Liquid Modernity

Zygmunt Bauman
Foreword

On Being Light and Liquid

‘Fluidity’ is the quality of liquids and gases. What distinguishes both of them from solids, as the Encyclopaedia Britannica authoritatively informs us, is that they ‘cannot sustain a tangential, or shearing, force when at rest’ and so undergo ‘a continuous change in shape when subjected to such a stress’.

This continuous and irrecoverable change of position of one part of the material relative to another part when under shear stress constitutes flow, a characteristic property of fluids. In contrast, the shearing forces within a solid, held in a twisted or flexed position, are maintained, the solid undergoes no flow and can spring back to its original shape.

Liquids, one variety of fluids, owe these remarkable qualities to the fact that their ‘molecules are preserved in an orderly array over only a few molecular diameters’; while ‘the wide variety of behaviour exhibited by solids is a direct result of the type of bonding that holds the atoms of the solid together and of the structural
arrangements of the atoms'. 'Bonding', in turn, is a term that signifies the stability of solids – the resistance they put up 'against separation of the atoms'.

So much for the Encyclopaedia Britannica – in what reads like a bid to deploy 'fluidity' as the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era.

What all these features of fluids amount to, in simple language, is that liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape. Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time. While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance, of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but 'for a moment'. In a sense, solids cancel time; for liquids, on the contrary, it is mostly time that matters. When describing solids, one may ignore time altogether; in describing fluids, to leave time out of account would be a grievous mistake. Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture.

Fluids travel easily. They 'flow', 'spill', 'run out', 'splash', 'pour over', 'leak', 'flood', 'spray', 'drip', 'seep', 'ooze'; unlike solids, they are not easily stopped – they pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through others still. From the meeting with solids they emerge unscathed, while the solids they have met, if they stay solid, are changed – get moist or drenched. The extraordinary mobility of fluids is what associates them with the idea of 'lightness'. There are liquids which, cubic inch for cubic inch, are heavier than many solids, but we are inclined nonetheless to visualize them all as lighter, less 'weighty' than everything solid. We associate 'lightness' or 'weightlessness' with mobility and inconstancy: we know from practice that the lighter we travel the easier and faster we move.

These are reasons to consider 'fluidity' or 'liquidity' as fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways novel, phase in the history of modernity.

I readily agree that such a proposition may give a pause to anyone at home in the 'modernity discourse' and familiar with the vocabulary commonly used to narrate modern history. Was not modernity a process of 'liquefaction' from the start? Was not 'melting the solids' its major pastime and prime accomplishment all along? In other words, has modernity not been 'fluid' since its inception?

These and similar objections are well justified, and will seem more so once we recall that the famous phrase 'melting the solids', when coined a century and a half ago by the authors of The Communist Manifesto, referred to the treatment which the self-confident and exuberant modern spirit awarded the society it found much too stagnant for its taste and much too resistant to shift and mould for its ambitions – since it was frozen in its habitual ways. If the 'spirit' was 'modern', it was so indeed in so far as it was determined that reality should be emancipated from the 'dead hand' of its own history – and this could only be done by melting the solids (that is, by definition, dissolving whatever persists over time and is negligent of its passage or immune to its flow). That intention called in turn for the 'profaning of the sacred': for disavowing and dethroning the past, and first and foremost 'tradition' – to wit, the sediment and residue of the past in the present; it thereby called for the smashing of the protective armour forged of the beliefs and loyalties which allowed the solids to resist the 'liquefaction'.

Let us remember, however, that all this was to be done not in order to do away with the solids once and for all and make the brave new world free of them for ever, but to clear the site for new and improved solids; to replace the inherited set of deficient and defective solids with another set, which was much improved and preferably perfect, and for that reason no longer alterable. When reading de Tocqueville's Ancien Régime, one might wonder in addition to what extent the 'found solids' were resented, condemned and earmarked for liquefaction for the reason that they were already rusty, mushy, coming apart at the seams and altogether unreliable. Modern times found the pre-modern solids in a fairly advanced state of disintegration; and one of the most powerful motives behind the urge to melt them was the wish to discover or invent solids of – for a change – lasting solidity, a solidity which one could trust and rely upon and which would make the world predictable and therefore manageable.

The first solids to be melted and the first sacreds to be profaned were traditional loyalties, customary rights and obligations which bound hands and feet, hindered moves and cramped the enterprise.
To set earnestly about the task of building a new (truly solid!) order, it was necessary to get rid of the ballast with which the old order burdened the builders. ‘Melting the solids’ meant first and foremost shedding the ‘irrelevant’ obligations standing in the way of rational calculation of effects; as Max Weber put it, liberating business enterprise from the shackles of the family–household duties and from the dense tissue of ethical obligations; or, as Thomas Carlyle would have it, leaving solely the ‘cash nexus’ of the many bonds underlying human mutuality and mutual responsibilities. By the same token, that kind of ‘melting the solids’ left the whole complex network of social relations unstuck – bare, unprotected, unarmed and exposed, impotent to resist the business-inspired rules of action and business-shaped criteria of rationality, let alone to compete with them effectively.

That fateful departure laid the field open to the invasion and domination of (as Weber put it) instrumental rationality, or (as Karl Marx articulated it) the determining role of economy: now the ‘basis’ of social life gave all life’s other realms the status of ‘superstructure’ – to wit, an artefact of the ‘basis’ whose sole function was to service its smooth and continuing operation. The melting of solids led to the progressive untying of economy from its traditional political, ethical and cultural entanglements. It sedimented a new order, defined primarily in economic terms. That new order was to be more ‘solid’ than the orders it replaced, because – unlike them – it was immune to the challenge from non-economic action. Most political or moral levers capable of shifting or reforming the new order have been broken or rendered too short, weak or otherwise inadequate for the task. Not that the economic order, once entrenched, will have colonized, re-educated and converted to its ways the rest of social life; that order came to dominate the totality of human life because whatever else might have happened in that life has been rendered irrelevant and ineffective as far as the relentless and continuous reproduction of that order was concerned.

That stage in modernity’s career has been well described by Claus Offe (in ‘The Utopia of the Zero Option’, first published in 1987 in Praxis International): ‘complex’ societies ‘have become rigid to such an extent that the very attempt to reflect normatively upon or renew their “order”, that is, the nature of the coordination of the processes which take place in them, is virtually precluded by dint of their practical futility and thus their essential inadequacy’. However free and volatile the ‘subsystems’ of that order may be singly or severally, the way in which they are intertwined is ‘rigid, fatal, and sealed off from any freedom of choice’. The overall order of things is not open to options; it is far from clear what such options could be, and even less clear how an ostensibly viable option could be made real in the unlikely case of social life being able to conceive it and gestate. Between the overall order and every one of the agencies, vehicles and stratagems of purposeful action there is a cleavage – a perpetually widening gap with no bridge in sight.

