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## ARTICLE

# Collateral Casualties of Consumerism

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

University of Leeds, UK

*Abstract.* Collateral victims of consumerism are the 'flawed consumers' – lacking resources that socially approved consumer activity requires. Collateral damages refer to the new frailty of inter-human bonds resulting from the transfer of consumerist patterns upon relations between humans. Collateral casualties of consumerism are all men and women affected by either of these and thereby confronted by a series of unfamiliar challenges difficult or impossible to cope with.

### *Key words*

collateral damage • human bonds • underclass

THE NEWLY COINED and instantly popular concepts of 'collateral damages', 'collateral casualties' and 'collateral victims' belong to the barristers' vocabulary and are rooted in the pragmatics of legal defence, even if first deployed by the military spokesmen in their press briefings and transferred to the journalist language and then to the vernacular from there.

Though winking to the widely described phenomenon of 'unanticipated consequences' of human actions, 'collaterality' subtly shifts the emphasis. The shared meaning of all three above-listed concepts is the excuse of the harm-causing actions, their justification and exemption from punishment, on the strength of their un-intentionality. As Stanley Cohen could say – they belong to the linguistic arsenal of the 'states of denial': denial of *responsibility* – *moral* responsibility as well as *legal*. For instance (and such instants have been increasingly common of late), a dozen or so

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women and children had their lives violently interrupted, or have been maimed for life, by a smart missile meant to hit a single man suspected of training others or being trained himself for the role of a suicide bomber; in the next press briefing by a military spokesman, death of women and children would be mentioned, well after the hitting of the appointed targets has been described in detail, as 'collateral damage': as a kind of harm for which no one could be brought to trial, since the local residents and passers-by who were killed or wounded did not figure among the targets aimed at by those who launched the missile and those who ordered it to be launched.

The moot question, of course, is whether 'unanticipated' means necessarily 'impossible to anticipate', and yet more to the point, whether 'unintentional' stands for 'impossible to calculate' and so 'impossible to intentionally avoid', or for a mere indifference and callousness of those who did the calculations and did not care enough about avoiding. Once such a question is explicitly asked, it becomes clear that whatever answer the investigation of a particular case may suggest, there are good reasons to suspect that what the invoking of the 'unintentionality' argument intends to deny or exonerate is *ethical blindness* – conditioned or deliberate. Purely and simply, killing a few alien women and children was not considered an excessive price to pay for blowing up or even trying to blow up one would-be terrorist. When elephants fight, pity the grass; but the elephants will be the last to pity the grass. Were they able to speak, they would, if challenged, point out that they held no ill feelings against the lawn and it was not them who made it grow on the site on which elephant battles happen to be fought . . .

Martin Jay (2006) has recently recalled from semi-oblivion the blunt verdict pronounced by George Orwell (1953) in his seminal essay on politics and the English language:

In our time political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible . . . Political language – and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists – is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.

Having scrutinized the state of political discourse half a century later, Jay himself could no longer treat 'spin, exaggeration, evasion, half-truths and the like' as a temporary ailment that could be cured, or an alien intrusion in the struggle of power that with due effort could be replaced by 'straight-forward speaking from the heart':

rather than seeing the Big Lie of totalitarian politics as met by the perfect truth sought in liberal democratic ones, a truth based on that quest for transparency and clarity in language we have seen endorsed by Orwell and his earnest followers, we would be better advised to see politics as the endless struggle between lots of half-truths, cunning omissions, and competing narratives, which may offset each other, but never entirely produce a single consensus.

There is surely a 'cunning omission', or two, in the newspeak phrase 'collateral casualties' or 'collateral damage'. What has been shrewdly omitted is the fact that the 'casualties', whether 'collateral' or not, have been the effects of the way in which the blow was planned and delivered, as those who planned it and delivered it did not particularly care whether the damage spills over the assumed boundary of the proper target into the hazy (since kept by them out of focus) area of side-effects and unanticipated consequences. There may be a half-truth, if not a downright lie, as well: from the perspective of the declared objective of actions, some of its victims may be indeed classified as 'collateral' – but it won't be easy to prove that the official and explicit narrative is not 'economical with truth'; that it tells indeed, as it insists that it does, the truth, only truth and the whole truth about the thoughts and motives nesting in the planners' minds or debated on the planners' meetings. One is entitled to suspect that (to recall Robert Merton's distinction between the 'manifest' and 'latent' functions of routine behavioural patterns and single undertakings) the qualifier 'latent' does not necessarily mean in this case 'unconscious' or 'unwanted'; it may mean instead 'kept secret' or 'covered up'. And mindful of Martin Jay's warning about an apparently irreducible multitude of narratives, we should rather abandon hope to verify or refute one or another interpretation 'beyond reasonable doubt'.

It is the *political* lie thus far, a lie deployed in the service of explicitly *political* power struggle and *political* efficiency, that has stayed in the focus of our attention. But the 'collateral damage' is a concept in no way confined to the specifically political area; neither are the 'cunning omissions' and 'half-truths' that are endemic to it. Power struggles are not conducted solely by professional politicians; and it is not just the politicians who are professionally engaged in the search for efficiency. The way in which the dominant narratives or narratives aspiring to domination draw the line separating 'the purposeful action' from the action's 'unanticipated consequences' is also the principal stake in the promotion of *economic* interests

and in the effort to enhance the competitive advantages in the struggle for economic profits.

