Survival as a Social Construct

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The prospect of life is death; the ultimate cause of death is birth – only they who live can die; good health preserves life so that it can meet its death when it comes; life is the only truly terminal disease . . .

All these statements are both trivial and absurd. They are absurd as they defy logic. And they are absurd as they spell out, in a form still less dramatic and paradoxical than the existential incongruity they attempt to grasp and report, the ultimate failure of rationality: human inability to reconcile the transcending power of *time-binding* mind and the transience of its *time-bound* fleshy casing. It is this ultimate incongruity (not the one between animal instincts and social norms, which made Durkheim's man a *homo duplex*, but one between the freedom of a symbol-making and symbol-using subject and its fatal dependence on natural body) that inspired Pascal's comment: men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness. Death blatantly defies the power of reason: reason's power is to be a guide to good choice, but death is not a matter of choice. Death is the scandal of reason. It saps trust in reason and the security reason promises. It loudly declares reason's lie. It inspires fear that saps and ultimately defeats reason's offer of confidence. Reason cannot exculpate itself of this scandal. It can only try a cover-up.

And it does. Since the discovery of death (and the state of having discovered death is the defining, and distinctive, feature of the human) human societies have kept designing elaborate subterfuges, hoping that they would allow them to forget about the scandal; failing to forget, to afford not to think about it; failing that, to forbid speaking of it. In Ernest Becker's words,

> all culture, all man's creative life-ways, are in some basic part of them a fabricated protest against natural reality, a denial of the truth of human condition, and an

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> attempt to forget the pathetic creature that man is . . . Society itself is a codified hero system, which means that the society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning.[1] (1973: 33, 7)

Thanks to the elaborate effort of society, 'in normal times we move actually without ever believing in our own death, as if we fully believed in our own corporeal immortality' (Zilboorg, 1970).[2]

Social Deconstruction of Death

The most common expedient is to make the dead 'cease to exist'. Cemeteries, Baudrillard (1976: 195ff) suggests, were the first ghettos; indeed, the archetypal ghettos, the patterns for all ghettos to come. Funerals differ in their ritual, but they are always acts of exclusion. They proclaim the dead abnormal, dangerous, those to be shunned. And they expel the dead from the company of the normal, innocuous, these to be associated with. But they do more than that. Through applying to the dead the same technique of separation as they do to the carriers of infectious diseases or contagious malpractices, they cast the dead in the category of threats that lose their potency if kept at a distance. Better still, the dead, like the ill, insane or the criminal, are put in trust, into 'the care of licensed professionals' (Anderson, 1986: 16) and thus are supposed to disappear not only from sight, but from mind. The self-deceit is all too visible, though; the dead cannot be buried in the past, as their lot is the future of all those living in the present. As sites of confinement, cemeteries are not half as secure as leprosaria, lunatic asylums or prisons. Haunted houses and haunted lives testify to the porousness of cemetery walls.

Another common expedient is to deny the substance of death: its finality. One can do it in many ways. One can follow the Hindu pattern of privatizing death and compensating it with a collectivized immortality: accept the permanence of being – 'that which is can never cease to be' (*Bhagavad Gita*, quoted in Carse, 1980: 133) – and thus make life and death into exchangeable forms of eternal being, stages whose duration does not matter in view of the perpetuity of existence. One can go one better and try to bring that 'being' which is eternal closer home. This is what the Jewish faith has done, ascribing perpetuity to the special relationship – the covenant – between Jewish people and God. Personal death does not matter much as long as the conversation of God with His people – God's revelation to the Jews and the Jews' service to

God – goes on. One can think of the Socrates–Plato solution as of a secular version of the same, yet a version meant not for a popular consumption, but for the reassurance of the chosen few, able and willing to seek consolation in philosophy; one putting the eternal truth in place of the Jewish God, and replacing the conversation between God and His people by the conversations of philosophers with the Absolute. One can think as well of modern totalitarianisms, in their nationalistic, class or racist forms, as of other varieties of collectivized immortality; varieties particularly effective in devaluing the transient, expendable and mortal individual.

Or one can, with Christianity, insist on personal immortality. As the decay of the physical body of the dead was too evident and unexceptional to be refuted, the preservation of the body could not be entertained in any but a miraculous form (the idea is entertained again in our time, in the form of the miraculously potent science and technology – as an artificially induced hibernation 'until such time when the medicine for the now terminal disease will have been found'). But the preservation of the soul could be postulated without fear of empirical refutation; the care of the soul's unending future would then take precedence over the worry about the flesh destined for putrefaction. Hopefully, the experts attending to the soul's future would also take precedence over the specialists caring for the body's present.

This delicate construction, vulnerable at the best of times, has been delivered a shattering blow at the threshold of the modern era – once behaviour of bodies fell out of the rule of nature and moved into the area demanding human vigilance and reflective action (and thus also calling for the problem-defining and problem-solving experts). The ever more evident insufficiency of unreflexive custom as a guarantee of social existence was perceived as the withdrawal of God from the world; absent from the world of the living, God could no longer be addressed, conversed with or induced to intervene. Propelled into the world by the original act of creation, humankind was now left to its own resources – above all it had to build up its existence using the most perfect of God's gifts, reason. As David R. Hiley put it,

> the conceptual role human telos had played was filled by a philosophy of history as progress; that is, the transition from our untutored and discordant condition to the realization of our true end was cast in terms of a teleological conception of the human species. (1988: 46)

The transition was to be accomplished by human reason; that is, by making good choices, only good choices and ever better choices. Making good choices itself turned into the *telos*; there could be no other end to human existence, since any other end would put a limit to reason's power. The sole purpose of reason was its own application, its rule, its mastery. Reason's mastery over humans as persons was the only meaning of the emancipation of humanity as a species; the only sensible model for humanity reaching finally its destination, its *telos*. The species' eternal self-perfection, called *progress*, required now that everything else is temporal, transient and disposable; including the necessarily imperfect, non-final individual exemplars of humanity.

Harry Redner (1982: 13, 4–5) expressed the new, modern status of death as a paradox, as an irony of history: 'man is now mortal, precisely by having acted on the premise of Man's immortality'. This new, modern conception of individual mortality is not, to be sure, a whim of philosophy. It grows from the condition created by modern practice. 'Men have devised a way of systematically dominating, controlling, and disposing of all things . . . They can make themselves irrelevant, if not redundant, to their own solutions and so dispose of themselves'. For mankind to self-assert, each individual member had to be a *tabula rasa* to be written upon, an *empty cabinet* to be filled with contents. 'To achieve this immortality of Man, Progress has to exclude death by relegating it to the private sphere of the individual' (Redner, 1982: 34).

This was only superficially, however, a return to the Judaist expedient or opting for the Hinduist one. This privatization of death has a distinctly modern tinge. It does not play down the *significance of death*, by denying its finality and irredeemability. It does play down instead the *significance of life*, by denying its relevance to the progress of humanity, the only conceivable 'logic of history'. It proclaims the enhancement of individual life as the end point of progress and mission of history, but for the time being – before the end has been reached and mission fulfilled – it legitimizes the treating of life as a means to an end (be it a classless society, a race-pure society, a society fulfilling the destiny of a nation). Indeed, no purpose could be said to reside in the episode stretching from the birth to the death of the individual. This episode's meaning derives solely from the future, that is from being overcome and left behind.

Modern privatization of death comes together with the privatization of life. Both are to be filled with sense and purpose by those

who live and die. There are many devices that help life to be lived with a purpose, or to be lived as a series or a succession of purposes. The most important of the devices are supplied by instrumental reason. There are no devices (there can be no specifically *modern* devices) to anticipate death as a meaningful event. Our own death cannot be thought of as instrumental. It invalidates the discourse of instrumentality as it spells the termination of purposeful action. This is where its horror resides in the modern world of instrumental rationality: the world where deeds are lived as means to ends and justify themselves by the ends which they serve as means. There is no way in which this horror could be argued away. It can be only barred from consciousness, tabooed as a topic, heaved out away from current concerns; or, in the typically modern way, split into small-scale worries, each one separately removable – so that the fearful finality and irremediability of the original worry can be never scanned in its totality.

The latter expedient strives to conceal the fact that death, as the ultimate end of life, cannot be resisted. The truth that death cannot be escaped is not denied – it cannot be denied; but it could be held out of the agenda, elbowed out by another truth: that each *particular* case of death (most importantly, death which threatens the particular person, me, at the particular moment, now) can be resisted, postponed or avoided altogether. Death as such is inevitable; but each concrete instance of death is contingent. Death is omnipotent and invincible; but none of the specific cases of death is.

