The absence of society

October 2008

The JRF's recent public consultation revealed a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society. This *Viewpoint* continues the discussion about modern 'social evils' on the theme of 'the absence of society'. Zygmunt Bauman argues that these 'ills' are products of the withdrawal of the traditional conception of 'society' and are rooted in the way of life of today's individualised society of consumers.

Key points

- Today's 'social ills' have their roots in the socio-cultural and political transformations of the last decades and are seated in the way of life of the liquid-modern, individualised society of consumers.

- The most remarkable and insidious feature of the present-day edition of social ills is that they arise mostly from the absence of society, rather than from its pressures. They are products of the withdrawal of 'society'.

- Left increasingly to their own resources and acumen, individuals are expected to devise individual solutions to socially generated problems. Such expectation sets individuals in mutual competition and so communal solidarity is irrelevant, if not downright counter-productive.

- The driving force of conduct is no longer the (more or less) realistic desire to 'keep up with Joneses', but the infuriatingly nebulous idea of catching up with supermodels, premier league footballers and top-ten singers.

- Consuming more is the sole road to inclusion, but the inability to consume more is a sure recipe for exclusion.

- Whereas the upper classes needed do little or nothing at all to retain their superior condition, and the lowest classes could do little or nothing at all to improve on their inferior lot, for the middle classes everything which they didn't yet have appeared to be for the taking but what they already had could be easily lost.

- Middle classes have not achieved their utopia of the 'perfect balance' between equally coveted freedom and security. Instead, instability of social location and the ensuing 'existential uncertainty' has become a universal human condition.

- Denial of recognition, refusal of respect and the threat of exclusion are most commonly used to explain and justify the grudge individuals might bear towards society.

- One-issue solutions aimed at mitigating the impact of one or another social ill may bring temporary and partial relief, but, short of reforming the individualistic way of life, they would not remove the cause.

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Context

The most remarkable and insidious feature of the present-day edition of social ills (in whatever part of social life they appear) is that they arise mostly from the *absence* of society, rather than from its forceful, obtrusive and ubiquitous, overwhelming, coercive and oppressive pressures. They are products of the gradual, yet relentless, *withdrawal* of 'society' – in the sense in which it was understood until recently: 'society' as an 'actor' armed with will, purpose, and the means to pursue and achieve them; and as a 'community', a congregation reconciling and blending private and public, individual and shared interests, offering care to all its members, while demanding their discipline and loyalty in exchange. All in all, as an entity that defines individual obligations while guaranteeing individual rights. 'Society' in that sense becomes now conspicuous mostly by its absence. As Margaret Thatcher famously declared, "there is no such thing as 'society'. There are only individuals and families". And as Peter Drucker, the hugely influential voice of American emergent neo-conservatism, chiming in with Thatcher, announced: "No longer salvation from society".

Our modern era started with discovery of the 'absence of God'. The apparent randomness of fate (the lack of visible connection between good fortune and virtue as much as between ill fate and vice) was taken as the evidence that God abstains from active intervention in the world He created, having left human affairs to human worry and tackling. The void thereby yawning at the control desk had to be filled by human society, attempting to replace blind fate with 'normative regulation', and existential insecurity with the rule of law; a society that would insure all its members against life risks and individually suffered misfortune. That intention found its fullest manifestation in the social arrangement commonly called the 'welfare state'.

What is the social state?

More than anything else, the 'welfare state' (which I prefer to call by the name of *social* state, a name that shifts the emphasis from distribution of material benefits to the shared motive and purpose of their provision) is such an arrangement of human togetherness as resists the present-day tendency, reinforced and exacerbated by the drive to 'privatise' (the promotion of the essentially anti-communal, individualising patterns of the consumer market style, that sets individuals in competition with others), to break down the networks of human bonds and undermine the social foundations of human solidarity. If 'privatisation' shifts the task of fighting back and (hopefully) resolving the socially produced problems onto the shoulders of individual men and women, in most cases much too weak for the purpose, and to their mostly inadequate skills and insufficient resources, then the 'social state' tended to unite its members in the struggle to protect all and any of them from the morally devastating competitive 'war of all against all' and 'one-upmanship'.

A state is 'social' when it promotes the principle of the communally endorsed, collective insurance against individual misfortune and its consequences. It is that principle – declared, set in operation and trusted to be working – that lifts the abstract 'society' to the level of 'real', tangible, felt-and-lived community, and thereby replaces (to deploy John Dunn's terms) the mistrust-and-suspicion-generating 'order of egoism' with the confidence and solidarity-inspiring 'order of equality'. And it is the same principle which lifts members of society to the status of citizens. That is, it makes them stakeholders, in addition to being stock-holders – beneficiaries, but also the actors responsible for the creation and decent allocation of benefits; citizens defined and moved by their acute interest in the common property and responsibility: the network of public institutions that can be trusted to assure solidity and reliability of the state-issued 'collective insurance policy'.