Contrary to most dystopian scenarios, this effect has not been achieved through dictatorial rule, subordination, oppression or enslavement; nor through the ‘colonization’ of the private sphere by the ‘system’. Quite the opposite: the present-day situation emerged out of the radical melting of the fetters and manacles rightly or wrongly suspected of limiting the individual freedom to choose and to act. **Rigidity of order is the artefact and sediment of the human agents’ freedom.** That rigidity is the overall product of ‘releasing the brakes’: of deregulation, liberalization, ‘flexibilization’, increased fluidity, unbridling the financial, real estate and labour markets, easing the tax burden, etc. (as Offe pointed out in ‘Binding, Shackles, Brakes’, first published in 1987); or (to quote from Richard Sennett’s Flesh and Stone) of the techniques of ‘speed, escape, passivity’ – in other words, techniques which allow the system and free agents to remain radically disengaged, to by-pass each other instead of meeting. If the time of systemic revolutions has passed, it is because there are no buildings where the control desks of the system are lodged and which could be stormed and captured by the revolutionaries; and also because it is excruciatingly difficult, nay impossible, to imagine what the victors, once inside the buildings (if they found them first), could do to turn the tables and put paid to the misery that prompted them to rebel. One should be hardly taken aback or puzzled by the evident shortage of would-be revolutionaries: of the kind of people who articulate the desire to change their individual plights as a project of changing the order of society.

The task of constructing a new and better order to replace the old and defective one is not presently on the agenda – at least not on the agenda of that realm where political action is supposed to
reside. The ‘melting of solids’, the permanent feature of modernity, has therefore acquired a new meaning, and above all has been redirected to a new target – one of the paramount effects of that redirection being the dissolution of forces which could keep the question of order and system on the political agenda. The solids whose turn has come to be thrown into the melting pot and which are in the process of being melted at the present time, the time of fluid modernity, are the bonds which interlock individual choices in collective projects and actions – the patterns of communication and co-ordination between individually conducted life policies on the one hand and political actions of human collectivities on the other.

In an interview given to Jonathan Rutherford on 3 February 1999, Ulrich Beck (who a few years earlier coined the term ‘second modernity’ to connote the phase marked by the modernity ‘turning upon itself’, the era of the *soi-disant* ‘modernization of modernity’) speaks of ‘zombie categories’ and ‘zombie institutions’ which are ‘dead and still alive’. He names the family, class and neighbourhood as the foremost examples of that new phenomenon. The family, for instance:

> Ask yourself what actually is a family nowadays? What does it mean? Of course there are children, my children, our children. But even parenthood, the core of family life, is beginning to disintegrate under conditions of divorce ... [G]randmothers and grandfathers get included and excluded without any means of participating in the decisions of their sons and daughters. From the point of view of their grandchildren the meaning of grandparents has to be determined by individual decisions and choices.

What is happening at present is, so to speak, a redistribution and reallocation of modernity’s ‘melting powers’. They affected at first the extant institutions, the frames that circumscribed the realms of possible action-choices, like hereditary estates with their no-appeal-allowed allocation-by-ascription. Configurations, constellations, patterns of dependency and interaction were all thrown into the melting pot, to be subsequently recast and refashioned; this was the ‘breaking the mould’ phase in the history of the inherently transgressive, boundary-breaking, all-eroding modernity. As for the individuals, however – they could be excused for failing to notice; they came to be confronted by patterns and figurations which, albeit ‘new and improved’, were as stiff and indomitable as ever.

Indeed, no mould was broken without being replaced with another; people were let out from their old cages only to be admonished and censured in case they failed to relocate themselves, through their own, dedicated and continuous, truly life-long efforts, in the ready-made niches of the new order: in the *classes*, the frames which (as uncompromisingly as the already dissolved *estates*) encapsulated the totality of life conditions and life prospects and determined the range of realistic life projects and life strategies. The task confronting free individuals was to use their new freedom to find the appropriate niche and to settle there through conformity; by faithfully following the rules and modes of conduct identified as right and proper for the location.

It is such patterns, codes and rules to which one could conform, which one could select as stable orientation points and by which one could subsequently let oneself be guided, that are nowadays in increasingly short supply. It does not mean that our contemporaries are guided solely by their own imagination and resolve and are free to construct their mode of life from scratch and at will, or that they are no longer dependent on society for the building materials and design blueprints. But it does mean that we are presently moving from the era of pre-allocated ‘reference groups’ into the epoch of ‘universal comparison’, in which the designation of individual self-constructing labours is endemically and incurably underdetermined, is not given in advance, and tends to undergo numerous and profound changes before such labours reach their only genuine end: that is, the end of the individual’s life.

These days patterns and configurations are no longer ‘given’, let alone ‘self-evident’; there are just too many of them, clashing with one another and contradicting one another’s commandments, so that each one has been stripped of a good deal of compelling, coercively constraining powers. And they have changed their nature and have been accordingly reclassified: as items in the inventory of individual tasks. Rather than preceding life-politics and framing its future course, they are to follow it (follow from it), to be shaped and reshaped by its twists and turns. The liquidizing powers have moved from the ‘system’ to ‘society’, from politics’ to ‘life-policies’ – or have descended from the ‘macro’ to the ‘micro’ level of social cohabitation.

Ours is, as a result, an individualized, privatized version of
modernity, with the burden of pattern-weaving and the responsibility for failure falling primarily on the individual's shoulders. It is the patterns of dependency and interaction whose turn to be liquefied has now come. They are now malleable to an extent unexperienced by, and unimaginable for, past generations; but like all fluids they do not keep their shape for long. Shaping them is easier than keeping them in shape. Solids are cast once and for all. Keeping fluids in shape requires a lot of attention, constant vigilance and perpetual effort — and even then the success of the effort is anything but a foregone conclusion.

It would be imprudent to deny, or even to play down, the profound change which the advent of 'fluid modernity' has brought to the human condition. The remoteness and unreachability of systemic structure, coupled with the unstructured, fluid state of the immediate setting of life-politics, change that condition in a radical way and call for a rethinking of old concepts that used to frame its narratives. Like zombies, such concepts are today simultaneously dead and alive. The practical question is whether their resurrection, albeit in a new shape or incarnation, is feasible; or — if it is not — how to arrange for their decent and effective burial.

This book is dedicated to this question. Five of the basic concepts around which the orthodox narratives of the human condition tend to be wrapped have been selected for scrutiny: emancipation, individuality, time/space, work, and community. Successive avatars of their meanings and practical applications have been (albeit in a very fragmentary and preliminary fashion) explored, with the hope of saving the children from the outpouring of polluted bathwaters.