All deaths have causes, each death has a cause, each particular death has its particular cause. Corpses are cut open, explored, scanned, tested. The cause is found: blood clot, kidney failure, haemorrhage, heart arrest, lung collapse. We do not hear of people dying of mortality. They die only of individual causes; *because* there was an individual cause. No postmortem stops before the individual causes have been revealed. There are so many causes of death; given enough time, one can name them all. If I defeat, escape or cheat twenty among them, twenty less will be left to defeat me. One does not die; one dies of a *disease* or of *murder*. I can do nothing to defy mortality. But I can do quite a lot to avoid a blood clot or a lung cancer. I can stop eating eggs, refrain from smoking, do physical exercises, keep my weight down; I can do so many other things. And while doing all these right things and forcing myself to abstain from the wrong ones, I have no time left to ruminate that the effectiveness of each thing I am doing, however

foolproof it could be made, does not in the least detract from the uselessness of them all taken together. The cause of instrumental rationality celebrates more triumphant battles – and in the din of festivities the news of the lost war is inaudible.

This is how we are trained to think (or not to think). According to an American researcher, an average child who reached the age of fourteen by 1971 would have watched about 18,000 cases of death on TV (Hick, 1976: 86). Most of those people who died on the screen were killed. Some others (though not at all that many) failed in their fight against a disease, or did not fight it promptly or keenly enough. Each case of death ('as seen on TV') had a cause, and for the same reason was *avoidable*: contingent. That contingency, that avoidability, that encouraging and reassuring gratuity of death was the main topic of the TV drama in which people lost their lives: individual people, individual lives and in individual circumstances.

The doctors who stand between me and my death do not fight mortality either; but they do fight, gallantly and skilfully, each and any of its particular cases. They fight *mortal diseases*. Quite often they win. Each victory is an occasion for rejoicing: once more, *death has been avoided*. Sometimes they lose the battle. And then, in Helmut Thielicke's (1983: 44) words, the death of a patient – *this* patient, *here* and *now* – is 'felt to be a personal defeat. Doctors are like attorneys who lose cases and are thus forced to face up to the limit of their own powers. No wonder that they conceal their faces and turn aside.' A lost court case does not put in question the importance and the competence of lawyers; at worst, it may cast shadow on the skills of a particular barrister. A death that has not been prevented does not undermine the authority of the medical profession. At worst it may stain the reputation of an individual doctor. But the condemnation of the individual practitioner only reinforces the authority of the art: the doctor's fault was not to use the tools and the procedures he *could use*. He is guilty precisely because the profession as a whole is capable of doing what he did not do, though should have done. Or in case a learned council resolves that the suspicion of neglect has been ill founded, as the proper tools and procedures are not available *at the moment* – the cause of hiding the lost war against mortality behind loudly hailed victorious frays and skirmishes with cholesterols, infections and tumours receives another powerful boost. The means have not been invented *yet*; the equipment has not been developed, the vaccine

has not been discovered, the technique has not been tested. But they will, given time and money. Conquest of no disease is *in principle* impossible. Did you say that another disease will threaten life once this one here and now has been conquered? Well, we will cross that bridge when we come to it. Let us concentrate on the task at hand, on this trouble here and now. This we *can* do; and this we will go on doing.

From a hangman, death has been turned into a prison guard. The horror of mortality has been sliced into thin rashers of fearful, yet curable (or potentially curable) afflictions; they can be now fit neatly into every nook and cranny of life. Death does not come now at the end of life: it is there from the start, in a position of constant surveillance, never relaxing its vigil. Death is watching when we work, when we eat, when we love, when we rest. Through its many deputies, death presides over life. Fighting death is meaningless. But fighting the *causes* of dying turns into the meaning of life.

This is a most radical reversal of Epicurus's reasoning, calculated to avert the terror of death: so long as we exist, death is not present, and when death is present, we do not exist: therefore, death affects neither the dead nor the living . . . Death is present, in the countless little daily prescriptions and prohibitions, that not for a moment allow one to forget. Commenting on Pascal's reminder that death that comes unexpected is less terrifying than the *thought of death* when one is not in danger, Thielicke (1983: 5) writes that the most terrible thing about death is 'death as *thought*: in the thought that lies like a shadow over the whole of life and impresses upon it the stamp of a being for death'.

Life as Survival

Norbert Elias (1985: 23) noted 'a peculiar embarrassment felt by the living in the presence of dying people. They often do not know what to say. The range of words available for use in this situation is relatively narrow.' Elias added a comment: 'Feelings of embarrassment hold words back.' Civilization lifted the threshold of shame; we do not discuss cruel and gory matters, we hide in closets things we once did in public, we abhor the flashes of realities the civilizing process proclaimed non-existent or at least unspeakable. Death is just one of these things that have been suppressed; hence the embarrassment that makes us numb.

Though Elias's description of our curious ineptitude in the face

of death is unquestionably correct, his interpretation seems less so. In our times we do not lack words to talk about ostensibly the most intimate and private – bodily, physiological – functions. Two of them – one referring to sexual activity, another to an excretive function – have made a truly spectacular career in the languages of literature, film and their daily replicas, and came to serve the expression of the widest possible gamut of emotions, from the rudest to the most sublime. We use them profusely in speech, unhampered by embarrassment. We use them gladly and with relish. We actively seek the sights which those words evoke, and are prepared to pay a lot for the pleasure: *The Fly* has been a runaway box-office success, *The Texas Chain-Saw Massacre* a best-selling video for family use, *The Living Dead* stay firmly among the most popular film characters, while Tom and Jerry keep smashing and maiming each other, to the delight of successive generations of children. And yet we do not know what to tell the dying. Here, our vocabulary (or is it our imagination? our thinking power?) fails us. There must be something special about death that is responsible.

It is not delicacy of manners that deprives us of speech, but the simple fact that, indeed, we have nothing to say to a person who has no use for the language of survival; a person who is about to leave the world of busy pretence that that language conjures up and sustains. Once death stopped being the *entry* it once was and was reduced to an *exit* pure and simple; once it stopped being a stage in the forward march of mankind and came to be a thoroughly private ending of that thoroughly private affair called life – it also lost all meaning that could be expressed in a vocabulary geared, after all, to its collective and public denial. True, death reduced to a series of cases each with an individual cause of its own is ubiquitously present in the business of life; it spurs life efforts, it saturates the struggle for survival. By the same token, however, it loses its identity; it exists only in its denial. We may offer to the dying only the language of survival; the one language for which they have no use. Fear of death is the mainspring of culture – but culture is an effort to make death invisible and unspeakable.

There would be probably no culture were humans unaware of their mortality; but culture is an elaborate counter-mnemotechnic device to forget what they are aware of. Culture would be useless if not for the devouring need to forget; there would be no transcending were there nothing to be transcended. In the City of the Immortals, Jorge Luis Borges tells us,

> a hundred or so irregular niches . . . furrowed the mountain and the valley. In the sand there were shallow pits; from these miserable holes (and from the niches) naked, grey-skinned, scraggly bearded men emerged. I thought I recognized them: they belonged to the bestial breed of the troglodytes . . . (1970: 138)

The troglodytes knew not the art of writing; neither would they speak. Only after prolonged (and vain) effort to usher a troglodyte into the mysteries of human language did the visitor discover that his reluctant disciple was Homer; Homer who has been admitted to the City of the Immortals and come to know that he would never die. Once he learned of his immortality, it became clear to him that 'if we postulate an infinite period of time, with infinite circumstances and changes, the impossible thing is not to compose the *Odyssey*, at least once' (1970: 145). Thus the composition of the *Odyssey* that *cannot not be* loses its lustre; the composition is no longer a unique event, and thus not an act of heroism; it is useless as a vehicle of self-assertion.

> Everything among the mortals has the value of the irretrievable and the perilous. Among the Immortals, on the other hand, every act (and every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past, with no visible beginning, or the faithful passage of others that in the future will repeat it to a vertiginous degree . . . Nothing can happen only once, nothing is preciously precarious. (1970: 146)[3]

Let us observe that the Immortals conjured up by Borges all had a mortal past; they came to disdain struggle for the unique because they *ceased* to be mortals who made such a struggle into the content of life. Borges's Immortals construed themselves out of the *negation* of mortality. Even their contempt for all act and thought that cannot be unique was a tribute to their mortal past. They would not grasp it on their own, were they unaware of the possibility of mortality, were they Immortals (and aware of being immortal) 'from the beginning' (would there be a beginning then?). Whatever content the visitor found in their existence, came from the forgetting, invalidating or rejection of the substance moulded of the past fear of mortality; they derived their substance from that other one which they had left behind (and which could be spoken about only negatively, in terms of 'no more', 'is not', 'does not have') . . . The understanding that circumstances and changes are infinite and therefore *worthless* could appear only in so far as one

remembered that the circumstances and changes were once finite and thereby *precious*; if one knew the value that was once born of finitude.