The application of that principle may, and often does, protect men and women from the bane of poverty – most importantly, however, it may (and by and large does) become a prolific source of social solidarity that recycles 'society' into a common, communal good. Society is raised to the level of community as long as it effectively protects its members against the twin horrors of misery and indignity; that is against the terrors of being excluded, of falling or being pushed from the fast-accelerating vehicle of progress, of being condemned to 'social redundancy' and otherwise consigned to 'human waste'.

In its original intention, 'social state' was to be an arrangement to serve precisely such purposes. Lord Beveridge, to whom we owe the blueprint for the post-war British 'welfare state', believed that his vision of a comprehensive, collectively endorsed insurance for *everyone* was the inevitable consequence and indispensable complement of the liberal idea of individual freedom, as well as indispensable condition of *liberal democracy*. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's declaration of war on fear was based on the same assumption, as must have been Joseph Rowntree's pioneering inquiry of the volume and causes of human poverty and degradation. Liberty of choice entails, after all, uncounted and uncountable risks of failure; many people would find such risks unbearable, fearing that they may exceed their personal ability to cope. For most people, the liberal ideal of the freedom of choice will remain an elusive phantom and idle dream, unless the fear of defeat is mitigated by the insurance policy issued in the name of community, a policy they can trust and rely on in case of personal defeat or a blow of fate.

If freedom of choice is granted in theory but unattainable in practice, the pain of hopelessness would be surely topped with the humiliation of haplessness; the daily-tested ability to cope with life challenges is after all that very workshop in which self-confidence of individuals, and so also their self-esteem, is cast or melted away. No rescue from individual indolence or impotence would be expected from a political state that is not, and refuses to be, a *social* state. Without social rights *for all*, a large, and in all probability growing, number of people would find their political rights being of little use and unworthy of their attention. If political rights are necessary to set social rights in place, social rights are indispensable to keep political rights in operation. The two rights need each other for their survival; that survival can be only their joint achievement.

The social state has been the ultimate modern embodiment of the idea of community: that is, of an institutional incarnation of such an idea in its *modern* form of an 'imagined totality' woven of reciprocal dependence, commitment and solidarity. Social rights tie that imagined totality to daily realities of its members and base that imagination on the solid ground of life experience; these rights certify veracity and realism of mutual trust and of the trust in the shared institutional network that endorses and validates collective solidarity. 'Belonging' translates as trust in the benefits of human solidarity, and in the institutions that arise out of that solidarity and promise to serve it and assure its reliability. As it was spelled out in the Swedish Social Democratic Programme of 2004, everyone is fragile at some point in time. We need each other. We live our lives in the here and now, together with others, caught up in the midst of change. We will all be richer if all of us are allowed to participate and nobody is left out. We will all be stronger if there is security for everybody and not only for a few.

Just as the carrying power of a bridge is measured by the strength of the weakest pillar and grows as that strength grows, the confidence and resourcefulness of a society is measured by the security and resourcefulness of its weakest sections and grows as they grow. Social justice and economic efficiency, loyalty to the social state tradition and ability to modernise swiftly and with little or no damage to the social cohesion and solidarity, are not and need not be at loggerheads. On the contrary: as the social democratic practice of our Nordic neighbours has demonstrated, 'the pursuit of a more socially cohesive society is the necessary pre-condition for modernisation by consent'. That Scandinavian pattern is nowadays everything but a relic of past hopes – once powerful, but now frustrated.

Presently, however, we (primarily in the 'developed' countries, but under the concerted pressure of global markets, IMF and the World Bank, also in most 'developing' ones) seem to be moving in an opposite direction: societies become increasingly 'absent'. The range of individual autonomy is expanding, yet at the same time the social functions of the state are being ceded ('subsidiarised') to the self-concern of the individuals. States no longer endorse the collective insurance policy and leave the task of achieving well-being to the individual pursuits.

What is the outcome of increased individualism?