Modernity means many things, and its arrival and progress can be traced using many and different markers. One feature of modern life and its modern setting stands out, however, as perhaps that 'difference which makes[s] the difference'; as the crucial attribute from which all other characteristics follow. That attribute is the changing relationship between space and time.

Modernity starts when space and time are separated from living practice and from each other and so become ready to be theorized as distinct and mutually independent categories of strategy and action, when they cease to be, as they used to be in long pre-modern centuries, the intertwined and so barely distinguishable aspects of living experience, locked in a stable and apparently invulnerable one-to-one correspondence. In modernity, time has history, it has history because of the perpetually expanding 'carrying capacity' of time — the lengthening of the stretches of space which units of time allow to 'pass', 'cross', 'cover' — or conquer. Time acquires history once the speed of movement through space (unlike the eminently inflexible space, which cannot be stretched and would not shrink) becomes a matter of human ingenuity, imagination and resourcefulness.

The very idea of speed (even more conspicuously, that of acceleration), when referring to the relationship between time and space, assumes its variability, and it would hardly have any meaning at all were not that relation truly changeable, were it an attribute of inhuman and pre-human reality rather than a matter of human inventiveness and resolve, and were it not reaching far beyond the narrow range of variations to which the natural tools of mobility — human or equine legs — used to confine the movements of pre-modern bodies. Once the distance passed in a unit of time came to be dependent on technology, on artificial means of transportation, all extant, inherited limits to the speed of movement could be in principle transgressed. Only the sky (or, as it transpired later, the speed of light) was now the limit, and modernity was one continuous, unstoppable and fast accelerating effort to reach it.

Thanks to its newly acquired flexibility and expansiveness, modern time has become, first and foremost, the weapon in the conquest of space. In the modern struggle between time and space, space was the solid and stolid, unwieldy and inert side, capable of waging only a defensive, trench war — being an obstacle to the resilient advances of time. Time was the active and dynamic side in the battle, the side always on the offensive: the invading, conquering and colonizing force. Velocity of movement and access to faster means of mobility steadily rose in modern times to the position of the principal tool of power and domination.

Michel Foucault used Jeremy Bentham's design of Panopticon as the archmetaphor of modern power. In Panopticon, the inmates were tied to the place and barred from all movement, confined within thick, dense and closely guarded walls and fixed to their beds, cells or work-benches. They could not move because they were under watch; they had to stick to their appointed places at all times because they did not know, and had no way of knowing,
where at the moment their watchers – free to move at will – were. The surveillants’ facility and expediency of movement was the warrant of their domination; the inmates ‘fixedness to the place’ was the most secure and the hardest to break or loose of the manifold bonds of their subordination. Mastery over time was the secret of the managers’ power – and immobilizing their subordinates in space through denying them the right to move and through the routinization of the time-rhythm they had to obey was the principal strategy in their exercise of power. The pyramid of power was built out of velocity, access to the means of transportation and the resulting freedom of movement.

Panopticon was a model of mutual engagement and confrontation between the two sides of the power relationship. The managers’ strategies of guarding their own volatility and routinizing the flow of time of their subordinates merged into one. But there was tension between the two tasks. The second task put constraints on the first – it tied the ‘routinizers’ to the place within which the objects of time routinization had been confined. The routinizers were not truly and fully free to move: the option of ‘absentee landlords’ was, practically, out of the question.

Panopticon is burdened with other handicaps as well. It is an expensive strategy: conquering space and holding to it as well as keeping its residents in the surveilled place spawned a wide range of costly and cumbersome administrative tasks. There are buildings to erect and maintain in good shape, professional surveillants to hire and pay, the survival and working capacity of the inmates to be attended to and provided for. Finally, administration means, willy-nilly, taking responsibility for the overall well-being of the place, even if only in the name of well-understood self-interest – and responsibility again means being bound to the place. It requires presence, and engagement, at least in the form of a perpetual confrontation and tug-of-war.

What prompts so many commentators to speak of the ‘end of history’, of post-modernity, ‘second modernity’ and ‘surmodernity’, or otherwise to articulate the intuition of a radical change in the arrangement of human cohabitation and in social conditions under which life-politics is nowadays conducted, is the fact that the long effort to accelerate the speed of movement has presently reached its ‘natural limit’. Power can move with the speed of the electronic signal – and so the time required for the movement of its essential ingredients has been reduced to instantaneity. For all practical purposes, power has become truly exterritorial, no longer bound, not even slowed down, by the resistance of space (the advent of cellular telephones may well serve as a symbolic ‘last blow’ delivered to the dependency on space: even the access to a telephone socket is unnecessary for a command to be given and seen through to its effect. It does not matter any more where the giver of the command is – the difference between ‘close by’ and ‘far away’, or for that matter between the wilderness and the civilized, orderly space, has been all but cancelled.) This gives the power-holders a truly unprecedented opportunity: the awkward and irritating aspects of the panoptical technique of power may be disposed of. Whatever else the present stage in the history of modernity is, it is also, perhaps above all, post-Panoptical. What mattered in Panopticon was that the people in charge were assumed always to ‘be there’, nearby, in the controlling tower. What matters in post-Panoptical power-relations is that the people operating the levers of power on which the fate of the less volatile partners in the relationship depends can at any moment escape beyond reach – into sheer inaccessibility.

The end of Panopticon augurs the end of the era of mutual engagement: between the supervisors and the supervised, capital and labour, leaders and their followers, armies at war. The prime technique of power is now escape, slippage, elision and avoidance, the effective rejection of any territorial confinement with its cumbersome corollaries of order-building, order-maintenance and the responsibility for the consequences of it all as well as of the necessity to bear their costs.

This new technique of power has been vividly illustrated by the strategies deployed by the attackers in the Gulf and Yugoslav wars. The reluctance to deploy ground forces in the conduct of war was striking; whatever the official explanations might have implied, that reluctance was dictated not only by the widely publicized ‘body-bag’ syndrome. Engaging in a ground combat was resented not just for its possible adverse effect on domestic politics, but also (perhaps mainly) for its total uselessness and even counter-productivity as far as the goals of war are concerned. After all, the conquest of territory with all its administrative and managerial consequences was not just absent from the list of the objectives of war actions, but it was an eventuality meant to be by all means avoided, viewed
with repugnance as another sort of ‘collateral damage’, this time inflicted on the attacking force itself.

Blows delivered by stealthy fighter planes and ‘smart’ self-guided and target-seeking missiles – delivered by surprise, coming from nowhere and immediately vanishing from sight – replaced the territorial advances of the infantry troops and the effort to dispossess the enemy of its territory – to take over the land owned, controlled and administered by the enemy. The attackers definitely wished no longer to be ‘the last on the battlefield’ after the enemy ran or was routed. Military force and its ‘hit and run’ war-plan prefigured, embodied and portended what was really at stake in the new type of war in the era of liquid modernity: not the conquest of a new territory, but crushing the walls which stopped the flow of new, fluid global powers; beating out of the enemy’s head the desire to set up his own rules, and so opening up the so-far barricaded and walled-off, inaccessible space to the operations of the other, non-military, arms of power. War today, one may say (paraphrasing Clausewitz’s famous formula), looks increasingly like a ‘promotion of global free trade by other means’.