The genuine immortals would not be aware that they are *not mortal*; for this very reason they elude our imagination; their experience (if there was an experience) could not be narrated in our language. As to the human mortals, they are aware that they are *not immortal*; this is what gives measure to time, makes every moment both fearful and precious, makes being into action and existence into a purpose and a task. Inescapably, as Elias Canetti wrote (1973: 290), man is a *survivor*: 'the most elementary and obvious form of success is to remain alive'. We are not just alive; at every moment we are *still* alive. Success is always until further notice; it is never final. It must be repeated over and over again, the effort can never grind to a halt. Survival is a life-long task. Its creative potential in never exhausted. It is just locked up, in one fell swoop, at the moment of death.

Canetti insists that survival is not identical with the old and trivial notion of 'self-preservation'. The idea of self-preservation, sometimes discussed as an instinct, sometimes as a rational choice, hides or beautifies the gruesome truth of survival. Survival is targeted on others, not on the self. We never live through our own death; but we do live through the deaths of the others, and their death gives meaning to our success: we are *still* alive. Thus 'the desire for a long life which plays such a large part in most cultures really means that most people want to survive their contemporaries. They know that many die early and they want a different fate for themselves' (1973: 291). I would not conceive of my own performance as a success if not for the fact that performances of others proved unsuccessful; I can only measure my own performance against those other performances. I want to know what should I do to *outlive* others. I eagerly refrain from smoking once I believe that others who smoke develop certain terminal diseases.

Because this is how I plan my survival and measure its success, I may forget that the ultimate meaning of my staving off the danger of dying of cause A is the increase in probability that my death, when it comes, will be described as caused by B, C . . . Z. 'I do not want to die' always translates, in its pragmatic conclusions, into 'I would rather die of that than this'. As the 'that' cannot be exhausted, the truth of the translation must not be admitted into consciousness, and this requires that survival effort scores ever

new successes. Survival needs constant reassurance; and the only convincing reassurance is the death of others: *not me*. Hence, Canetti insists, the sinister potential of survival which is glossed over in the tamed and castrated notion of 'self-preservation'. What the latter notion belies is the fact that *personal* achievement of self-preservation can be perceived as such (and hence inspire human effort) only if grasped in terms of a *social* relation of survival.

At the radical extreme of survival, says Canetti, looms murder: 'He wants to kill so that he can survive others; he wants to stay alive so as not to have others surviving him.' This wish can be suppressed, but it cannot be conjured away: 'Only survival at a distance in time is wholly innocent' (Canetti, 1973: 293, 292)[4]. Survival is never wholly innocent when reforged into action; blatantly so when, adorned in lofty ideals of fighting evil empires or disarming the enemies of mankind, be they carriers of disease or spoilers of harmonious order, it shapes itself up as war, crusade or genocide. The survivor's 'most fantastic triumphs have taken place in our own time, among people who set great store by the idea of humanity . . . The survivor is mankind's worst evil, its curse and perhaps its doom' (Canetti, 1973: 544).[5]

This is a dramatic, tragic vision of the inner tendency of survival. One wonders to what extent this tendency is truly *inner* (or innate); one is entitled to suspect that the destructive edge of survival is sharpened (and even more probably directed) by the socially organized setting in which the activity of survival takes place. It is this setting that may (or may not) arrange survival as a zero-sum game, and then split the habitat into a part that is threatening and has to be subdued or better still annihilated, and another part whose well-being enhances the chance of my own survival; this is what most societies have been doing all along, and continue to do. Like other in-built qualities of the human predicament, the impulse to survival is the stuff of which societies are patched together. This impulse has been neither created by society nor fought against. It is, rather, manipulated; *socially managed* in a way that, for one reason or another, is deemed useful. It is deployed to build and preserve boundaries. It is invoked, explicitly or tacitly, whenever hostility is to be directed, but also whenever loyalty to the cause and group solidarity are called for. It is not just, and not necessarily, destructive in its application. Or, rather, it can be put effectively to non-destructive uses precisely because of its destructive potential.

One such use can be traced back to what Norman O. Brown

(1959: 118ff)[6] dubbed the *Oedipal Project*: 'The project of becoming God – in Spinoza's terms, *causa sui*'. The oedipal project is a flight from infantile dependency, a wish to become 'the father of himself'. This stage in development always arrives, and once it arrives is invariably directed against the parents, the true embodiment of dependency – and this whatever the parents do and however they behave. The oedipal project is a drive to emancipation that cannot be achieved unless the bond of dependency is broken. However, the deepest, the ultimate dependency is that on one's own mortal body and for this reason the battle cannot be won. The oedipal project is just the first trial skirmish in a long series of battles doomed to defeat. The *causa sui* project remains unfulfilled, and as long as it is unfulfilled it feeds the need for ever new battles. It also needs ever new battlefields and war strategies, so that the struggle may continue while each successive engagement is lost. The tragic paradox is that the undeclared purpose of the struggle is gaining exclusive mastery over one's own body (and thus, by proxy, surviving its unsurvivable mortality: the dream of survival constitutes the body as its most potent target, as the body is the mortal side of the self, and – with its procreative function – is also the instrument through which individual immortality is expropriated by the species), but it is always the socially set framework of dependence that injects meaning into the experience of 'lack of mastery'. The battlefields are socially determined: hence also the war strategies, like the battlefields, cannot but transcend individuality of the 'incipient God'. It is on this interface that the survival needs of the developing individual meet and merge with the self-perpetuating processes of sociality: the survival-inspired *causa sui* projects are bound to remain forever unfulfilled, and because of their endemic inconclusiveness the continuation of sociality is assured. The drive to individual survival paves the way to the survival of human collectivity.

Or at least it can, in principle. Harmony is not preordained. It is always a social achievement. Survival is, potentially, as anti-social as pro-social; left unattended it may break the chain of sociality which, under different circumstances, it holds together. It can be put to socially destructive as much as to socially creative uses. More often than not, it is put to uses that are both destructive and constructive. As it is doomed and cannot but be doomed from the start, none of the possible uses can be foolproof from either the collective or individual point of view.

Which way survival will turn, depends on the *policy* of survival. Individual survival is (if at all) tamed and manipulated socially through socially administered policies. Policies deemed useful to the perpetuation of structure-spawning sociality tend to be institutionalized; policies seen as harmful tend to be crusaded against, marginalized or – if possible – suppressed altogether. Any social setting favours the selection of some policies and renders other policies unattractive or unrealistic.

Policies of Survival

To be pursued for any length of time more than purely idiosyncratically and quixotically, each policy of survival must meet one condition: it has to channel the horror of death (and thus to organize the individual's concern with survival) in such a way as to dovetail the resulting practice with the mechanism of social reproduction. In other words, it needs to harmonize individual self-constitution with the constitution of society (or, more generally, with the continuing flow of sociality). Several policies that meet this condition will be named and briefly discussed below.

1. *God*. Endemic lack of control over one's own mortality is reflected as inscrutability of Divine providence. But the latter comes together with the possibility of survival through the transcendence of the limitations imposed by the body. This policy of survival tends to downgrade the body; through mortification and neglect of bodily needs, as well as through construing bodily functions as inferior, shameful or sinful, the concern with prolongation of bodily existence is partly defused. The point of gravity in survival shifts, realistically, to the areas over which individuals do have control (or at least can realistically hope to gain it): to thoughts and deeds. It is through thoughts and deeds that transcendence, true immortality, may be achieved. The positive outcome is guaranteed; but the guarantee is valid only in so far as the required deeds are performed and prescribed thoughts are thought. This could be what Dostoievsky had in mind when he wrote that 'making man responsible, Christianity *eo ipso* recognizes his freedom' (Dostoievsky, 1979: 13).[7] The energy generated by the thrust to survival is put to a socially harmless – even socially profitable – use, while the dread of mortality is alleviated; man can really 'do something about it'. It does matter what he does and how he thinks. The choice of mode of life is relevant to survival, but this relevance hangs on trust in God. Only apparently such trust (which

must be complete and unreserved) implies a complete abandonment of individuality to the will of the all-powerful Other, God. In fact it offers a sought after package deal: individualizing consequences of survival concerns (through the dependence of survival on how the individual acts), together with the supra-individual guarantees of the means the individual is advised to deploy for the purpose.

These guarantees have the additional advantage of being immune to test – their ultimate proof is securely located beyond human experience. However harsh may be the trials induced by the action on which the guarantees are conditional, the guarantees themselves are never tried: an abstract entity, God, is not accessible to censure. His performance is not subject to empirical test, and trust in God is not conditional on anything that may be gleaned from human experience. God's power need not justify itself through practical performance and is therefore totally obedient to human fantasy; as such, it is a secure place to invest the dream of survival; the wisdom of the investment stands little chance of disavowal. As no other supra-individual safeguard against mortality, the succour that God offers depends solely on the strength and intensity of trust; and solely when invested in God can the trust really afford to be unconditional. No other policies of survival can match this achievement.