Left increasingly to their own resources and acumen, individuals are expected to devise individual solutions to socially generated problems, and do it individually, using their own skills and individually possessed assets. Such expectation sets individuals in mutual competition. This renders communal solidarity, except in the form of temporary alliances of convenience (that is, of human bonds tied up and untied on demand and with 'no strings attached') viewed as by and large irrelevant if not downright counter-productive. If not mitigated by forceful institutional intervention, this renders differentiation and polarisation of chances inescapable; indeed, it makes the polarisation of prospect and chances a self-propelling and self-accelerating process. The effects of that tendency were easy to predict – and can be now counted. In Britain for instance, the share of the top 1 per cent earners doubled since 1982 from 6.5 per cent to 13 per cent of the national income while chief executives of the 100 FTSE companies are now earning not 20 times as in 1980, but 133 times more than the average earners.

On the other hand however, thanks to the new network of 'information highways' all and any individual – man or woman, adult or child, rich or poor – is invited or forced to compare one's own individual lot with the lot of all other individuals, and particularly with the lavish consumption of public idols, those celebrities constantly in the limelight, on TV screens and the first pages of tabloids and glossy magazines, and to measure the values that make life worth living by the opulence they brandish. At the same time, when the realistic prospects of a satisfying life continue to differentiate sharply, the dreamed-of standards and coveted tokens of 'happy life' tend to level up; the driving force of conduct is no longer the more or less realistic desire to 'keep up with Joneses', but the infuriatingly nebulous idea of catching up with supermodels, premier league footballers and rock and pop stars. As Oliver James has recently suggested, the truly toxic mixture is created by stocking up 'unrealistic aspirations and the expectations that they can be fulfilled'; great swathes of the British populace 'believe that they can become rich and famous', that 'anyone can be Alan Sugar or Bill Gates, never mind that the actual likelihood of this occurring has diminished since the 1970s'.[1]

Mapping the cause of social evils

The rest of this *Viewpoint* is dedicated to the tracing of cultural and psychological mechanisms that as a result of that profound social transformation beget the ills listed in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's consultation.

Max Scheler, insightful German ethical philosopher, noted in 1912[2] that the average person comes to appreciate a value only 'in the course of, and through comparison' with possessions, condition, plight or quality of (an)other person(s). Personal experience of a value is, we may say, secondary to social evaluation and social interaction.

Quite often, however, the outcome of interpersonal comparison is a discovery of the *non*-possession of a value found to be socially appreciated and for that reason felt to be desirable. That discovery, and yet more the awareness that the acquisition and enjoyment of the value in question is beyond one's own capacity, arouses resentment: a mixture of rancour, vexation and indignation, anger and hostility, all caused by the feeling of having been harmed and offended – indeed, deprived, robbed or left behind and rejected; and a desperate urge to ward off the menace of self-depreciation and self-contempt, arising from that humiliating condition.

Resentment breeds two opposite tendencies. On the one hand, the missing value is hotly desired and the failure to appropriate it becomes ever more painful and difficult to bear. On the other hand, however, in an effort to mitigate the pain of humiliation the unreachable value together with its lucky possessors tend to be demeaned, derided and degraded (in the manner of the fox of Aesop's ancient fable, deciding that the failure to reach the grapes hanging too high was not in fact a defeat, since the grapes were sour in the first place).

The experience (or fear) of humiliation begets therefore a highly ambivalent attitude, described by psychologists as 'cognitive dissonance' and explained as a response to (or rather as escape from) the need of holding simultaneously to two incompatible opinions. Humiliation casts the valued objects as simultaneously desired and resented, elevating and degrading, tokens of prestige and brands of shame (urban riots mix, as a rule, theft *and* destruction of the same objects). It tends, therefore, to be a source of perpetual anxiety, spiritual discomfort and all too often sizzling hostility and aggressiveness of all those afflicted. Having no evident rational solution, cognitive dissonance prompts and feeds irrational responses (that is, acts that are ineffective in removing the cause, even if useful for a temporary release of resulting tension).

And yet a growing number of our contemporaries become, just as Max Scheler anticipated, afflicted. Few if any denizens of our liquid-modern society of consumers can boast to be fully immune to the threat of contamination. Our vulnerability, says Scheler, is unavoidable (and perhaps incurable) in a kind of society in which relative equality of political and other rights and formally acknowledged social equality go hand in hand with enormous differentiation of the genuine power, possessions and education; a society in which everyone 'has the right' of considering himself equal to everybody else, whom in fact he is unable to equal.[3]

