THE INDIVIDUALIZED SOCIETY

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN
The Individualized Society
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Zygmunt Bauman

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'Men are so necessarily mad' – Blaise Pascal quipped – 'that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness.' From madness there is no escape but another madness, Ernest Becker insists, commenting on Pascal's verdict, and explains: humans are 'out of nature and hopelessly in it'; individually and collectively, we all rise above the finitude of our bodily life and yet we know – we cannot but know, though we do everything we can (and more) to forget it – that the flight of life would inevitably (and literally) run into the ground. And there is no good solution to the dilemma, because it is precisely the fact of having risen above nature that opens our finitude to scrutiny and makes it visible, unforgettable and painful. We do all we can to make our natural limits a most closely guarded secret; but were we ever to succeed in that effort we would have little reason to stretch ourselves 'beyond' and 'above' the limits we wished to transcend. It is the sheer impossibility of forgetting our natural condition that prompts us, and allows us, to rise above it. Since we are not allowed to forget our nature, we can (and must) go on challenging it.

Everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness – agreed madness, shared
madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same.¹

‘Agreed’, ‘shared’, ‘dignified’ – dignified by the act of sharing and by the outspoken or tacit agreement to respect what is shared. What we call ‘society’ is a huge contraption which does just that; ‘society’ is another name for agreeing and sharing, but also the power which makes what has been agreed and is shared dignified. Society is that power because, like nature itself, it was here long before any of us arrived and will stay here after every one of us has long gone. ‘Living in society’ – agreeing, sharing and respecting what we share – is the sole recipe for living happily (if not forever after). Custom, habit and routine take the poison of absurdity out of the sting of the finality of life. Society, Becker says, is ‘a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning’.² ‘Mad’ are only the unshared meanings. Madness is no madness when shared.

All societies are factories of meanings. They are more than that, in fact: nothing less than the nurseries of meaningful life. Their service is indispensable. Aristotle observed that a solitary being outside a polis can be only an angel or a beast; no wonder, we may say, since the first is immortal and the second unaware of its mortality. Submission to society, as Durkheim points out, is a ‘liberating experience’, the very condition of liberation ‘from blind, unthinking physical forces’. Could not one say, asks Durkheim rhetorically, that ‘it is only by a fortunate circumstance, because societies are infinitely more long-lived than individuals, that they permit us to taste satisfactions which are not merely ephemeral’?³ The first of the quoted sentences is, as it were, pleonastic: what the submission to society offers is not so much liberation from ‘unthinking physical forces’ as a liberation from thinking about them. Freedom comes in the form of exorcizing the spectre of mortality. And it is this tautology which renders the exorcism effective and makes certain types of satisfactions taste like the defeat of ruthlessly blind ‘physical forces’. When shared with those born earlier and those likely to live longer, satisfactions ‘are not merely ephemeral’; more exactly, they are cleansed (ephemerally) from the stigma of ephemerality. Inside a mortal life one can taste immortality, even if only metaphorically or metonymically – by shaping one’s life in the likeness of forms
which are agreed to be endowed with undying value, or by coming into touch and rubbing shoulders with things which by common agreement are destined for eternity. One way or another, something of the durability of nature may rub off on the transience of the individual life.

In the same way in which knowledge of good and evil begets the potent and staunch need for moral guidance, knowledge of mortality triggers the desire for transcendence, which takes one of two forms: either the urge to force the admittedly transient life to leave traces more lasting than are those who left them, or the wish to taste this side of the edge of transient life experiences `stronger than death'. Society feeds on that desire in both its forms. There is an energy in that desire waiting to be channelled and directed. Society 'capitalizes' on that energy, draws its life-juices from that desire, in so far as it manages to do just what is wanted: to supply credible objects of satisfaction, alluring and trustworthy enough to prompt efforts which 'make sense' and 'give sense' to life; efforts which are sufficiently energy and labour consuming to fill the time span of life, and sufficiently varied to be realistically coveted and pursued by all ranks and stations however profuse or meagre their talents and resources.

This may be, as Becker suggests, madness, but one can also argue that it may rather be a rational response to the condition which human beings cannot change, while yet they have to cope with its effects. Whatever it is, society 'manipulates it', much as it manipulates that other knowledge, of good and evil – but its freedom of manoeuvre in this case is greater, and its responsibility more grave, since humans ate from the Tree of Good and Evil, but only heard of the Tree of Life and have no memory of tasting its fruit.