2. *Common Cause.* With the appearance of powers bent on the substitution of a designed, artificial order for the natural one and thereby opening the extant reality to questioning, the 'trust in God' policy of survival cannot but lose the very advantage that made it so strikingly effective: its other-worldly anchorage. God is now called to legitimize himself in performance open to critical scrutiny and empirical test. It is now the well-being of the body that is at stake, which the secular powers promise to improve; on this battlefield God stands little chance. The wisdom of providence is sorely tested, and the very assumption of its immortal solidity that formed so reliable a foundation for the resilience of other-worldly fantasy becomes now its major handicap. Secular powers, on the contrary, dwell on the non-finality of the human predicament: the human plight can be improved, and thus the sufferings of today do not undermine, in principle, their ability to promote happiness – they only supply motive for further action, more hope and more trust. In a sense, the very unsafisfactoriness of the present supplies the proof that life may be made more gratifying.

Like all remaining policies of survival and unlike the religious

one, this one appeals to reason: resourceful powers may implement a reason-dictated, rational order on earth that will make human fate more palatable. Trust has now a mundane, this-worldly anchorage. It is to be located in collective designs that offer in exchange a guarantee of the propriety of the individual solution to the problem of survival. If it cannot defy individual death, it may (or at least aims to) invest individual life with meaning which renders bodily death as irrelevant as it was when the divinely guaranteed spiritual immortality was trusted. This is a *common cause* policy of survival.

Nationalism, the cause of the classless society and the cause of the racially pure society are the most potent examples of common-cause survival policies. Their potency derives from the presence of resourceful powers able and willing to contemplate the introduction and management of a *total order*; truly effective policies of survival can be only totalistic ideologies, offering a radical, global and permanent solution to the contradiction between the transience of bodily existence and the limitlessness of spiritual transcendence. For this reason, other – mostly single-issue – common-cause policies are wan and ineffective by comparison, however hard they try to emulate their achievement.

Like the religious one, the common-cause policy of survival (the more so the more totalistic it is) is bound to play down the importance of bodily death; but unlike the religious policy, it embroils itself in an unresolvable and ultimately lethal contradiction, since its declared end (and its sole claim to trust) is this-worldly happiness. Like the religious one, the common-cause policy promises immortality; but this immortality is vested in causes and collectivities, not individuals. It therefore invites individual rebellion, which tends to grow with the realization that the promise of a paradise which one would never enter anyway is a poor compensation for the sufferings that are required on the road to paradise with relentless regularity.

Common-cause policies of survival are vulnerable also for another reason. Their carriers and embodiments, the leaders, are visible, or at least cannot be made completely invisible; so are their deeds and the effects of their deeds; so is their lifestyle. They may be judged by what they deliver. They may also be judged by the degree to which they live their ideology. And they are so judged – seldom passing the test in every respect and for the duration of time. They may try to escape judgement, emulating the

lofty withdrawal of God from the world; they may surround themselves by heavily armed guards and a wall of secrecy. Thanks to such expedients, they may hide for a time the fact of being mortal, bodily creatures, and not matching the immortality of the cause they preach. As, however, the cause they preach is anchored in this-worldly order, their prolonged absence weakens the cause and in the long run is unthinkable. Unlike God, they must be practically engaged with earthly matters. Each drawback in the latter is therefore interpreted as the case of their misjudgement, each error rebounds as a proof of mismanagement and sediments as a record of unreliability. Trust is vulnerable and needs constant refuelling. Ideological leaders need ever new proofs of credibility and trustworthiness; their performance stands for the viability of the recipe for immortality which legitimizes their claim to obedience. The survival value of the recipe requires their own survival. This need prods them toward the posture of Canetti's *radical survivors*. Not only must they stay alive as leaders, they must *outlive* their rivals (in fact, everyone likely to outlive them is a rival). This is why ideological leaders tend to turn into despots or dictators. Or, rather, only such among them as turn into despots or dictators stand a chance of going down in history as effective ideological leaders.

3. *Love*. According to Otto Rank (1932: 232), the modern person's dependency on the love partner 'is the result of the loss of spiritual ideologies'. Bereaved by God and His secular emulators, the modern person 'needs *somebody*, some "individual ideology of justification", to replace the declining collective ideologies'. Love takes over at the point where God and the Despot-with-a-Mission left off. Not that love is born of modern bereavement. But it is the modern predicament, one which emerged in the wake of the bankruptcy of tested old policies of survival, that has burdened love with new load which it was never before called on to carry.

It is now the partner in love who is expected to offer the space for transcendence, *to be* transcendence. He or she must be a mirror in which my fantasy looks real; my fantasy is to become real by the very fact of being reflected. My own self, confined as it is by the mortality of its own bodily carapace, is to acquire a vicarious immortality by sundering its private bond and being set free. It has to gain a new, unbound and more credible existence within the trans-individual 'universe of two'. I may dream that in the process the mortality of the self is defeated by the sheer feat of abandoning the hopelessly mortal individual body. But the new anchorage of

survival is another body and another self, entangled much as my own in the mutual conflict from which only subterfuges pretend to offer an exit. Itself afloat, it can hardly hold the anchor fast enough.

'We want an object that reflects a truly ideal image of ourselves. But no human object can do this . . . No human relationship can bear the burden of godhood', thus Ernest Becker (1973: 166) sums up the fate of modern love. Hence what only superficially may seem to be a paradox: just when the functional importance of love has risen to unprecedented heights, its carrying capacity seems to have drastically fallen. The heightened expectations have multiplied the likelihood of failure. Defeats do not necessarily expose the lie ensconced at the bottom of the love strategy. They only gestate – in the partners – impatience and restlessness, the breathless search for the 'true partner' who must, just must, be waiting round the corner; for the 'universes of two' they result in endemic brittleness – the couples break at the first hurdle, as the partners prefer a new, as yet unexplored track to the chores of negotiating the already revealed obstacles of the old one.

Terminal dangers surround the love relationship on both sides. My bid for the confirmation of the self may be rejected or accepted with reservations to which I am not prepared to consent. But even if my bid has been assented to in full, the acceptance may fail to bring the expected satisfaction. It may not carry the degree of reassurance I sought. After all, my stakes in immortality have been invested in another mortal creature, and this brute fact cannot be concealed for long by even the most passionate deification of the partner. Unlike God or an anointed despot, my partner in love has the distinct disadvantage of being constantly within the field of my vision, of being watched by me at close quarters also in situations which make salient the truth of his or her bodily mortality. The despot fails as an object of survival policy once he publicly reveals the absence of supra-human potency by losing a battle; for a partner in love, it is enough to be human in humanity's endemic, irreparable duality. And it is precisely the partner's humanity that makes him or her fit to be an object of love; it therefore cannot but be drawn into love relationship.

These inner contradictions of love as a policy of survival are nowhere as prominent as in the case of an erotic relationship, where spiritual and sexual intimacy feed and reinforce each other (or are presumed to do so). In its natural function, sexual procreation is a method through which the species preserves its immortality at

the expense of the mortality of its individual members; for this very reason it is singularly unfit for the role the policy of survival of the individual would wish it to play once it picks on the sexual union as the vehicle in which to escape death. Sexual intimacy cannot bear such exaggerated hopes; in modern practice the disappointment leads to the discrediting of the spiritual aspect of sex in its totality and the pronounced tendency to divest sexual intercourse of the last vestiges of spiritual union. No longer are the absolute and the transcendent sought in the sexual partner; what is expected from the partner is, at best, a willingness and ability to arouse and stimulate the 'perfect performance' – and thus reconfirm the value of the self in a roundabout fashion, by allowing it to stretch to the 'genuine', or fantasized about, limits (which, in *fantasy*, always means transcending the *genuine* limits).

4. *Self-care*. The survival policies have been surveyed so far in such an order as to expose the gradual shrinking of the space in which the thrust to immortality is vested. A policy falling upon itself, aiming back at its point of emergence, is a logical next step. This possibility has been already revealed in the effects of dashed sexual hopes: the sexual prowess of the Ego moving into the centre of expectation, with sexual intimacy with the Alter reduced to the role of an occasion for its release and display.