To put it simply: resentment breeding a cognitive dissonance is inescapable, whenever there is a gap between the extent of formal rights and the material ability to fulfil them; in other words, between being an 'individual by decree' (as we all are), and the ability to act as the individuals are expected to (an ability which only a minority of us can be sure of possessing). The detrimental, evil-generating psychological consequences of that gap are sharply aggravated when, as in our liberal democratic society, it is the *individual* that is instructed, nudged and expected to close that gap through his or her own effort and by using the resources they individually command. Closing the gap is commended as individual achievement, while its persistence is blamed on individual indolence or sloth, adding offence to injury. (This is, let me note, what the Joseph Rowntree Foundation study has shown to be the explanation of failure widely accepted by the defeated; as a rule, they blame their individual failings – lack of guts, stamina, ambition, self-control, or staying power – for doing worse than others, whom they believe to be endowed with more personal virtues and skills). John McCain, the US Republican presidential candidate, recently restated what has been for a long time now the explicit or unspoken principle of individualist philosophy and official policies reflecting and boosting its spread: "it is not the duty of government to bail out and reward those who act irresponsibly".[4]

Our society meets all the conditions of resentment spelled out above, and so the vulnerability to the 'cognitive dissonance' with all its socially and individually harmful consequences is (at least potentially) universal. Its universality – as well as universality of the temptation of one-upmanship with which, in an individualised society like ours, it is inevitably intimately related – reflect the inner, unresolvable contradiction of a society that for all its members sets a standard of happiness which most of those 'all' are unable to match or are prevented from matching.

Even in the minds of the relatively well-off the moments of security and spiritual comfort tend to be, as Jeremy Seabrook[5] points out, poisoned by the fear of threats emanating from that explosive mixture of dire inequality and rampant individualism. Although the rich may live in separate areas and live in the enclosures of home, car, work and places of leisure, there are still intersections where the lives of the privileged are crossed by those they fear – the attacker on the Underground, the watcher in the dark on the brief walk from car to front door. We are all products of the same culture of a savage individualism.

The principal training ground for that 'savage individualism' is the consumer market – the piper we all pay daily for setting the tunes for us to daily intone. To quote Seabrook again[6], 'In this new social order, there is only one thing worse than domination by the market, and that is exclusion from it, since there is now no other source of knowing who we are'. In the market society, the phantom of untold happiness waiting to be discovered in the shopping malls hovers over life pursuits, in tandem with the spectre of untold misery called 'exclusion'. The entering and staying in the game, trying to catch the phantom and escape the clutches of the spectre, is the sole never-ending task of a life otherwise sliced into short-lived episodes. The art and compulsion of playing that addictive game are the core of the market-guided and market-administered lifelong, 'cradle-to-coffin' socialisation. Those who remain immune to the consumerist pressures are fated to become outcasts.

The meaning of failure in a society of consumers

Exclusionist practices in the society of consumers are much more strict, harsh and unyielding than in the society of producers. In a society of producers, it is the males unable to reach and pass the test of producing/soldiering capacity who are cast as 'abnormal' and branded as 'invalids'; they are subsequently categorised, alternatively, as the objects of therapy which would hopefully make them fit again and bring them back 'into the ranks', or of penal policy, which would discourage them to resist return to the fold. However, in the society of consumers, 'invalids' earmarked for exclusion are 'flawed consumers', who unlike the misfits of the society of producers (the rejects of industry or of military service) cannot be conceived of as people deserving care and assistance, since unlike the workplaces and soldiering duties, consumer pursuits are (counterfactually) presumed to be always universally available to everyone who wants them.

While keeping the reserve army of labour and army reservists in good shape is widely viewed as a reasonable and desirable investment, all investment in the 'failed consumers' is condemned as a 'waste of taxpayers' money' because by no stretch of imagination might it add vigour to the profit-making activities by which the 'health of economy' is measured. And since any verdict of 'social invalidity' followed by exclusion is, in the society of consumers, assumed to be the outcome of *individual* faults and seen as a *private* worry (any suspicion of 'extrinsic', supra-individual, society-rooted causes of failure being eliminated from the start or at least cast in doubt and disqualified as valid defence), all that only adds insult to injury and makes the resulting resentment yet more acute and desire of vengeance yet more violent.

To shop and to consume means nowadays to invest privately commanded assets in one's own social membership, which the market society translates as 'saleability': obtaining qualities for which there is already a market demand, or recycling the already possessed qualities into commodities for which demand can be yet created. Most consumer commodities on offer in the consumer market derive their attraction and their power to enlist keen customers from their genuine or imputed, explicitly advertised or obliquely implied investment value. Their promise to increase the attractiveness and consequently the market price of their buyers is written, in large or small print, or at least between the lines, into the prospectuses of all products – including such products as are, ostensibly, being purchased mostly or even exclusively for the sake of pure consumer delights; consumption is an investment in everything that matters for the individual 'market value' and self-esteem. Increasingly, we tend to think of ourselves and appreciate or demean ourselves after the pattern of market commodities – as the following cases testify.