Where there is use, there is always a chance of abuse. And the line dividing use from abuse among the vehicles of transcendence on offer was and remains a most hotly (perhaps the most hotly) contested of the borders which human societies have drawn; it is also likely to remain so for a long time to come, since the fruits of the life-tree are not available on any duly licensed market stall. The object of all economies is the management of scarce resources, but the fate of the economy of death transcendence is to manage – supply and distribute – substitutes for notoriously absent resources: the surrogates which have to deputize for the 'real stuff' and render life liveable without it. Their main application
is to prevent (or, short of preventing, to put off) discoveries similar
to Leonardo da Vinci’s sad conclusion: ‘While I thought that I was
learning how to live, I have been learning how to die’ – a wisdom
which may sometimes prompt a blossoming of genius, but more
often than not would result in a paralysis of will. It is for this
reason that the life meanings on offer and in circulation cannot be
sorted out as ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’, true or fraudulent. They
bring satisfactions which differ in emotional fullness, profundity
and duration, but they all stop short of the genuine need-satisfac-
tion.

Two consequences follow. One is the astounding inventiveness
of cultures whose ‘main business’ is to supply ever new, as yet
untried and undiscredited variants of transcendence strategies and
resuscitate ever anew the trust in the ongoing search despite the
way the explorers stumble from one disappointment to another
frustration. The trade in life meanings is the most competitive of
markets, but with the ‘marginal utility’ of the commodities on
offer unlikely ever to shrink, the demand prompting competitive
supply is unlikely to dry up. Second is the awesome opportunity to
capitalize on the untapped and forever unexhausted volumes of
energy generated by the continuous and never fully quenched thirst
for life meaning. That energy, if properly seized and channelled,
can be turned to many sorts of uses: thanks to its ubiquitousness
and versatility, that energy constitutes fully and truly the culture’s
‘metacapital’ – the stuff of which many and different bodies of
‘cultural capital’ can be and are moulded. Any kind of social order
could be represented as a network of channels through which the
search for life meanings is conducted and the life-meaning formu-
lae conveyed. The energy of transcendence is what keeps the for-
midable activity called ‘social order’ going; it makes it both
necessary and feasible.

It has been suggested before that separating ‘right’ and ‘wrong’
life meanings and formulae is a task that is not merely daunting
but, if undertaken, is bound to fail. This does not mean, though,
that all life meanings on offer are of equal value; from the fact that
none is exactly on target, it does not follow that they all miss the
targets by the same margin. Every culture lives by the invention
and propagation of life meanings, and every order lives by
manipulating the urge for transcendence; but once capitalized,
the energy generated by the urge can be used and misused in
many different ways, though the profits from each allocation benefit clients unequally. We may say that the gist of ‘social order’ is the redistribution, the differential allocation of culturally produced resources and strategies of transcendence, and that the job of all social orders is to regulate their accessibility, turning it into the principal ‘stratifying factor’ and the paramount measure of socially conditioned inequality. Social hierarchy with all its privileges and deprivations is built out of the differential value measures of life formulae available to various categories of human beings.

It is in the field of such socially regulated redistributions of the capitalized ‘energy of transcendence’ that the issue of the truth and falsity of life meanings can be sensibly posited and a credible answer can be sought. The energy may be *misused*, and it is – when the possibilities of meaningful life are reduced, concealed or belied and the energy is directed away from their discovery. Social manipulation of the urge for transcendence is unavoidable if the individual life is to be lived and life in common is to continue – but it tends to include a *surplus manipulation* which diverts rather than brings closer the chances which life entails.

Surplus manipulation is at its most vicious when it turns the blame for the imperfections of the culturally produced life formulae and the socially produced inequality of their distribution on the self-same men and women for whose use the formulae are produced and resources needed to deploy them are supplied. It is then one of those cases when (to use Ulrich Beck’s expression) institutions ‘for overcoming problems’ are transformed into ‘institutions for causing problems’; you are, on the one hand, made responsible for yourself, but on the other hand are ‘dependent on conditions which completely elude your grasp’ (and in most cases also your knowledge); under such conditions, ‘how one lives becomes the biographical solution of systemic contradictions.’ Turning the blame away from the institutions and onto the inadequacy of the self helps either to defuse the resulting potentially disruptive anger, or to recast it into the passions of self-censure and self-disparagement or even rechannel it into violence and torture aimed against one’s own body.

Hammering home the ‘no more salvation by society’ commandment and turning it into a precept of commonsensical wisdom, a phenomenon easy to spot on the surface of contemporary life,