But the weight ascribed to the display of sexual prowess can be seen also from another perspective: in its case, the centre of gravity moves from transcendence as an achieved (and once achieved, constant) state, to the transcendence as a momentary event, as a performance. When seen in such a way, our example appears to be a specimen of a new type of survival policy; one that differs sharply from the policies considered so far, and which (perhaps due to this difference) shows an amazing capacity for expansion. What is involved here is an attempt to belie the ultimate limits of the body by breaking, successively, its *currently* encountered, *specific* limitations (this could be done personally as well as vicariously; here lies the secret of the fascination with the record-breaking performance of sportspersons, experienced as acts committed on behalf of the species as a whole). By the same token, the impossible task of escaping the mortality of the body is never allowed to be encountered in its awesome totality, as it is split into a never-ending series of concrete challenges, reduced to a manageable, and hence realistic, size. The time dimension of transcendence is turning here into a spatial issue: stretching the *span of life* is turned into the

effort to stretch the *capacity to live*. Time all but disappears: it has been reduced and flattened out of existence, subjected to a process that 'narrows the present down to a chaos of evanescent events' (Redner, 1982: 280). What matters amidst such chaos, is the only stable point of reference, *the body*, living permanently the current moment; not what the body is bent on accomplishing in the future, but 'bodily fitness', body as multi-purpose instrument, ready for all challenges yet indifferent to the nature of any task it may confront.

Eschatology is dissolved in technology. It is 'how to do it', not 'what to do', on which the survival concerns focus; not what is to be done, but 'how well' it has been done, is the measure of each episode into which the struggle for survival now splits. The transcendence of mortality has been replaced with the mind-and-energy consuming task of transcending the technical capacity for living. This is a triumph of life-size instrumentality over the metaphysical purpose inscribed in eternity; the triumph of event over time, the livable present over future death. The future has been abolished, evicted from the field of vision. It has been replaced by Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*, the non-flowing time, time without continuation or consequence, a continuous present.

The worry about immortality can now all but be forgotten in the daily bustle about *health*. Mortality generates *Angst*, disease is pregnant only with *anxiety*. Illness can be conquered, and so anxiety (unlike the *Angst*) does not paralyse, but spurs into action. If immortality cannot be made into a realistic goal, health can. There are so many things and deeds one should avoid to protect health. Avoiding them is a time-consuming labour: consumption of time that would otherwise be shot through with metaphysical dread is the most gratifying aspect of health anxiety. One does not need to stand idle; one can do something about death: not about death in general, true, but about this and that cause of death, here and now. We are mindful of the doctor's remonstrations: let us concentrate on this trouble here and now; we will cross that other bridge when we come to it. We hear and read that even 'the longest-living men' whose major title to fame was longevity (not to mention the 'ordinary' very old) die finally of kidney disease or liver trouble or pneumonia; no one seems to die because of human mortality. A paradoxical reflection of such thinking is a belief, promoted by the medical profession and ossified into 'objective fact' through statistics, that 'death from natural causes alone is diminishing. There is an even

more telling trend because many deaths from disease often have human intentionality – conscious and unconscious – as part of the cause' (Vaux, 1978: 62–3). 'Natural death' seems today suspicious; 'unexplained death' is a challenge to a world-view that no longer recognizes – not publicly, not loudly – the universality and inescapability of death, and splits mortality into a multitude of individual occurrences, each with its own cause, each with a principally defeatable cause, each essentially 'preventable'.

However thorough and prolonged the succour this policy of survival may bring, it has its own drawbacks. One may forget that the most a victory may bring is a temporary lull in enemy action, not final victory. But one is not allowed to enjoy the respite for long. Death is a momentary event, but defence of health and vigilance against its enemies is a life-long labour. Death comes at the end of life, defence of health fills the whole of it. The price for exchanging immortality for health is life lived in the shadow of death; to postpone death, one needs to surrender life to fighting it.

The self-care policy of survival construes death as an individual event, as an occurrence brought about by a particular cause, a cause which could be absent or could be avoided – as *contingency*. Each death is different; each death is individual; each death is a private experience; each death is lonely.[8] And so is life, once colonized by this kind of death: individual, different, unshared, lonely. If my death is cause by something I have done, or something I could prevent from happening, or my inaction or neglect, survival is reconfirmed as my private matter and private responsibility. The more consistently I deploy my strategy of survival, the more I am left alone. Loneliness is frightening and unbearable, because of my uncertainty as to how adequate are the weapons I deploy to fight off the threats to my body. The know-how as to what weapons to select, and the weapons themselves, I can obtain only from others – from those who control the access to weapons and possess the knowledge of how to use them. Being alone makes me dependent on others. It opens me up to others, but in a particular way, leaving a profound imprint on the shape of ensuing sociality. I need the others as purveyors of guaranteed means of private survival; as people whose authority I can trust so as to cede the responsibility for my choice and allay suspicions as to its propriety. Failing that, I need the others as means to re-collectivize my privatized fears. I need the others to lose private uncertainty in a shared audacity

and temerity of numbers. And so I need the *experts*. And I need the *tribes*.

The Habitat of Survival

None of the policies of survival has been found faultless; none can be foolproof. What is more, the search for a foolproof (pragmatically reasonable or logically rational) policy of survival is itself a ruse – a conspiracy of silence about the ultimate futility of effort, to bury the truth that the ostensible purpose of the search cannot be reached (to put this Pascal's way, madness may be only replaced with another madness; to express this in Freudian terms, a cure for neurosis is another neurosis). The search is bound to remain inconclusive, and it is precisely for this reason that it is bound to go on. Policies of survival are, after all, more or less ingenious subterfuges designed to permit a life with the awareness of death – and such subterfuges, to be even moderately effective, need to rest their authority on false pretences, to pretend not to be what they are. In order to make life in the shadow of mortality livable (which they can do), they must lie that they allow us to conquer mortality (a promise on which they cannot deliver). They are ultimately frustrating; yet the disappointment comes after their work has been done.

Thus the effectiveness of the policies of survival is never total. But it may be greater or smaller, depending on the availability of resources which the pursuit of a given policy demands; ultimately, on the degree of 'fit', on co-ordination between a given policy of survival and the habitat inside which is has to be pursued. Habitat does not 'determine' the choice of policies; but it does render some policies more *realistic* (and thus more credible, more trustworthy, more likely to be chosen) than others.

Our present, *postmodern* habitat seems to be particularly hospitable to the policy of self-care. It thoroughly privatizes responsibility for the business of life: it stoutly refuses all preordained assignment to life-models, and instead construes life as a process of self-constitution. It also purveys supra-individually based certainty (or supra-individual tranquillizers to subdue the pangs of uncertainty) in both sought-after varieties – of expertise and of tribal symbols – thus making it possible to live with the always haunting and potentially devastating consequences of privatization.

Between the survival policy of self-care and the way knowledge production and knowledge distribution have been institutionalized in modern society, there is a remarkable degree of correspondence

and mutual adjustment. The production of knowledge follows the principle of partition: dissembly of issues into smaller particles – small enough to be conceived of as mechanical entities (that is, such entities that warrant linking together causal explanation, prediction and control). Thanks to such a principle of institutionalization, knowledge in modern society is *practical* – understanding is subordinate to, and generative of, managerial capacity. For the same reason knowledge is intimately associated with power. Production of knowledge is conditional on the power to divide and separate. Once obtained, knowledge feeds into power to manage and control. For the same reason again, there can be no knowledge (that is, institutionalized and legitimized knowledge) of totality other than a collection of partial knowledges concerned with the 'constitutive parts' (read: products of dissembly) of the totality. There is no knowledge of life, but only of life processes; the more minute the processes, the fuller the knowledge.

The distribution of knowledge is predetermined by the conditions of its production. Knowledge is available not as illumination, but as issue-bound instruction. Partial knowledge belongs to partial specialists; it is always the property of experts, who administer its apportionment. *Collectively*, the experts articulate the experience of prospective knowledge-recipients as an aggregate of manageable (and manageable *singly*) problems, thereby assuring the homomorphy of experience with the pattern of knowledge production and knowledge ownership.[9] Translation of experiential intuition into problems recognized as legitimate objects of knowledge and thus amenable to expert management is a two-way process. It invites active interpretation of knowledge by its prospective beneficiary; but it is conducted under the supervision of the experts, who retain the final say in the matter of the adequacy of translation.

