation might be, the sides would wish to negotiate a mutually acceptable *modus vivendi* once it was certain that the cohabitation would last. Having negotiated such a mode of togetherness, they would trust its longevity. They would obtain thereby a reliably solid frame in which to inscribe and hold their expectations and plans for the future. This gain is the prime motive for engaging in negotiation.

¹⁶ Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, London, W.W. Norton & Company 1998, pp. 43, 31, 25.

It is the prospect of such a gain that makes the partners interested in discussion, dispute, compromise and agreement and prompts them to continue.

Nowadays, though, the assumption that 'we will meet again' strikes many people as increasingly nebulous. The characters of the life-game come and go and are bound to vanish and be replaced many times over as the game progresses. The scene of action is a-changing, on a pace difficult or impossible for the powers of perception and retention to match. Plots, scenarios and characters change well before the players have managed to finish their lines.

It is not clear what are the rules of the game currently played. Sometimes the players have good reasons to doubt whether there are any rules at all and whether all the players follow the same set of rules. Alain Peyrefitte¹⁷ traced the spectacular outburst of creative energy in the modern era back to a widespread confidence in oneself and others, both resting on trust in the longevity and undisputed authority of social institutions. 'Pour croître, il faut croire: mais en quoi?' Peyrefitte worries that confidence is wilting once the soil in which it has been planted becomes, like social institutions of our time, infirm and friable. When trust has no firm ground in which to root, the courage needed to take risk, to assume responsibilities and to enter long-term commitments dissipates.

In my student years one of the most popular characters of the science of animal behaviour was a fish called the stickleback. Male sticklebacks build nests for the females to lay and store roe. Males guard the nests until the eggs are hatched. An invisible borderline separates the 'home territory' around the nest (that is the space males defend against all trespassing stickleback males), from the 'foreign territory' (that is all the rest of space) from which the male flees if he accidentally encounters another member of the species. In laboratory experiments two male sticklebacks were put during a spawning season into a water tank too small to keep their respective 'home territories' apart. Confused males, getting contradictory and irreconcilable signals and so unable to choose unambiguously between fight and escape, assumed a 'neither-nor' vertical posture burying their heads in sand – obviously a posture completely irrelevant to the quandary, let alone to its resolution. Since my student years the comparative study of animal behaviour has made enormous strides. Sticklebacks may be all but forgotten, but their idiosyncratic conduct has been recognised as a specimen of a much wider, probably universal regularity. When confronted with contradictory, ambivalent, illegible or inconstant, labile signals – animals

¹⁷ Alain Peyrefitte, *La société de confiance: Essai sur les origines de développement*, Paris, Odile Jacob 1998, pp. 514–7, 539.

tend to develop *inhibition* – a sort of behavioural paralysis. The learned, habitualised modes of behaviour are suspended. What follows then is either a behavioural depression manifested in total inaction, or resorting to ‘irrational conduct’ – moves only tenuously if at all related to the situation causing distress. If the latter option is taken, tension tends to be temporarily relieved through pointless aggression that leaves the causes of distress intact. Similar behavioural alternatives have been observed in the case of signals admittedly unambiguous, but portending a danger that cannot be avoided whatever the threatened animal may do (escape and fighting back being both out of the question).

Both situations prevail in human life in the ‘liquid stage’¹⁸ of the modern era. Most of the time, the signposts and orientation points, far from staying put, seem to be on castors; they change places quicker than the destination they point to can be reached and hardly ever remain in place long enough to enable the wanderer to memorise the trajectory. More often than not, there are more signs at the crossroads suggesting different locations of the sought destination or beckoning to other destinations, unheard of, untried and for that reason tempting. In each case, the result is an anxiety-generating ambivalence. To make the situation even more treacherous and yet more vexing, the few signs that are uncharacteristically clear, uncontested and so judged as reliable, suggest roads that many a wanderer is either not resourceful enough to pass or barred from embarking on. Not reaching the destinations widely considered as worthy and attractive is a painful experience. Being excluded from the widely undertaken attempts to reach such a destination or lacking the resources needed to make them, makes one aware that pain is imminent and yet there is nothing its prospective sufferer can do to stave it off or escape. This is precisely the kind of predicament that is suspected to preclude rational action and trigger instead either inhibition or a random aggression wide of the target.

No wonder that the symptoms of the two characteristic reactions to ambiguity and uncertainty abound, become ever more salient and ever more widely noted.

On the one hand, the interest in ‘Politics’ with a capital ‘P’ (that is, in explicitly political movements, political parties and the composition and programmes of governments), the intensity and strength of political beliefs, not to mention the day-by-day active participation in activities traditionally classified as political, are all evaporating at an accelerating pace. In tune with the mood of the times, ‘citizens’ are expected to look no further than the next tax cut or pension rise and to have no other interests except shorter hospital queues, less beggars on the street, more criminals in jail or faster discovery of the poisonous potential in

¹⁸ See my *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press 2000.

foodstuffs. Few if any consummate politicians would muster the courage to propose a vision of a 'good society' to electors who having more than once singed their fingers are known to prefer a *different now* to a *better future*. Eminent political figures, like Laurent Fabius¹⁹, in the rare moments when they go as far as proposing 'an idea' (in Fabius' case, a rather banal idea of 'eco-development', that is of a development agreeing with an ecological approach – a move necessitated anyway by the internal frictions of the French 'plural Left' rather than by the leaders' appetite for grand visions), feel obliged to immediately apologise to the public for talking about something that will take more than a few days to implement: 'J'entend déjà certains commentaires: pourquoi, diable, le ministre français de l'économie et des finances réfléchit-il au long terme? Ne devrait-il pas se concentrer plutôt sur la gestion immédiate...?'