Jim MacLaughlin has reminded us recently (in Sociology 1/99) that the advent of the modern era meant, among other things, the consistent and systematic assault of the ‘settled’, converted to the sedentary way of life, against nomadic peoples and the nomadic style of life, starkly at odds with the territorial and boundary preoccupations of the emergent modern state. Ibn Khaldoun could in the fourteenth century sing the praise of nomadism, which brings peoples ‘closer to being good than settled peoples because they ... are more removed from all the evil habits that have infected the hearts of the settlers’ – but the practice of feverish nation- and nation-state-building which shortly afterwards started in earnest all over Europe put the ‘soil’ firmly above the ‘blood’ when laying the foundations of the new legislated order and codifying the citizens’ rights and duties. The nomads, who made light of the legislators’ territorial concerns and blatantly disregarded their zealous efforts of boundary-drawing, were cast among the main villains in the holy war waged in the name of progress and civilization. Modern ‘chronopolitics’ placed them not just as inferior and primitive beings, ‘underdeveloped’ and in need of thorough reform and enlightenment, but also as backward and ‘behind time’, suffering from ‘cultural lag’, lingering at the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder, and unforgivably slow or morbidly reluctant to climb it to follow the ‘universal pattern of development’.

Throughout the solid stage of the modern era, nomadic habits remained out of favour. Citizenship went hand in hand with settlement, and the absence of ‘fixed address’ and ‘statelessness’ meant exclusion from the law-abiding and law-protected community and more often than not brought upon the culprits legal discrimination, if not active prosecution. While this still applies to the homeless and shifty ‘underclass’, which is subject to the old techniques of panoptical control (techniques largely abandoned as the prime vehicle of integrating and disciplining the bulk of the population), the era of unconditional superiority of sedentarism over nomadism and the domination of the settled over the mobile is on the whole grinding fast to a halt. We are witnessing the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement. In the fluid stage of modernity, the settled majority is ruled by the nomadic and extraterritorial elite. Keeping the roads free for nomadic traffic and phasing out the remaining check-points has now become the meta-purpose of politics, and also of wars, which, as Clausewitz originally declared, are but ‘extension of politics by other means’.

The contemporary global elite is shaped after the pattern of the old-style ‘absentee landlords’. It can rule without burdening itself with the chores of administration, management, welfare concerns, or, for that matter, with the mission of ‘bringing light’, ‘reforming the ways’, morally uplifting, ‘civilizing’ and cultural crusades. Active engagement in the life of subordinate populations is no longer needed (on the contrary, it is actively avoided as unnecessarily costly and ineffective) – and so the ‘bigger’ is not just not ‘better’ any more, but devoid of rational sense. It is now the smaller, the lighter, the more portable that signifies improvement and ‘progress’. Travelling light, rather than holding tightly to things deemed attractive for their reliability and solidity – that is, for their heavy weight, substantiality and unyielding power of resistance – is now the asset of power.

Holding to the ground is not that important if the ground can be reached and abandoned at whim, in a short time or in no time. On the other hand, holding too fast, burdening one’s bond with mutually binding commitments, may prove positively harmful and the new chances crop up elsewhere. Rockefeller might have wished to
make his factories, railroads and oilrigs big and bulky and own them for a long, long time to come (for eternity, if one measures time by the duration of human or human family life). Bill Gates, however, feels no regret when parting with possessions in which he took pride yesterday; it is the mind-boggling speed of circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement which brings profit today — not the durability and lasting reliability of the product. In a remarkable reversal of the millennia-long tradition, it is the high and mighty of the day who resent and shun the durable and cherish the transient, while it is those at the bottom of the heap who — against all odds — desperately struggle to force their flimsy and paltry, transient possessions to last longer and render durable service. The two meet nowadays mostly on opposite sides of the jumbo-sales or used-car auction counters.

The disintegration of the social network, the falling apart of effective agencies of collective action is often noted with a good deal of anxiety and bewailed as the unanticipated 'side effect' of the new lightness and fluidity of the increasingly mobile, slippery, shifty, evasive and fugitive power. But social disintegration is as much a condition as it is the outcome of the new technique of power, using disengagement and the art of escape as its major tools. For power to be free to flow, the world must be free of fences, barriers, fortified borders and checkpoints. Any dense and tight network of social bonds, and particularly a territorially rooted tight network, is an obstacle to be cleared out of the way. Global powers are bent on dismantling such networks for the sake of their continuous and growing fluidity, that principal source of their strength and the warrant of their invincibility. And it is the falling apart, the friability, the brittleness, the transience, the until-further-noticeness of human bonds and networks which allow these powers to do their job in the first place.

Were the intertwined trends to develop unabated, men and women would be reshaped after the pattern of the electronic mole, that proud invention of the pioneering years of cybernetics immediately acclaimed as the harbinger of times to come: a plug on castors, scuffling around in a desperate search for electrical sockets to plug into. But in the coming age augured by cellular telephones, sockets are likely to be declared obsolete and in bad taste as well as offered in ever shrinking quantity and ever shakier quality. At the moment,

many electric power suppliers extol the advantages of plugging into their respective networks and vie for the favours of the socket-seekers. But in the long run (whatever 'the long run' means in the era of instantaneity) sockets are likely to be ousted and supplanted by disposable batteries individually bought in the shops and on offer in every airport kiosk and every service station along the motorway and country road.

This seems to be a dystopia made to the measure of liquid modernity — one fit to replace the fears recorded in Orwellian and Huxleyan-style nightmares.

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Afterthought

On Writing; On Writing Sociology

The need in thinking is what makes us think. 

_Theodor W. Adorno_

Quoting the Czech poet Jan Škácel’s opinion on the plight of the poet (who, in Škácel’s words, only discovers the verses which ‘were always, deep down, there’), Milan Kundera comments (in _L’Art du roman_, 1986): ‘To write, means for the poet to crush the wall behind which something that “was always there” hides.’ In this respect, the task of the poet is not different from the work of history, which also _discovers_ rather than _invents_: history, like poets, uncovers, in ever new situations, human possibilities previously hidden.