The experts do not speak *sotto voce*, though. Faced with the need to establish the attraction of their products,[10] spokesmen and practitioners of various fields of expertise have willy-nilly to engage in a competitive struggle, even if their products satisfy ostensibly non-exclusive needs and serve the solution of non-related problems. What they compete for is public *attention*. Experts' authority is conditional on the public recognition of the relative importance of the field they operate for the practiced mode of survival. Experts must therefore *alert* the prospective clients to the fact that what their knowledge and knowledge-products service has prime survival value. This can be done by arousing heretofore non-experienced

fears: an element of daily life (preferably an element widely used or affecting a large population) is brought into relief and *problematized* as an object fit for special attention: revealed as harmful, poisonous or otherwise deleterious to the purpose of individual well-being, unless scrupulously and expertly controlled or reprocessed according to expert advice. Often addressed is the already deeply entrenched fear of inadequacy: the prospective beneficiaries of expert services are told that by abstaining from using the given advice or product they do a disservice to themselves; when neglecting experts' suggestions, they are bound to perform incompetently and thus less efficiently. 'Fear campaigns' may promote specific products of expert knowledge; even greater is however their summary impact, the promotion and sedimentation of the 'cult of specialists' – the generalized, diffuse feelings of helplessness and incompetence which demand permanent assistance of 'people in the know'. The value of expert services is built on the clients' *trust*; yet the prospective clients must first be primed by a demonstration of their individual inability to define their problems and deal with them adequately. The authority of the experts has its counterpart in the self-deprecation and low self-esteem of the non-specialists, and by proxy of non-specialism (dilettantism, common sense) as such. The fear campaign attains victory through the humiliation of its targets: successive chunks of lay knowledge and know-how are redefined as instances of ignorance and obscurantism.

Though from the collective rule of the experts (dependence of all chosen modes of survival, and of the choice itself, on expert services) there is no escape (even a protest against experts' mismanagement ends up as a call for more expert services, having been first brought into being by expert-supplied redefinition of past services), the principle of privatization of survival is in no way undermined. Neither is the perception of it as a freedom of choice being sapped; after all, submission to expert rule is always mediated by the decision of individuals pursuing their respective policies of survival. The experts cannot promote and defend their authority otherwise as appealing to the clients' autonomy and right to choose. They have to justify their collective rule as service: in terms of clients' private concerns with individual survival. The subtle interaction between the expert management of the habitat of survival and the autonomy of the individual survivors has been enticingly described by Michel de Certeau (1984: xviii):

> As unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce through their signifying practices something that might be considered similar to the 'erratic lines' ('lignes d'erre') drawn by autistic children . . . 'indirect' or 'errant' trajectories obeying their own logic. In the technocratically constructed, written, and functionalized space in which the consumers move about, their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space. Although they are composed with the vocabularies of established languages (those of television, newspapers, supermarkets, or museum sequences) and although they remain subordinated to the prescribed syntanctical forms (temporal modes of schedules, paradigmatic orders of spaces, etc.), the trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop. (Translation slightly amended by Z.B.)

Indeed, de Certeau's choice of the metaphor is apt. The relationship of dependence and autonomy is not unlike that of the grammar and vocabulary of language and formed sentences of speech: the latter are in no way 'determined' by the former and move freely within the frame it provides. From the vantage point of the experts, habitat is a territory of intended colonization and regulation; when, however, the relevancies are motivated by survival concerns, the same habitat appears as a space filled with unattached signifiers, a space 'of endless replacement, supercession, drift and play' (Hebdige, 1988: 71),[11] a space awaiting attribution of meaning: the act through which the presence of the individual, and the validity of his or her survival plan, can be confirmed and re-asserted.

A similar dialectics of dependence and choice applies to another constitutive feature of the postmodern habitat: the *tribes*, Michel Maffesoli suggested the concept of *neo-tribalism* to distinguish the contemporary variant of tribal life from the 'classical' notion of tribalism as codified by ethnographers. Neo-tribes are marked by their fluidity: the 'tribes' are both locally assembled and scattered. They are *momentary condensations* in the ever flowing stream of seductive choices. Tribes are incurably fragile, yet at every moment command tremendous emotional investment. Their 'substance', their materiality, is but that investment. And more often than not donning a motley dress or bizarre and multi-coloured hair-style is all there is to the act of joining the tribe. Hence the 'tragic superficiality' of tribe-forming *sociality* as distinct from the 'dramatic authenticity' of the social. Even if this tribe or another happens to declare an objective, a purpose – 'this is not essential; what is

important is the energy expended on the formation of the group as such'. An inner organization, centre of authority, platform, statutes are all superfluous, as are the declared aims of a neo-tribe. Tribes, Maffesoli (1988: 98–9, 123) suggests, are their own purposes. They are no more, yet no less either, than momentary condensations of the incessant urge of sociality.

Where I differ from Maffesoli is in his placement of neo-tribalism in the context of the alleged 'mass-society' tendency; in his all too frequent references to the Dionysian roots of the 'join the tribe' urge; and in the resulting message of the unambiguously anti-individualistic impact of the neo-tribal phenomenon. I propose instead that – much as in the case of technology and expertise – the variegated, chequered and fluctuating tribal scene is engaged with the privatized individual in a subtle dialectical game of dependence and freedom. Tribes are simultaneously refuges for those trying in vain to escape the loneliness of privatized survival, and the stuff from which private policies of survival, and thus the identity of the survivor, are self-assembled. The tribe-forming and dismantling sociality is not a symptom of declining individuality, but a most powerful factor in its perpetuation. Neo-tribes are fickle, ephemeral and elusive products of life under conditions of privatized survival; but neo-tribalism, as a feature of the habitat, is a necessary and stable condition of 'realism' of the survival policies that respond to such privatization.

Neo-tribalism is an indispensable complement of a habitat in which private survivals are serviced by the variegated and often contradictory advice of the experts. The sum total of problems spawned by the finely dissected and inherently fissiparous network of expertise exceeds the absorptive capacity of individual attention. The choice, however, is a daunting task, as the hierarchies of relevance suggested by the experts servicing different problem areas are hardly ever compatible. It is in this difficult yet indispensable matter of choice that tribes perform a crucial function, as they sanction global *lifestyles*, each offering its own structure of relevances. One can say that the role of neo-tribes consists in selecting a number of disparate and scattered, partial 'problems of survival', and assembling the samples into comprehensive and relatively cohesive life-models. For the individual, joining a tribe means adopting a peculiar lifestyle; or, rather, the road to a coherent lifestyle leads through the adoption of tribally sanctioned structure of relevances complete with a kit of totemic symbols.

Hence the reproduction of tribes and of individual survival formulae are intimately inter-related; they are, so to speak, two sides of the same social process. The non-obligatory, non-coercive character of tribal 'membership' (one can hardly speak of membership, as it were, considering the absence of tribal executive powers, the rudimentary nature of formalization and almost complete lack of control over the individual adherents' decisions to 'join' or to 'leave' and move to another tribe) squares well with the status of survival as a private task and responsibility.

Survival as a Stratifying Factor

Unlike self-preservation, survival – let us repeat – is a social relation (not only in its consequences, but in its very constitution as an urge and a task). What prompts survival concerns is not simply the vision of an imminent exit from the sensuous, future-binding life, saturated with hope and expectation, but the awareness that others will go on living. It is this awareness that makes one's own death humiliatingly inconsequential and, by proxy, threatens everything that precedes death, the life itself, with degradation or destruction of meaning. Survival concerns always include, therefore, the comparative aspect: immortality not being a viable option, survival means living *longer than others*. Though born of the ostensibly universal human condition, survival concerns *differentiate*: death is a descent into depersonalized nothingness, but the most horrible aspect of death as a *thought* is the fact that this nothingness is utterly private, depersonalization personal. Life in general will not grind to a halt – and it is from the imagined perspective of that continuing life that my own future nothingness (again as a social relation) can be, and is, grasped and conceived. Those about to survive me will be spectators of the impending revelation of my nothingness. It is their gaze that will constitute my nothingness. And it is in relation to them that the nothingness ought to be (if this is at all possible) denied. Were it denied, freedom of judgement of those who will live after me would be constrained; their announcement of my descent into nothingness would be prevented or at least made less credible or final – and all this because of what *I am* or what *I do*.

This makes the effort to deny descent into nothingness into a *policy of stratification*: into a stratagem aimed at making some people 'less mortal' than others. Some people would succeed in bending future judgements so that they would not deny their

survival; the rest will sink into oblivion precisely because they lack or miss the survival entitlements of the first.

People are stratified by their respective degrees of *freedom*; the ultimate meaning of a relatively superior status is always a wider range of possible choices, and the lower down a status is in social hierarchy, the less freedom their incumbents possess and the less they can be seen as genuinely 'voluntary subjects'. To be 'higher' means more freedom; to be 'lower' means more dependence. The verticality of social hierarchy is construed of comparative 'unboundedness' or 'boundedness' of choices. The universal urge to survival generates its own stratification. It could be argued as well that it underlies *all* social stratification.