As one of the 16- and 17-year-old girls interviewed in the Cotswolds and quoted by Decca Aitkenhead, the exquisitely insightful *Guardian* correspondent, confessed: "Well, if I went out in what I'm wearing now (jeans and a T-shirt) people would stare and go, 'why aren't you wearing some special, sexually provocative clothes?' At the age of 13 we were going out dressed like that. That's just what you wear to look fashionable."

A somewhat older woman over 20 adds that "the reminders of what a sexy body looks like are everywhere, and as I get older I worry more and more about how I measure up". The meanings of 'sexually provocative clothes' and the 'look of the sexy body' are both determined by the current fashion (fashion changes, and fast: the 16- and 17-year-olds 'have no idea that pre-teen T-shirts with slogans such as "Trainee Babe" came into fashion only in the 90s, and seem amazed that girls once dressed differently'. One of them 'looks incredulous', Aitkenhead notices, when told that 'in the 70s girls didn't shave their armpits'). To obtain new versions of such clothes and groom such looks and replace or re-groom the outdated versions, is a condition of *being and staying in demand*: of remaining desirable enough to find willing customers, whether or not money is exchanged.

By such reckoning, consuming more is the sole road to inclusion; whereas the inability to consume more is a sure recipe for exclusion.

The supremacy of individualism

When reduced to the consumption of 'made in the Marketland' commodities, pursuit of happiness remains a thoroughly individual activity, even if practised in the company of other consumers. With the formula of happiness elevating the one-upmanship-style interpersonal competition to the rank of life strategy, with the individuals overwhelmed by a 'thirst for excitement and diminishing willingness to fit with others, to subordinate themselves or do without … how can two individuals who want to be or become equals and free, discover the common ground on which their love can grow?', ask German sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. 'How can the other person avoid becoming an additional hindrance, if not a disruptive factor?'[8] These questions sound rhetorical, loaded as they are in advance with straightforward answers and foregone conclusions. 'One-upmanship' (in the authors' version, 'I am what matters: I, and You as my assistant, and if not You then some other You'[9]) can't be easily squared with partnership and love, and particularly the kind of love we long for: a love keeping away the spectre of loneliness, a shelter from the turbulent and stormy, mercilessly competitive life of markets and marketing.

A widely read and respected columnist in a widely read and respected weekly newspaper states, in passing, as presumably a self-evident truth and a matter of common sense that requires neither proof nor extensive argument, that 'love is the least reliable of human emotions'[10] – and she adds that if in the name of love you sacrifice yourself to the needs of your partner 'you are left with nothing but a tenuous connection to another human being that time, daily wear and tear, and the pressures of the 21st century will no doubt take their toll on'. Whereas sociologists Ehrenreich and English point out[11] that in the post-romantic world where the old ties no longer bind, all that matters is you: you can be what you want to be; you choose your life, your environment, even your appearance and your emotions.

The old hierarchies of protection and dependency no longer exist, there are only free contracts, freely terminated. The marketplace, which long ago expanded to include the relations of production, has now expanded to include *all* relationships. 'Sacrificial culture is dead', bluntly declared Giles Lipovetsky, French sociologist, in his 1993 post-face to the stage-setting 1983 study of contemporary individualism[12]. 'We've stopped recognising ourselves in any obligation to live for the sake of something else than ourselves'.

Not that we have turned deaf to our concerns with the misfortunes of other people, or with the sorry state of the planet; nor did we cease to be outspoken enough about such worries. Neither is it a case that we've stopped declaring our willingness to act in defence of the downtrodden and the planet they share with us, nor that we have stopped to act (at least occasionally) on such declarations. On the face of it, the opposite seems rather to be the case: the spectacular rise of egotistic self-concern runs paradoxically shoulder to shoulder with rising sensitivity to human misery, abhorrence of violence, pain and suffering visited on even most distant strangers and with regular explosions of focused (remedial) charity. But, as Lipovetsky rightly observes, such moral impulses and outbursts of magnanimity are instances of 'painless morality', morality stripped of obligations and executive sanctions, 'adapted to the Ego-priority'. When it comes to acting 'for the sake of something else than oneself', passions, well-being and physical health of the Ego tend to be both the preliminary and the ultimate considerations; they tend also to set the limits to which we are prepared to go in our readiness to help.