What history does matter-of-factly is a challenge, a task and a mission for the poet. To rise to this mission, the poet must refuse to serve up truths known beforehand and well worn, truths already ‘obvious’ because they have been brought to the surface and left floating there. It does not matter whether such truths ‘assumed in advance’ are classified as revolutionary or dissident, Christian or atheist – or how right and proper, noble and just they are or have been proclaimed to be. Whatever their denomination, those ‘truths’ are not this ‘something hidden’ which the poet is called to uncover; they are, rather, parts of the wall which the poet’s mission is to crush. Spokesmen for the obvious, self-evident and ‘what we all believe, don’t we?’ are _false poets_, says Kundera.

But what, if anything, does the poet’s vocation have to do with the sociologist’s calling? We sociologists rarely write poems. (Some of us who do take for the time of writing a leave of absence from our professional pursuits.) And yet, if we do not wish to share the fate of ‘false poets’ and resent being ‘false sociologists’, we ought to come as close as the true poets do to the yet hidden human possibilities; and for that reason we need to pierce the walls of the obvious and self-evident, of that prevailing ideological fashion of the day whose commonality is taken for the proof of its sense. Demolishing such walls is as much the sociologist’s as the poet’s calling, and for the same reason: the walling-up of possibilities belies human potential while obstructing the disclosure of its bluff.

Perhaps the verses which the poet seeks ‘were always there’. One cannot be so sure, though, about the human potential discovered by history. Do humans – the makers and the made, the heroes and the victims of history – indeed carry forever the same volume of possibilities waiting for the right time to be disclosed? Or is it rather that, as human history goes, the opposition between discovery and creation is null and void and makes no sense? Since history is the endless process of human creation, is not history for the same reason (and by the same token) the unending process of human self-discovery? Is not the propensity to disclose/create ever new possibilities, to expand the inventory of possibilities already discovered and made real, the sole human potential which always has been, and always is, ‘already there’? The question whether the new possibility has been created or ‘merely’ uncovered by history is no doubt welcome nourishment to many a scholastic mind; as for history itself, it does not wait for an answer and can do quite well without one.

Niklas Luhmann’s most seminal and precious legacy to fellow sociologists has been the notion of _auto poiesis_ – self-creation (from Greek _poiein_, do, create, give form, be effective, the opposite of _παχεῖν_ – of suffering, being an object, not the source, of the act) – meant to grasp and encapsulate the gist of the human condition. The choice of the term was itself a creation or discovery of the link (inherited kinship rather than chosen affinity) between history and poetry. Poetry and history are two parallel currents (‘parallel’ in the sense of the non-Euclidean universe ruled by Bolyai and Lobachevski’s geometry) of that auto poiesis of human potentialities, in which creation is the sole form discovery can take, while self-discovery is the principal act of creation.
Sociology, one is tempted to say, is a third current, running in parallel with those two. Or at least this is what it should be if it is to stay inside that human condition which it tries to grasp and make intelligible; and this is what it has tried to become since its inception, though it has been repeatedly diverted from trying by mistaking the seemingly impenetrable and not-yet-decomposed walls for the ultimate limits of human potential and going out of its way to reassure the garrison commanders and the troops they command that the lines they have drawn to set aside the off-limits areas will never be transgressed.

Alfred de Musset suggested almost two centuries ago that ‘great artists have no country’. Two centuries ago these were militant words, a war-cry of sorts. They were written down amidst deafening fanfares of youthful and credulous, and for that reason arrogant and pugnacious, patriotism. Numerous politicians were discovering their vocation in building nation-states of one law, one language, one world-view, one history and one future. Many poets and painters were discovering their mission in nourishing the tender sprouts of national spirit, resurrecting long-dead national traditions or conceiving of brand-new ones that never lived before and offering the nation as not-yet-fully-aware-of-being-a-nation the stories, the tunes, the likenesses and the names of heroic ancestors – something to share, love and cherish in common, and so to lift the mere living together to the rank of belonging together, opening the eyes of the living to the beauty and sweetness of belonging by prompting them to remember and venerate their dead and to rejoice in guarding their legacy. Against that background, de Musset’s blunt verdict bore all the marks of a rebellion and a call to arms: it summoned his fellow writers to refuse co-operation with the enterprise of the politicians, the prophets and the preachers of closely guarded borders and gun-bristling trenches. I do not know whether de Musset intuit the fratricidal capacities of the kind of fraternities which nationalist politicians and ideologists-laureate were determined to build, or whether his words were but an expression of the intellectual’s disgust at and resentment of narrow horizons, backwaters and parochial mentality. Whatever the case then, when read now, with the benefit of hindsight, through a magnifying glass stained with the dark blots of ethnic cleansings, genocides and mass graves, de Musset’s words seem to have lost nothing of their topicality, challenge and urgency, nor have they lost any of their original controversiality. Now as then, they aim at the heart of the writers’ mission and challenge their consciences with the question decisive for any writer’s raison d’être.

A century and a half later Juan Goytisolo, probably the greatest among living Spanish writers, takes up the issue once more. In a recent interview (‘Les batailles de Juan Goytisolo’ in Le Monde of 12 February 1999), he points out that once Spain had accepted, in the name of Catholic piety and under the influence of the Inquisition, a highly restrictive notion of national identity, the country became, towards the end of the sixteenth century, a ‘cultural desert’. Let us note that Goytisolo writes in Spanish, but for many years lived in Paris and in the USA, before finally settling in Morocco. And let us note that no other Spanish writer has had so many of his works translated into Arabic. Why? Goytisolo has no doubt about the reason. He explains: ‘Intimacy and distance create a privileged situation. Both are necessary.’ Though each for a different reason, both these qualities make their presence felt in his relations to his native Spanish and acquired Arabic, French and English – the languages of the countries which in succession became his chosen substitute homes.

Since Goytisolo spent a large part of his life away from Spain, the Spanish language ceased for him to be the all-too-familiar tool of daily, mundane and ordinary communication, always at hand and calling for no reflection. His intimacy with his childhood language was not – could not be – affected, but now it has been supplemented with distance. The Spanish language became the ‘authentic homeland in his exile’, a territory known and felt and lived through from the inside and yet – since it also became remote – full of surprises and exciting discoveries. That intimate/distant territory lends itself to the cool and detached scrutiny sine tra et studio, laying bare the pitfalls and the yet untested possibilities invisible in vernacular uses, showing previously unsuspected plasticity, admitting and inviting creative intervention. It is the combination of intimacy and distance which allowed Goytisolo to realize that the unreflexive immersion in a language – just the kind of immersion which exile makes all but impossible – is fraught with dangers: ‘If one lives only in the present, one risks disappearing together with the present.’ It was the ‘outside’, detached look at
his native language which allowed Goytisolo to step beyond the constantly vanishing present and so enrich his Spanish in a way otherwise unlikely, perhaps altogether inconceivable. He brought back into his prose and poetry ancient terms, long fallen into disuse, and by doing so blew away the store-room dust which had covered them, wiped out the patina of time and offered the words new and previously unsuspected (or long forgotten) vitality.