The colonization of the future is bound to remain forever unpleasantly provisional and revocable; the future is, after all, the site of that uncertainty which has prompted the colonizing thrust in the first place. The denial of nothingness lacks all solidity if anchored in the future; even if addressed to future survivors and prompted by the wish to bind *their* judgements, it could derive its substantiality only from the roots struck firmly in the 'site of certainty' – the past. Paradoxically, the hope of transcending the present can be rooted only in making the past last. That hope lies behind the constant temptation to retrieve the past, never to let it out of living memory – as if to demonstrate in such a roundabout way the non-transience of things; more precisely, the non-transience of *certain* things, relevant to *certain* people. The thrust toward differential survival rebounds as a partisan retrieval of history. The struggle against the inequality of survival chances (unequal hopes to bind the future) chooses history writing and rewriting as its major battlefield. The war to colonize the imagined future is fought on the territory of imagined past.

Survival, let us repeat once more, is a social relation. Binding history may be hoped to be effective as a warrant for the binding of future only because other people cannot demonstrate the lasting visibility of their own past (better still: have no past of their own). The differentiality of survival requires a differential deprivation of history. The importance of long and carefully recorded pedigrees lies in the fact that most people cannot trace their ancestors beyond a second or a third generation; aristocracies, with their long survival record, stand out in a world populated by people without past. The existence of people with long pedigrees is deeply rooted and solidly entrenched – a fact they find easy to argue in view of the

shallow and evanescent presence of all others. For similar reasons, the splendour of old, inherited riches can be never matched by the glitter of brand new fortune; the latter exudes the pungent odour of mortality which the former can claim to have dissipated and lost during its long march through past ages.

But new fortunes may be used to rob the holders of inherited ones of the tokens of their immortality: their castles and their adornments. The adornments now carry immortality by proxy: their acquisition bestows vicarious immortality on the new owners. They are ascribed an *immortal* beauty (or is it the beauty of immortality?). And, unlike the pedigrees, they are movable – so that they can service a flexible stratification, a hierarchy with mobility: a game of musical chairs which gives everybody a chance to win a battle in which most must lose. Of the precious ore of time-defying ancestry, charms and mascots of immortality are minted – fit for marketing and available for private acquisition. Aristocracy may have lost the monopoly of immortality; but the scramble for the trappings of its past glory is a posthumous tribute to the astounding success of its formula of transcendence.

Next to the timelessness of continuous blood kinship, stands the extemporality of mind. Lifton and Olson call this the 'creative mode' of immortality:

> One may feel a sense of immortality in this mode through teaching, art-making, repairing, construction, writing, healing, inventing or through lasting influences of any kind on other human beings – influences that one feels can enter into a general human flow beyond the self. In professions like science or art that have a long heritage, one is frequently aware of the historical sources of one's work and the tradition that one's own contribution is maintaining. (Lifton and Olson, 1974: 77)

From Plato's immortal ideas to Husserl's de-historicized subjectivity, philosophers struggled to reforge the ongoing conversation of history-conscious creators into the timelessness of truth (it is not for nothing that men of intellect have been dubbed the 'aristocracy of spirit'). The discourse that spans distances impassable for the 'ordinary' men and women simultaneously separates its participants from the mortals; it sets testing conditions of entry which only the chosen (or self-chosen) few can hope to meet. It plays impeccably the role all viable survival policies are expected to play: it establishes survival as social relation, as a stratifying vehicle, as the principle of inclusion that draws its potency from its practice of exclusion.

The Postmodern Deconstruction of Immortality

None of the traditional ways of dabbling with timelessness (themselves timeless) have been abandoned under postmodern conditions. And yet they have been, so to speak, relegated to the second league of public attention, elbowed out by a new, specifically postmodern, strategy of survival. It differs from other strategies by being geared to a wide, nay universal, use. It also differs from other strategies in that it attempts to resolve the haunting issue of survival by doing its best to take it off the life agenda. Instead of trying (in vain) to colonize the future, it dissolves it in the present. It does not allow the finality of time to worry the living – by slicing time (all of it, exhaustively, without residue) into short-lived, evanescent episodes. It rehearses mortality, so to speak, by practicing it day by day. Daily life becomes a perpetual dress rehearsal for death.

What is being rehearsed in the first place, is the *ephemerality* and *evanescence* of things. As soon as they are acquired, the coveted and dreamed of possessions are discredited and devalued by 'new and improved', more prestigious versions; before they have time to enjoy their acquisitions, their owners are shamed into disliking and wishing to replace them. The urge to mobility prevents the development of strong affections for any of the places that serve as no more than temporary stations. Dramas do not outlive the pressing of a button; books last from one railway stop to another. Nothing is 'for life': skills, jobs, occupations, residences, marriage partners: they come and go, and they annoy or bore or embarrass when they stay too long. The main function of the news is to chase yesterday's news off and to be driven away by tomorrow's news. The centre of public vision is permanently overcrowded: those who make it to the centre appear from nowhere and fade into non-existence. Their short-lived, but each time intense, all-stops-pulled cults celebrate birth *ab nihilo*, the painlessness of disappearance, the wonder of evanescence, the beauty of the fleeting moment, the glory of transience. The cults proclaim longevity to be boredom and turn permanence into a word of ridicule. Today's cults make tomorrow's cults necessary: there is in operation, as Thielicke (1983:18) suggested, a 'centrifugal tendency of a continually enhanced dissipation'. Skin-deep fascinations and commitments, never given enough time or enough attention 'to stick', leave a vacuum beneath. This void must be filled 'with ever new imports from outside' (Lifton and Olson, 1974: 27). The game goes on. For all practical purposes it needs no more reinforcement from outside. It self-perpetuates.

Another rehearsed quality of things and events is their *inconsequentiality*. 'No strings attached' is the sought-after ideal and the measure of value. Events are kept strictly separate and their autonomy is closely guarded; they should not, they do not affect the events of tomorrow and the deeds committed next door. Episodes may be stopped in the middle of action, started again, watched once more in slow motion. They are what they are: episodes, occurrences with no history and no follow-up, one-off happenings. Skills acquired today are useful for today and do not secure the skills called for by tomorrow's challenges. Enjoyment does not lend itself to moral scrutiny and does not impeach moral conscience. Sex does not result in social duty; preferably, not in emotional attachment either. Life is not a novel with a plot and a denouement; it is instead a railway station bookstand filled to overflowing with the latest bestsellers.

With transience and ephemerality reforged into daily practice, glorified and ritualistically celebrated, the strategy of survival comes full circle. It is now immortality, not mortality, which is deconstructed; but deconstructed in such a way as to show that the permanent is nothing but the sequence of evanescences, that time is nothing but a succession of episodes without consequence and immortality is nothing but a simple aggregate of mortal beings. Deconstructed, immortality reveals mortality as its only secret. Mortality need not be deconstructed: it ought to be lived. Consumer bliss is the final, long solicited and expected, yet slow to come, stage of secularization. Now, truly, *everything* is in human hands. But the meaning of 'everything' has changed.

Like many other policies of survival, the postmodern strategy has a stratifying potency. The richness, volume and fast pace of the impressions in which it aims to dissolve mortality do not come to all in the same measure. They rather set apart those who can reasonably hope for free access from those who have little chance of passing the entry gate. Access and non-access are not separate conditions; they depend on each other in what is a zero sum game of freedom. 'The cruel irony of history', writes Kenneth L. Vaux, 'is that as man learns how to increase human well-being through science, the number of persons who profit from these gifts is fewer and fewer'. He also offers an insight into what may be the cause of this irony: 'Reducing deaths from sudden causes like accidents and infections necessitates endurance of more costly deaths. While sudden coronary or cerebral death may be a blessing in terms of

expense, cancer and the other degenerative disorders often devastate one's personal finances' (Vaux, 1978: 48, 43). If the plausibility of the postmodern deconstruction of immortality has been grounded in the promise of a richer and longer enjoyment of mortal life, this plausibility is unevenly distributed. It polarizes rather than unites the proposed practitioners of the new survival strategy. 'There is a tendency', writes Nicholas Garnham (1982: 289), 'towards a two-tier market structure in which choice, being increasingly expensive, is offered to upper-income groups – while an increasingly impoverished, homogenized service is offered to the rest'.[12] The offer is extended to a fairly large chunk of the population; but in every case it remains an offer to *contract out* 'from the rest' (on freedom as a social relation and stratifying factor see Bauman, 1987: Ch. 3). The condition of survival postmodern-style is refusal of solidarity. When translated into life policy, deconstruction of immortality results in deconstruction of sociality.

From the point of view of the social construction of survival (as in so many other respects) postmodernity is a two-tier habitat: deconstruction of immortality is reserved for the top layer, with the old quandary of coping with the horrors of mortality remaining the fate of the bottom tier; but this is a fate they must now bear alone, on their own, with the resources 'contracted out' together with their owners.