As a rule, manifestations of devotion to that 'something (or someone) else', however sincere, ardent and intense, stop short of self-sacrifice. For instance, the dedication to green causes seldom if ever goes as far as adopting an ascetic lifestyle, or at least a partial self-denial. We would often be reluctant to accept even a minor personal inconvenience to renounce the lifestyle of consumerist indulgence; the driving force of our indignation does not tend to be renunciation of excess, but a desire of a superior, safer and better secured consumption. In Lipovetsky's summary, the 'disciplinary and militant, heroic and moralising individualism' gave place to an 'individualism à la carte', 'hedonist and psychological' – one that 'makes of the intimate accomplishments the principal purpose of existence'.[13] We don't seem to feel any longer to have a task or a mission to perform on the planet, nor is there apparently a legacy left which we would feel obliged to preserve, having been appointed its wardens.

Concern with the way the world is managed is giving way to the concern with *self*-management. It is not the state of the world, complete with its inhabitants, that tends to worry us and cause our concern – but rather what is in fact the end product of recycling its outrages, inanities and injustices into spiritual discomforts and emotional giddiness that impair the psychological balance and peace of mind of the concerned individual. This may be, as Christopher Lasch was one of the first to note and articulate, the result of transforming 'collective grievances into personal problems amenable to therapeutic intervention'.[14] 'The new narcissists', as Lasch memorably called the 'psychological men' able to perceive, scrutinise and assess the state of the world solely through the prism of personal problems, are 'haunted not by guilt but by anxiety'. In recording their 'inner' experiences, they 'seek not to provide an objective account of a representative piece of reality but to seduce others' into giving them 'their attention, acclaim or sympathy' and thus to shore up their faltering sense of self.[15] Personal life has become as warlike and as full of stress as the marketplace itself. The cocktail party 'reduces sociability to social combat'.[16]

Good news perhaps for the self-assertive, self-confident and resourceful individual wary of moral scruples that may stand in the way of self-promotion. But bad news for all the rest; and most certainly for the prospects of human solidarity, the sole lever capable of hoisting that rest from the doldrums of humiliation and seething resentment.

The struggle to be included

With nothing much on which to rest the craved-for security of one's social standing (the ultimate foundation of self-confidence and self-esteem), except the individually owned or acquired assets, it's no wonder that demands of recognition 'overflow the society' (to quote another French sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann). 'Everyone watches intently for approbation, admiration or love in the eyes of others'.[17] Everyone wishes to impress the onlookers – if not with attractive things one may possess and display, then with a conduct that suggests other powers. As Dick Hebdidge suggested long ago, in a study under the telling-it-all title 'Hiding in the Light', the powerless try to hide their powerlessness in the dazzling light of power-implying violence.

And let's note that struggling for recognition is a never-ending task, which makes the desire of recognition seem insatiable. Such grounds of self-esteem as the 'approbation and admiration' of others may provide are notoriously feeble. Eyes being known to be shifting, and things on which they fall or over which they 'surf' being notorious for twists and turns impossible to predict, the propulsion/compulsion to 'watch intently' never really grinds to a halt. Tepidity of today's vigilance may well turn yesterday's approval and acclaim into tomorrow's condemnation and derision. Recognition is like the cardboard rabbit in the sweepstakes chase: forever to be chased by the dogs, never to be locked in their jaws.

It has been widely noted in the past (still 30 years ago) that even the sharpest inequality of wages tended to be accepted placidly by the hired hands at the lower regions of the scale – on condition that it was a *customary* deprivation. It was the falling behind the people who thus far were treated as their equals that made people feel deprived – denied their rights (including their right to happiness) – and prompted them to rebel and strike. 'Deprivation', experienced as an injustice having been done and yelling to be amended for the sake of happiness, was as a rule of a *relative* variety.

Now, as much as then, deprivation means unhappiness – topping the discomfort of material hardships with hard blows to self-esteem and mortal blows to social recognition causing the pains of humiliation, degradation and rejection. Now as then, deprivation tends to be 'relative'; to feel deprived, a benchmark is needed against which to measure one's own condition. One may feel deprived and for that reason unhappy if falling below the standard enjoyed in the past, or falling behind one's equals of yesterday who now, suddenly, surge ahead. Thus far, nothing new under the sun. What is new is the status of the benchmark(s) that may cause the experience of 'having been deprived' to appear and thus inject an added urgency and vigour into the pursuit of happiness.