In Contre-allée, a book published recently in co-operation with Catherine Malabou, Jacques Derrida invites his readers to think in travel — or, more exactly, to ‘think travel’. That means to think that unique activity of departing, going away from chez soi, going far, towards the unknown, risking all the risks, pleasures and dangers that the ‘unknown’ has in store (even the risk of not returning).

Derrida is obsessed with ‘being away’. There is some reason to surmise that the obsession was born when the twelve-year-old Jacques was in 1942 sent down from the school which by the decree of the Vichy administration of North Africa was ordered to purify itself of Jewish pupils. This is how Derrida’s ‘perpetual exile’ started. Since then, Derrida has divided his life between France and the United States. In the US he was a Frenchman; in France, however hard he tried, time and time again the Algerian accent of his childhood kept breaking through his exquisite French parole, betraying a pied noir hidden under the thin skin of the Sorbonne professor. (This is, some people think, why Derrida came to extol the superiority of writing and composed the aetiological myth of priority to support the axiological assertion.) Culturally, Derrida was to remain ‘stateless’. This did not mean, though, having no cultural homeland. Quite the contrary: being ‘culturally stateless’ meant having more than one homeland, building a home of one’s own on the crossroads between cultures. Derrida became and remained a météque, a cultural hybrid. His ‘home on the crossroads’ was built of language.

Building a home on cultural crossroads proved to be the best conceivable occasion to put language to tests it seldom passes elsewhere, to see through its otherwise unnoticed qualities, to find out what language is capable of and what promises it makes it can never deliver. From that home on the crossroads came the exciting and eye-opening news about the inherent plurality and undecidability of sense (in L’Écriture et la différence), about the endemic impurity of origins (in De la grammatologie), and about the perpetual unfulfilment of communication (in La Carte postale) — as Christian Delacampagne noted in Le Monde of 12 March 1999.

Goytisolo’s and Derrida’s messages are different from that of de Musset: it is not true, the novelist and the philosopher suggest in unison, that great art has no homeland — on the contrary, art, like the artists, may have many homelands, and most certainly has more than one. Rather than homelessness, the trick is to be at home in many homes, but to be in each inside and outside at the same time, to combine intimacy with the critical look of an outsider, involvement with detachment — a trick which sedentary people are unlikely to learn. Learning the trick is the chance of the exile: technically an exile — one that is in, but not of the place. The unconfinedness that results from this condition (that is this condition) reveals the homely truths to be man-made and un-made, and the mother tongue to be an endless stream of communication between generations and a treasury of messages always richer than any of their readings and forever waiting to be unpacked anew.

George Steiner has named Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges and Vladimir Nabokov as the greatest among contemporary writers. What unites them, he said, and what made them all great, is that each of the three moved with equal ease — was equally ‘at home’ — in several linguistic universes, not one. (A reminder is in order. ‘Linguistic universe’ is a pleonastic phrase: the universe in which each one of us lives is and cannot but be ‘linguistic’ — made of words. Words lit the islands of visible forms in the dark sea of the invisible and mark the scattered spots of relevance in the formless mass of the insignificant. It is words that slice the world into the classes of nameable objects and bring out their kinship or enmity, closeness or distance, affinity or mutual estrangement — and as long as they stay alone in the field they raise all such artefacts to the rank of reality, the only reality there is.) One needs to live, to visit, to know intimately more than one such universe to spy out human invention behind any universe’s imposing and apparently indomitable structure and to discover just how much human cultural effort is needed to divine the idea of nature with its laws and necessities; all that is required in order to muster, in the end, the audacity and the determination to join in that cultural effort knowingly, aware of its risks and pitfalls, but also of the boundlessness of its horizons.
To create (and so also to discover) always means breaking a rule; following a rule is mere routine, more of the same – not an act of creation. For the exile, breaking rules is not a matter of free choice, but an eventuality that cannot be avoided. Exiles do not know enough of the rules reigning in their country of arrival, nor do they treat them unctuously enough for their efforts to observe them and conform to be perceived as genuine and approved. As to their country of origin, going into exile has been recorded there as their original sin, in the light of which all that the sinners later may do may be taken down and used against them as evidence of their rule-breaking. By commission or by omission, rule-breaking becomes a trademark of the exiles. This is unlikely to endear them to the natives of any of the countries between which their life itineraries are plotted. But, paradoxically, it also allows them to bring to all the countries involved gifts they need badly even without knowing it, such gifts as they could hardly expect to receive from any other source.

Let me clarify. The ‘exile’ under discussion here is not necessarily a case of physical, bodily mobility. It may involve leaving one country for another, but it need not. As Christine Brook-Rose put it (in her essay ‘Exsul’), the distinguishing mark of all exile, and particularly the writer’s exile (that is the exile articulated in words and thus made a communicable experience) is the refusal to be integrated – the determination to stand out from the physical space, to conjure up a place of one’s own, different from the place in which those around are settled, a place unlike the places left behind and unlike the place of arrival. The exile is defined not in relation to any particular physical space or to the oppositions between a number of physical spaces, but through the autonomous stand taken towards space as such. ‘Ultimately’, asks Brooke-Rose,

is not every poet or ‘poetic’ (exploring, rigorous) novelist an exile of sorts, looking in from outside into a bright, desirable image in the mind’s eye, of the little world created, for the space of the writing effort and the shorter space of the reading? This kind of writing, often at odds with publisher and public, is the last solitary, non-socialized creative art.

The resolute determination to stay ‘nonsocialized’; the consent to integrate solely with the condition of non-integration; the resist-

ance – often painful and agonizing, yet ultimately victorious – to the overwhelming pressure of the place, old or new; the rugged defence of the right to pass judgement and choose; the embracing of ambivalence or calling ambivalence into being – these are, we may say, the constitutive features of ‘exile’. All of them – please note – refer to attitude and life strategy, to spiritual rather than physical mobility.

Michel Maffesoli (in Du nomadisme: Vagabondages initiatiques, 1997) writes of the world we all inhabit nowadays as a ‘floating territory’ in which ‘fragile individuals’ meet ‘porous reality’. In this territory only such things as persons may fit as are fluid, ambiguous, in a state of perpetual becoming, in a constant state of self-transgression. ‘Rootedness’, if any, can there be only dynamic: it needs to be restated and reconstituted daily – precisely through the repeated act of ‘self-distantiation’, that foundational, initiating act of ‘being in travel, on the road. Having compared all of us - the inhabitants of the present-day world – to nomads, Jacques Attali (in Chemins de sagesse, 1996) suggests that, apart from travelling light and being kind, friendly and hospitable to strangers whom they meet on their way, nomads must be constantly on the watch, remembering that their camps are vulnerable, have no walls or trenches to stop intruders. Above all, nomads, struggling to survive in the world of nomads, need to grow used to the state of continuous disorientation, to the travelling along roads of unknown direction and duration, seldom looking beyond the next turn or crossing; they need to concentrate all their attention on that small stretch of road which they need to negotiate before dusk.