There seems to be no market for long-term visions of 'Good Society'. There are few suppliers, and not many more prospective buyers. And if so, interest in the government of the country and its works, if there is any such interest left, tends to be as short-term as the ministers' crisis-management campaigns. There is little interest in changing a more distant future as there is no sight of any connection between current citizens' actions (or citizens' apathy) and the shape of things to come. Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello²⁰ found that in contemporary workplaces the employees 'no more make careers but pass from one project to another, their success in the current project giving them access to the next'. Tony Blair is widely reputed to believe that the purpose of winning the current election is to win the next one.

The other common reaction to powerlessness, aggression, is not so much alternative, as complementary to inhibition. More often than not the two responses are triggered simultaneously. Withdrawal from the *agora* where political battles are left to small high-tech professional units since their outcome does not seem to depend on the bravery of little soldiers, is coupled with deploying the spare fighting spirit in places nearer to hand and so apparently easier to tackle. Orwell's 'five minutes of hatred' are no longer orchestrated by country rulers, but as most other things subjected to the principle of 'subsidiarity' have been deregulated, privatised and left to the local, or better still personal, initiative.

Tabloids fill time and the vacancy, doing their best to condense, channel and focus the diffuse and scattered frustrations of the politically inhibited: they are glad to oblige and pick up the targets on which to release the energy untapped by concerns with 'common causes'. There is

¹⁹ Laurent Fabius. 'Le temps des projets', *Le Monde* 1st June 2001, pp. 1, 16.

²⁰ Luc Boltanski & Éve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris, Gallimard 1999, p. 144.

no shortage of figures of fear and hatred like paedophiles returning home from a jail term, 'squeegee pests', 'muggers', 'lager louts', 'work shy', 'false asylum-seekers' or 'genuinely economic' migrants. Since fighting any of such figures leaves uncertainty no less daunting than before the fight started and is unlikely to alleviate the gnawing pain of powerlessness for much longer than a successive outburst of aggression takes – ever new objects of hatred and new targets of aggression are needed. Tabloids obligingly discover them or invent and supply to their anxious readers in a shape pre-cooked for instant consumption. But all the tabloid efforts, however ingenious, would be in vain were there no deep and plentiful anxiety diverted from its genuine cause and desperately seeking alternative outlets.

Orchestration of aggression seldom taps the whole of the aggressive energy that the continuing uncertainty coupled with persistent powerlessness generate. Enough of it is left to spill over and saturate the private, self-operated sectors of the web of social bonds – partnerships, families, neighbourhoods, work-place companies. All of them tend to become these days sites of violence, often dubbed by the uninvolved as 'gratuitous' by reason of having no evident reason, let alone rational purpose. Family homes become substitute battlegrounds for the games of self-assertion evicted from the public arena. So do the closely watched neighbourhoods from which one hopes to be able to preside over the game of exclusion instead of being its hapless target. So do the workplaces, which easily turn from shelters of solidarity and co-operation into the sites of cut throat, catch-as-you-can competition.

All such means of fighting the spectre of powerlessness are irrational in the sense of being wide of the mark. They come nowhere near the genuine causes of pain and leave them unscathed. Under the circumstances, however, as long as the root of trouble stays stubbornly out of bounds or is seen as such, they may be interpreted as 'rational' in the sense of psychological rationalisation of the unfulfilled urge for self-assertion and self-esteem. Whatever the verdict, there is no dispute that the substitute outlets for the anxiety generated by the combination of uncertainty and powerlessness deepen and intensify, instead of placating, the anxiety they were meant to fight or dissolve. They tend to fray or tear apart the ties of mutual commitments, this *conditio sine qua non* of solidary action, without which the true sources of anxiety can be neither reached nor affected.

Guarding law and order is, however, one of the orthodox functions that the state is now, as before, eager to perform, and so self-propelled and self-steering aggression is not likely to be tolerated. The state would not watch passively its subjects 'taking the law in their hands'. The family, neighbourhood, street or stadium violence tends to be countered by the state-organs coercion and repressed; its perpetrators

unwittingly invite one more proof of their powerlessness. Somewhat less risk is involved if the aggression is re-directed against oneself – one's own body and psyche. As alternative outlets are either blocked or fraught with risks, there are grounds to suppose that the present-day bodily-fitness obsession (manifested in dieting, weight-watching, jogging, 'health club' routines and other tiresome and often painful drills in some cases resembling self-inflicted DIY torture) serves, apart from its other functions, the task of re-directing surplus anxiety. It is yet more probable that similar energy diversion explains at least in part the epidemic spread of anorexic and bulimic disturbances, addictive drug use, allergy ailments and other psycho-somatic illnesses as well as the many extant and novel forms of psychic depression.

These are all side effects of uncertainty, mistaken for cures. The prime casualty of the mistake is political engagement, that constitutive feature of citizenship. And, consequently, of politics in its pristine Aristotelian sense.

The present-day crisis of citizenship and disenchantment with the potential of political engagement are ultimately rooted in the not entirely fanciful impression that agencies of *effective* action, particularly of *collective* effective action, and especially the *long-term* effective collective action are missing and that there are no obvious ways of resurrecting them or conceiving them anew. As one would expect in the resulting situation of cognitive dissonance, discomfort generated by such impression tends to be alleviated by an added belief that the passing of collective action needs not be bewailed since it was, and always will be, at its best irrelevant and at its worst inimical to the advancement of individual well being and happiness. It can be argued, though, that the apparent credibility of this belief is, to a large extent, the 'sour grapes' effect.

Whatever is the case, it seems that the key to the problems afflicting contemporary political life needs to be sought and in all probability can be found, in departures responsible for the growing impotence of the extant agencies of collective political action.

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