Inside the tightly stratified societies marked by a sharp polarisation of access to both material and symbolic values (prestige, respect, insurance against humiliation), it is the people situated 'in the middle', in the space stretching betwixt and between the top and the bottom layers, that tended to be most sensitive to the threat of unhappiness. Whereas the upper classes needed do little or nothing at all to retain their superior condition, and the lowest classes could do little or nothing at all to improve on their inferior lot, for the middle classes everything they didn't have as yet but coveted appeared to be for the taking, while everything they already had and cherished could be easily – in a single moment of inattention – lost. More than any other category of people, the middle classes were bound to live in a state of perpetual anxiety, constantly oscillating between brief intervals of apparent safety and its enjoyment and the horrors of approaching catastrophe. The offspring of middle-class families would need to strive hard if they wished to keep the family fortune intact and/or to recreate, by their own zeal and acumen, the comfortable social standing their parents enjoyed. It was mostly to narrate the risks and fears typically related to such tasks that the terms like 'fall', 'social degradation', or the agony and humiliation of being *declassé* were coined.

Indeed, the middle class was the only class of the class-divided society that remained permanently squeezed between two socio-cultural borders, each of the two borders reminiscent of a frontline rather than of a safe and peaceful, let alone a 'natural', frontier. One (upper) border was a site of incessant reconnaissance sorties and of feverish defence of the few bridgeheads on the other side; the second (lower) border had to be closely watched, as it could easily let intruders in, while offering little protection to the blundering insiders unless tightly sealed by them and intensely guarded.

Among the reasons to interpret the advent of the modern era as a transformation promoted mostly by middle-class interests (or following Karl Marx, as a victorious *bourgeois* revolution), the typically middle-class obsessive concerns with the frailty and untrustworthiness of social standing, and equally obsessive efforts of its defence and stabilisation, loom very large indeed. When sketching the contours of a society knowing no unhappiness, Utopian blueprints proliferating at the dawn of the modern era reflected, recycled and recorded predominantly middle-class dreams and longings: the society they portrayed was purified of uncertainties – and above all of the ambiguities and insecurities of social positions, the rights they bestowed upon their incumbents and the duties they demanded to be performed. However the blueprints might have differed, they were unanimously choosing duration, solidity and absence of change as the essential premises of human happiness. Inside the Utopian cities (virtually all Utopias were urban), positions were many and different, but every resident was safe and secure in the position allocated to him. More than anything else, Utopian blueprints visualised the end to uncertainty and insecurity: to wit, a fully predictable social setting free of surprises and calling for no further reforms and reshuffles. The 'good' or even the 'perfectly good' society divined in Utopias was a society that would have put paid once and for all to all the most typically middle-class anxieties.

One may say that the middle classes were an *avant garde* of the times to come, experiencing and exploring, before the rest of society, the principal contradiction endemic to existential condition, the contradiction destined to become a well-nigh universal characteristic in liquid-modern life: the perpetual tension between two values, security and freedom, equally coveted and indispensable for a happy life, but frightfully difficult, alas, to reconcile and be enjoyed together. Because of its precarious position, and the need to treat as a forever unfinished task what other parts of society could view as a (wanted or unsolicited) 'free gift' of fate which they needed do little to retain and could do little to change, the middle class was particularly predisposed to face and confront that tension. This circumstance may explain in part why the spread of the challenges and concerns originally specific to the middle classes to other sectors of the population has been widely recorded, rightly though not necessarily for the right reasons, as 'embourgeoisement'. Middle classes have not achieved their Utopia of the 'perfect balance' between equally coveted freedom and security. Instead, instability of social location and the ensuing 'existential uncertainty', once endemic solely to the 'middle classes', has become a universal human condition. Various forms of mental depression (caused

in great measure by the sentiment of personal failure), in the nineteenth century a specifically 'middle-class' ailment, tend nowadays to afflict around 23 per cent of the English-speaking population.

Not for nothing are the watched-by-millions *Big Brother* shows enjoying popularity that cuts across class divisions, presented to their mixed-class audience under the rubric of 'reality TV'. This denomination suggests that the off-screen life, 'the real thing', is like the on-screen saga of *Big Brother* competitors: here as there, on screen as in real life, no one playing the game of survival is guaranteed to survive; permission to stay in the game is but a temporary reprieve, and team loyalty is but 'until further notice' – that is, it won't outlive its usefulness for the promotion of individual interest. That *someone* will be excluded is beyond dispute; the only question is who it will be, and hence what is at issue is not the abolishing of exclusions (a task that would favour joining forces and solidarity of action), but shifting the threat of exclusion away from oneself and towards the others (a task that prompts self-concern while rendering solidarity unreasonable if not suicidal). In *Big Brother*, someone must be excluded each week: not because by some curious coincidence regularly, every week, one person reveals herself or himself as being inadequate, but because that 'must' has been written in the rules of 'reality as seen on TV'. Exclusion is in the nature of things, an un-detachable aspect of being-in-the-world, a 'law of nature', so to speak – and so to rebel against it makes no sense. The only issue worthy to be thought about is staving off the prospect of *myself* being excluded in the next week's round of exclusions.