‘Fragile individuals’, doomed to conduct their lives in a ‘porous reality’, feel like skating on thin ice; and ‘in skating over thin ice’, Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked in his essay ‘Prudence’, ‘our safety is in our speed’. Individuals, fragile or not, need safety, crave safety, seek safety, and so then try, to the best of their ability, to maintain a high speed whatever they do. When running among fast runners, to slow down means to be left behind; when running on thin ice, slowing down also means the real threat of being drowned. Speed, therefore, climbs to the top of the list of survival values.

Speed, however, is not conducive to thinking, not to thinking far ahead, to long-term thinking at any rate. Thought calls for pause and rest, for ‘taking one’s time’, recapitulating the steps already taken, looking closely at the place reached and the wisdom (or
imprudence, as the case may be) of reaching it. Thinking takes one's mind away from the task at hand, which is always the running and keeping speed whatever else it may be. And in the absence of thought, the skating on thin ice which is the fate of fragile individuals in the porous world may well be mistaken for their destiny.

Taking one's fate for destiny, as Max Scheler insisted in his Ordo amoris, is a grave mistake: 'destiny of man is not his fate . . . [T]he assumption that fate and destiny are the same deserves to be called fatalism.' Fatalism is an error of judgement, since in fact fate has 'a natural and basically comprehensible origin'. Moreover, though fate is not a matter of free choice, and particularly of the individual free choice, it 'grows up out of the life of a man or a people'. To see all that, to note the difference and the gap between fate and destiny, and to escape the trap of fatalism, one needs resources not easily attainable when running on thin ice: a 'time off' to think, and a distance allowing a long view. 'The image of our destiny', Scheler warns, 'is thrown into relief only in the recurrent traces left when we turn away from it.' Fatalism, though, is a self-corroborating attitude: it makes the 'turning away', that conditio sine qua non of thinking, look useless and unworthy of trying.

Taking distance, taking time - in order to separate destiny and fate, to emancipate destiny from fate, to make destiny free to confront fate and challenge it: this is the calling of sociology. And this is what sociologists may do, if they consciously, deliberately and earnestly strive to reforge the calling they have joined - their fate - into their destiny.

'Sociology is the answer. But what was the question?' states, and asks, Ulrich Beck in Politik in der Risikogesellschaft. A few pages previously Beck had seemed to articulate the question he seeks: the chance of a democracy that goes beyond 'expertocracy', a kind of democracy which 'begins where debate and decision making are opened about whether we want a life under the conditions that are being presented to us . . .'

This chance is under a question mark not because someone has deliberately and malevolently shut the door to such a debate and prohibited an informed decision-taking; hardly ever in the past was the freedom to speak out and to come together to discuss matters of common interest as complete and unconditional as it is now. The point is, though, that more than a formal freedom to talk and pass resolutions is needed for the kind of democracy which Beck thinks is our imperative, to start in earnest. We also need to know what it is we need to talk about and what the resolutions we pass ought to be concerned with. And all this needs to be done in our type of society, in which the authority to speak and resolve issues is the reserve of experts who own the exclusive right to pronounce on the difference between reality and fantasy and to set apart the possible from the impossible. (Experts, we may say, are almost by definition people who 'get the facts straight', who take them as they come and think of the least risky way of living in their company.)

Why this is not easy and unlikely to become easier unless something is done Beck explains in his Risikogesellschaft: auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne. He writes: 'What food is for hunger, eliminating risks, or interpreting them away, is for the consciousness of risks.' In a society haunted primarily by material want, such an option between 'eliminating' misery and 'interpreting it away' did not exist. In our society, haunted by risk rather than want it does exist - and is daily taken. Hunger cannot be assuaged by denial; in hunger, subjective suffering and its objective cause are indissolubly linked, and the link is self-evident and cannot be belied. But risks, unlike material want, are not subjectively experienced; at least, they are not 'lived' directly unless mediated by knowledge. They may never reach the realm of subjective experience - they may be trivialized or downright denied before they arrive there, and the chance that they will indeed be barred from arriving grows together with the extent of the risks.

What follows is that sociology is needed today more than ever before. The job in which sociologists are the experts, the job of restoring to view the lost link between objective affliction and subjective experience, has become more vital and indispensable than ever, while less likely than ever to be performed without their professional help, since its performance by the spokesmen and practitioners of other fields of expertise has become utterly improbable. If all experts deal with practical problems and all expert knowledge is focused on their resolution, sociology is one branch of expert knowledge for which the practical problem it struggles to resolve is enlightenment aimed at human understanding. Sociology
is perhaps the sole field of expertise in which (as Pierre Bourdieu pointed out in *La Misère du monde*) Dilthey’s famed distinction between *explanation* and *understanding* has been overcome and cancelled.

To understand one’s fate means to be aware of its difference from one’s destiny. And to understand one’s fate is to know the complex network of causes that brought about that fate and its difference from that destiny. To work in the world (as distinct from being ‘worked out and about’ by it) one needs to know how the world works.

The kind of enlightenment which sociology is capable of delivering is addressed to freely choosing individuals and aimed at enhancing and reinforcing their freedom of choice. Its immediate objective is to reopen the allegedly shut case of explanation and so to promote understanding. It is the self-formation and self-assertion of individual men and women, the preliminary condition of their ability to decide whether they want the kind of life that has been presented to them as their fate, that as a result of sociological enlightenment may gain in vigour, effectiveness and rationality. The cause of the autonomous society may profit together with the cause of the autonomous individual; they can only win or lose together.

To quote from *Le Délabrement de l’Occident* of Cornelius Castoriadis,

An autonomous society, a truly democratic society, is a society which questions everything that is pre-given and by the same token liberates the creation of new meanings. In such a society, all individuals are free to create for their lives the meanings they will (and can).

Society is truly autonomous once it ‘knows, must know, that there are no “assured” meanings, that it lives on the surface of chaos, that it itself is a chaos seeking a form, but a form that is never fixed once for all’. The absence of guaranteed meanings – of absolute truths, of preordained norms of conduct, of pre-drawn borderlines between right and wrong, no longer needing attention, of guaranteed rules of successful action – is the *conditio sine qua non* of, simultaneously, a truly autonomous society and truly free indi-

viduals; autonomous society and the freedom of its members condition each other. Whatever safety democracy and individuality may muster depends not on fighting the endemic contingency and uncertainty of human condition, but on recognizing it and facing its consequences point-blank.