Notes

1. According to Becker (1973), the essential incongruity of the human predicament makes human existence irreparably *heroic*: an incessant struggle to transcend what in principle cannot be transcended. 'The fact is that this is what society is and always has been: a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules of behaviour, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism' (1973: 4). 'But the truth about the need for heroism is not easy for anyone to admit'; in most men heroics

> is disguised as they humbly and complainingly follow out the roles that society provides for their heroics and try to earn their promotions within the system: wearing the standard uniforms – but allowing themselves to stick out, but ever so little and so safely, with a little ribbon or a red boutonnière, but not with head and shoulders. (1973: 6)

Within society,

> man cuts out for himself a manageable world . . . He accepts the cultural programming that turns his nose where he is supposed to look . . . He learns

> not to expose himself, not to stand out; he learns to embed himself in other-power, both of concrete persons and of things and cultural commands; the result is that he comes to exist in the imagined infallibility of the world around him. He doesn't have to have fears when his feet are solidly mired and his life mapped out in a ready-made maze. (1973: 23)

The shared understanding of death which we owe to the string of modern philosophers and novelists from Kierkegaard through Tolstoy and Nietzsche to Sartre, has been usefully summarized by Peter Koestenbaum (1976: 7):

> Death is not an experience but either a felt anticipation or a sorrowful loss. In any event, death is an influential self-concept. And it is this certainty about our eventual death and that of all other human beings that is the key to understanding our human nature . . . Death – our own and that of others – explains what it means to be human (searching for meaning, immortality, freedom, love, and individuality) far better than psychological principles of sex and aggression, the biological instincts of survival and procreation, the utilitarian theories of happiness and approbation, or the religious ukase of God's will. *The anticipation of our death reveals to us who we are.*

2. Zilboorg, like Becker or Norman O. Brown, belongs to the branch of the psychoanalytic movement bent on correcting Freud's simplistic 'sexual reductionism' and pointing to the work of Otto Rank as its major source of inspiration.

3. The immortality of Borges's Immortals was *received* (through drinking from the river of immortality) – and they knew it. James P. Carse (1980: 9), suggests that 'death, perceived as discontinuity, is not that which robs life of its meaning, but that which makes life's meaningfulness possible'. I propose that there is a conjunction (indeed, a causal link) where Carse sees an alternative and an opposition. The perception of death makes life's meaningfulness possible – nay, unavoidable – precisely because it makes life first empty of meaning, and thus leaves it to the humans to conjure up any meaning that could fill the void.

4. It is plausible that it is precisely the suppressed presence of the true meaning of survival that adds to the already considerable difficulty we experience when addressing the dying.

5. Canetti goes on to suggest that the danger of the survivor has been if anything increasing, and reaching a totally new scale: thanks to the new technology of action and the new means the action can use,

> a single individual can easily destroy a good part of mankind. To bring this about he can use technical means he does not understand; he can himself remain completely hidden; and he does not even have to run any personal risk in the process . . . Seen in retrospect, history appears innocent and almost comfortable. (1973: 544–5)

Against the looming danger, Canetti can draw little hope from past experience: 'Hitherto the only answer to man's passionate desire for survival has been a creative solitude which earns immortality for itself; and this, by definition, can be the solution only for a few' (1973: 545). Mortality, and its obtrusive companion, survival, are the twin keys to Canetti's (1985: 280) historiosophy: 'The efforts of individuals to

ward off death gave rise to the monstrous structure of power. Countless deaths were demanded for the survival of one individual. The resulting confusion is known as history'. Indeed, for most of the time history has been written as a chronicle of survivors; as a record of the battles won by princes so that they could outlive, even if only for a time, their rivals for the survival, the hard core of all fame.

6. Brown undertook to correct Freud's concept of Oedipal *complex*, purifying it of the narrowly sexual content; or, rather, reversing the order of interpretation and representing the sexual aspects of the Oedipal crisis as derivatives, or manifestations, of an actively embraced *project*, aimed in the first place at mastery and control.

7. Dostoievsky (1979: 13) juxtaposes the religious solution to the conflict between freedom and dependency to that of the secular one, supported by modern science:

> making man dependent on any error in the social organization, the environmental doctrine reduces man to absolute impersonality, to a total emancipation from all personal moral duty, from all independence; reduces him to a state of the most miserable slavery that can be conceived.

8. Norbert Elias's (1985) 'loneliness of the dying' seems to be predictable outcome of the 'episodization' of death brought about by the self-care strategy. Rather than being a manifestation of the delicacy of civilized emotions, the sight of the dying is repulsive to our contemporaries in so far as it demonstrates the ultimate futility of the effort to substitute the 'problem of health' for the 'problem of life'. The loneliness of the dying – keeping them out of sight (and preferably, through entrusting them to the professionals, also out of mind) – is a fitting corollary of the loneliness of irreparably individual concerns with health and fitness of the body. Similarly, one doubts whether Elias does not mistake the self-pretence of our age for the truth of history, when suggesting that in 'less developed societies' 'the magic practices' meant to deal with death are more widespread than in our own (1985: 46), or when he implies that our scientific knowledge representing death as a regular natural process is 'capable of giving a sense of security' (1985: 77) – in contrast to 'fantasy-explanations' of the pre-modern age. One may think of the countless survival, death-exorcizing practices that fill the whole life of modern men and women; they may be sanctioned by contemporary experts as sound, but the way they are performed does not differ greatly from the compulsion of magical rites. One may as well observe that the 'security' offered by modern science scores a poor second to that promised by the beliefs modern sciences discredited and tried to root out.

9. For a fuller discussion of the relationship between the organization of expertise and the structure of life-world, see the chapter 'Privatization of Ambivalence' in my *Modernity and Ambivalence*, (Bauman, 1990).

10. Harold Perkin (1989: 378) observed that 'most professional expertise does not enjoy a natural scarcity, and its value has to be protected and raised'. Vying for the only truly scarce resource – the share of *public attention* devoted to their products – experts create their own professional institutions, pursuing a twin purpose of 'educating' the public so that it rises to the comprehension of the importance of their services, and closing off the already won share of public attention to potential competitors. Experts find themselves obliged

> to justify the highest status and rewards they can attain by the social necessity and efficiency they claim for the services they perform. That on occasion the

> service is neither essential nor efficient is no obstacle to the principle. It only needs to be thought so by those providing and receiving it. Justification by service to the clients and society lies at the root of the professional social ideal. (1989: 360)

The authors of studies collected in *Information Technology Impact on the Way of Life* (EEC Conference on the Information Society held in Dublin 18–20 November 1981, edited by Liam Bannon et al., 1982) propose that in the case of information, an expert product fast rising in volume and importance, the absence of demand (of perception of need) is a rule, and thus competition for public attention becomes fiercer than ever before:

> with the majority of these products, supply comes before demand and the technical discussion on the characteristics of the products takes the place of any analysis of social demand. These technical arguments are twofold. On the one hand, since these new technical capabilities have appeared, it is necessary to utilize them so as not to be behind the times; on the other hand, their use allows one to do more, better and with less effort then before, and thus can only lead to greater happiness. (Victor Scardigli, François Plassard, Pierre-Alain Mercier, 'Information Society and Daily Life', in Bannon et al., 1982: 41)

We can comment that the success of the propaganda campaign depends not so much on convincing the prospective clients that the possession of the new product will increase their happiness, but on creating an atmosphere in which the non-possession, 'normal' and hardly anxiety-arousing before, is experienced as a nuisance and a threat and becomes intolerable: by new standards, the non-possession is tantamount to inadequacy and instils fear of failure. Gordon B. Thompson coined a useful term to set apart the majority of information technology products: *ethereal goods*. None of them has a use (and thus an exchange) value guaranteed in advance by the extant pattern of needs; the ethereal good 'has to win its consensus of value . . . The value of an ethereal good is a function of the attention given to that good by the society' ('Ethereal Goods: The Economic Atom of the Information Society' in Bannon et al., 1982: 88–9).

11. The dialectic of dependence and autonomy is inescapable, as 'we are invited to live our whole lives inside someone else's borrowed frames' (Hebdige, 1988: 152); the opposition inscribed in the mechanism of survival rebounds intellectually as 'the opposition between vertigo and ground which leaves us with that alternating sense of placeness and rootedness which is the very rhythm of modernity. The dilemma opened up with modernity will never be resolved. The rhythm will not stop' (1988: 244).

12. A.E. Cawkwell (1987: 2–3) has quoted a poignant rendition of the same problem by Jo Grimond: 'The new technology has not been used to make services cheaper and better for ordinary people. Big business, the better professional firms and such like have been able to contract out of deteriorating services. When I complained of the postal services to a fellow sufferer she replied: "Of course my husband's firm send anything urgent by motor-bicycle or telex." This is not an option open to most of us.'

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