Numerous computer games owe their popularity to the fun they offer: safe and freely chosen rehearsals of that practice of one-upmanship which in the real world is as risky and dangerous as it is obligatory and unavoidable. Those games allow you to do what you have perhaps wished to do, but were prevented from doing because of your fear of getting wounded or your conscientious objections to wounding others. One such game is recommended as 'ultimate carnage' and a 'last-man-standing demolition derby'. The enthusiastic sounding and not particularly ironic reviewer writes: 'The most fun … are the events that demand you crash with the timing and precision to hurl your rag doll of a driver through the windscreen and high into the air in one of many arena events. From firing your hapless protagonist down enormous bowling alleys to skimming him like a smooth pebble across vast expanses of water, each is in equal measure ridiculous, violent and hilarious to play'.

Note: it is your dexterity (your timing and precision in delivering blows) against your protagonist's 'haplessness' (his inability to repay you in kind) that makes one-upmanship such fun and so 'hilarious to play'. Your self-esteem, the ego-boosting derived from the display of your supreme skills, has been obtained at the expense of the protagonist's humiliation. Your dexterity could be no less and yet half as gratifying and far less fun, were it not for your protagonist being hurled through the windscreen when you stay safely in the driver seat.

The stake of the cut-throat individual competition, including the exclusion game, is no longer physical survival (at least in the affluent part of the planet, and currently 'until further notice'), not the satisfaction of primary biological needs which the survival instinct demands. Neither is it the right to self-assert, to set one's own objectives and to decide what kind of life one would prefer to live; to exercise such rights is, on the contrary, assumed to be every individual's duty. It is moreover an axiom that whatever happens to the individual cannot but be the consequence of exercising such rights or of abominable failure or sinful refusal to exercise them. Whatever happens to the individual would be retrospectively interpreted therefore as another confirmation of the individual's sole and inalienable responsibility for their individual plights: adversities as much as successes.

Once cast as individuals, we are now encouraged to actively seek 'social recognition' for what has been pre-interpreted as our individual choices: namely, of the forms of life which we, the individuals, are (whether by deliberate choice or by default) practising. 'Social recognition' means acceptance by 'others who matter' that a form of life practised by a particular individual is worthy and decent, and that on this ground the individual in question deserves respect owed and offered to other worthy and decent people.

The alternative to social recognition is the denial of dignity: humiliation. In Dennis Smith's recent definition, 'the act is humiliating if it forcefully overrides or contradicts the claim that particular individuals … are making about who they are and where and how they fit in'.[18] In other words, if the individual is, explicitly or implicitly, denied the recognition which s/he expected for the person s/he is and/or the kind of life s/he lives, and if s/he is refused the entitlements that would have been made available or continued to be available following such recognition. 'A person feels humiliated when s/he is brutally shown, by words, actions or events, that they cannot be what they think they are ... Humiliation is the experience of being unfairly, unreasonably and unwillingly pushed down, held down, held back or pushed out.'[19]

That feeling breeds resentment. In the society of individuals like ours, this is arguably the most venomous and implacable variety of resentment a person may feel and the most common and prolific cause of conflict, dissent, rebellion and thirst of revenge. Denial of recognition, refusal of respect and the threat of exclusion have replaced exploitation and discrimination as the formulae most commonly used to explain and justify the grudge individuals might bear towards society, or to the sections or aspects of society to which they are directly exposed (personally or through the media) and which they thereby experience (whether first or second hand).

Conclusion

I suggest that the comprehensive list of the most conspicuous and worrying manifestations of 'social ills', shown in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's consultation, has its roots in the socio-cultural and political transformations of the last decades outlined above. If this is the case, then the ills in question are rooted in the form of life of the liquid-modern, thoroughly individualised society of consumers. 'One-task' (one-issue) undertakings aimed at mitigating the impact of one or another item from the list may bring temporary and partial relief, but short of reforming that form of life they would hardly remove the cause of their proliferation and perpetual regeneration. For instance, appeals to the resurrection of 'family values' and family responsibilities so popular among the politicians are likely to hang in thin air. According to the latest research, two-thirds of English people believe that there is little difference between being married and living together, only a quarter think that married couples make better parents than unmarried ones, two-thirds judge that divorce may be a positive step towards a better life;[20] the role of parents is increasingly focused on (and all too often reduced to) providing children with monetary entry tickets to the consumer market.

Footnotes

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