If orthodox sociology, born and developed under the aegis of solid modernity, was preoccupied with the conditions of human obedience and conformity, the prime concern of sociology made to the measure of liquid modernity needs to be the promotion of autonomy and freedom; such sociology must therefore put individual self-awareness, understanding and responsibility at its focus. For the denizens of modern society in its solid and managed phase, the major opposition was one between conformity and deviance; the major opposition in modern society in its present-day liquefied and decentralised phase, the opposition which needs to be faced up to in order to pave the way to a truly autonomous society, is one between taking up responsibility and seeking a shelter where responsibility for one’s own action need not be taken by the actors.

That other side of the opposition, seeking shelter, is a seductive option and realistic prospect. Alexis de Tocqueville (in the second volume of his *De la démocratie en Amérique*) noted that if selfishness, that bane haunting humankind in all periods of its history, ‘desiccat the seeds of all virtues’, then individualism, a novel and typically modern affliction, dries up only ‘the source of public virtues’; the individuals affected are busy ‘cutting out small companies for their own use’ while leaving the ‘great society’ to its own fate. The temptation to do so has grown considerably since de Tocqueville jotted down his observation.

Living among a multitude of competing values, norms and life-styles, without a firm and reliable guarantee of being in the right, is hazardous and commands a high psychological price. No wonder that the attraction of the second response, of hiding from the requisites of responsible choice, gathers in strength. As Julia Kristeva puts it (in *Nations without Nationalism*), ‘It is a rare person who does not invoke a primal shelter to compensate for personal disarray.’ And we all, to a greater or lesser extent, sometimes more and sometimes less, find ourselves in that state of ‘personal disarray’. Time and again we dream of a ‘great simplification’; unprompted, we engage in regressive fantasies of which the images of the prenatal womb and the walled-up home are
prime inspirations. The search for a primal shelter is ‘the other’ of responsibility, just like deviance and rebellion were ‘the other’ of conformity. The yearning for a primal shelter has come these days to replace rebellion, which has now ceased to be a sensible option; as Pierre Rosanvallon points out (in a new preface to his classic Le Capitalisme utopique), there is no longer a ‘commanding authority to depose and replace. There seems to be no room left for a revolt, as social fatalism vis-à-vis the phenomenon of unemployment testifies.’

Signs of malaise are abundant and salient, yet, as Pierre Bourdieu repeatedly observes, they seek in vain a legitimate expression in the world of politics. Short of articulate expression, they need to be read out, obliquely, from the outbursts of xenophobic and racist frenzy – the most common manifestations of the ‘primal shelter’ nostalgia. The available and no less popular alternative to neotribal moods of scapegoating and militant intolerance – the exit from politics and withdrawal behind the fortified walls of the private – is no longer prepossessing and, above all, no longer an adequate response to the genuine source of the ailment. And so it is at this point that sociology, with its potential for explanation that promotes understanding, comes into its own more than at any other time in its history.

According to the ancient but never bettered Hippocratic tradition, as Pierre Bourdieu reminds the readers of La Misère du monde, genuine medicine begins with the recognition of the invisible disease – ‘facts of which the sick does not speak or forgets to report’. What is needed in the case of sociology is the ‘revelation of the structural causes which the apparent signs and talks disclose only through distorting them [ne dévoilent qu’en les voilant]’. One needs to see through – explain and understand – the sufferings characteristic of the social order which ‘no doubt pushed back the great misery (though as much as it is often said), while ... at the same time multiplying the social spaces ... offering favourable conditions to the unprecedented growth of all sorts of little miseries.’

To diagnose a disease does not mean the same as curing it – this general rule applies to sociological diagnoses as much as it does to medical verdicts. But let us note that the illness of society differs from bodily illnesses in one tremendously important respect: in the case of an ailing social order, the absence of an adequate diagnosis (elbowed out or silenced by the tendency to ‘interpret away’ the risks spotted by Ulrich Beck) is a crucial, perhaps decisive, part of the disease. As Cornelius Castoriadis famously put it, society is ill if it stops questioning itself; and it cannot be otherwise, considering that – whether it knows it or not – society is autonomous (its institutions are nothing but human-made and so, potentially, human-unmade), and that suspension of self-questioning bars the awareness of autonomy while promoting the illusion of heteronomy with its unavoidably fatalistic consequences. To restart questioning means to take a take a long step towards the cure. If in the history of human condition discovery equals creation, if in thinking about the human condition explanation and understanding are one – so in the efforts to improve human condition diagnosis and therapy merge.

Pierre Bourdieu expressed this perfectly in the conclusion of La Misère du monde: ‘To become aware of the mechanisms which make life painful, even unliveable, does not mean to neutralize them; to bring to light the contradictions does not mean to resolve them.’ And yet, sceptical as one can be about the social effectiveness of the sociological message, the effects of allowing those who suffer to discover the possibility of relating their sufferings to social causes cannot be denied; nor can we dismiss the effects of effects of becoming aware of the social origin of unhappiness ‘in all its forms, including the most intimate and most secret of them’.

Nothing is less innocent, Bourdieu reminds us, than laissez-faire. Watching human misery with equanimity while placating the pangs of conscience with the ritual incantation of the TINA (‘there is no alternative’) creed, means complicity. Whoever willingly or by default partakes of the cover-up or, worse still, the denial of the human-made, non-inevitable, contingent and alterable nature of social order, notably of the kind of order responsible for unhappiness, is guilty of immorality – of refusing help to a person in danger.

Doing sociology and writing sociology is aimed at disclosing the possibility of living together differently, with less misery or no misery: the possibility daily withheld, overlooked or unbelieved. Not-seeing, not-seeking and thereby suppressing this possibility is itself part of human misery and a major factor in its perpetuation. Its disclosure does not by itself predetermine its use; also, when known, possibilities may not be trusted enough to be put to the test
of reality. Disclosure is the beginning, not the end of the war against human misery. But that war cannot be waged in earnest, let alone with a chance of at least partial success, unless the scale of human freedom is revealed and recognized, so that freedom can be fully deployed in the fight against the social sources of all, including the most individual and private, unhappiness.

There is no choice between ‘engaged’ and ‘neutral’ ways of doing sociology. A non-committal sociology is an impossibility. Seeking a morally neutral stance among the many brands of sociology practised today, brands stretching all the way from the outspokenly libertarian to the staunchly communitarian, would be a vain effort. Sociologists may deny or forget the ‘world-view’ effects of their work, and the impact of that view on human singular or joint actions, only at the expense of forfeiting that responsibility of choice which every other human being faces daily. The job of sociology is to see to it that the choices are genuinely free, and that they remain so, increasingly so, for the duration of humanity.

Notes

Chapter 1 Emancipation

8 Alain Touraine, ‘Can we live together, equal and different?’, European Journal of Social Theory, November 1998, p. 177.