I suggest that the paramount (though by no means the only) 'collateral damage' perpetrated by that promotion and struggle is an overall, comprehensive commoditization of human life.

In the words of J. Livingstone,<sup>1</sup> 'the commodity form penetrates and reshapes dimensions of social life hitherto exempt from its logic to the point where subjectivity itself becomes a commodity to be brought and sold in the market as beauty, cleanliness, sincerity and autonomy'. And as Colin Campbell puts it, the activity of consuming:

has become a kind of template or model for the way in which citizens of contemporary Western societies have come to view all their activities. Since . . . more and more areas of contemporary society have become assimilated to a 'consumer model' it is perhaps hardly surprising that the underlying metaphysics of consumerism has in the process become a kind of default philosophy for all modern life. (Campbell, 2004: 41–2)

Arlie Russell Hochschild encapsulates the most seminal 'collateral damage' perpetrated in the course of the consumerist invasion in a phrase as poignant as it is succinct: 'materialization of love' (Hochschild, 2003: 203ff.).

Consumerism acts to maintain the emotional reversal of work and family. Exposed to a continual bombardment of advertisements through a daily average of three hours of television (half of all their leisure time), workers are persuaded to 'need' more things. To buy what they now need, they need money. To earn money, they work longer hours. Being away from home so many hours, they make up for their absence at home with gifts that cost money. They materialize love. And so the cycle continues.

We may add that their new spiritual detachment and physical absence from the home scene makes male or female workers alike impatient with the conflicts, big, small or downright tiny and trifle, which mixing under one roof inevitably entails.

As the skills needed to converse and seek understanding dwindle, what used to be a challenge intended to be confronted point blank and coped with turns increasingly into a pretext to break communication, to escape and burn bridges behind. Busy to earn more for things they feel they need for happiness, men and women have less time for mutual empathy and for

intense, sometimes tortuous and painful, but always lengthy and energy-consuming negotiations, let alone resolutions, of their mutual misapprehensions and disagreements. This sets in motion another vicious circle: the better they succeed in 'materializing' their love relationship (as the continuous flow of advertising messages prompts them to do), the fewer opportunities are left for a mutually sympathetic understanding that the notorious power/care ambiguity of love calls for. Family members are tempted to avoid confrontation and seek respite (or better still a permanent shelter) from domestic infighting; and then the urge to 'materialize' love and loving care acquires yet more impetus, as the more time-and-energy-consuming alternatives become ever less attainable at the time when it is more and more needed because of the steadily growing number of points of contention, grudges to be placated and disagreement clamouring for resolution.

If highly qualified professionals, the apples in the company directors' eyes, are all too often offered at the place of work an agreeable substitute for the cosy homeliness badly missing at home (as Hochschild (2003) notes, the traditional division of roles between workplace and family homestead tends to be reversed for them), nothing is offered for the employees lower in rank, less skilled and easily replaceable. If some companies, notably Amerco, investigated by Hochschild in depth, 'offer the old *socialist utopia* to an *elite* of knowledge workers in the top tier of an increasingly divided labour market, other companies may increasingly be offering *the worst of early capitalism to semiskilled and unskilled workers*'. For the latter, 'neither a kin network nor work associates provide emotional anchors for the individual but rather a gang, fellow drinkers on the corner, or other groups of this sort'.

The search for individual pleasures articulated by the currently offered commodities, a search guided and constantly redirected and refocused by the successive advertising campaigns, provides the sole acceptable – indeed badly needed and welcome – substitute for both the uplifting solidarity of work-mates and the glowing warmth of caring-for-and-being-cared-by the near and dear inside the family home and its immediate neighbourhood.

The politicians calling to resuscitate the dying or terminally ill 'family values', and serious about what their calls imply, should begin with thinking hard about the consumerist roots of, simultaneously, the wilting of social solidarity inside workplaces and the fading of the caring-sharing impulse inside family homes. Just as the politicians calling their voters to show reciprocal respect and serious about what their appeal implies ought to

think hard about the innate tendency of the society of consumers to instil in their members the willingness to accord other people just as much (and no more) respect as they are trained to feel and to show to consumer goods – the objects designed and destined for instantaneous, and possibly untroubled and no-strings-attached, satisfaction.

Collateral damages left along the track of the triumphant progress of consumerism are scattered all over the social spectre of contemporary 'developed' societies. There is, however, a new category of population, previously absent from the mental maps of social divisions, that could be seen as a collective victim of the 'multiple collateral damage' of consumerism. In recent years, this category has been given the name of the 'underclass'.

The term 'working class', once common but now falling out of use, belonged to the imagery of a society in which the tasks and functions of the better-off and the worse-off are different and in crucial aspects opposite, but *complementary*. That concept evoked an image of a class of people who have an indispensable while all-their-own role to play in the life of a society; people who made a useful contribution to that society as a whole and expected to be rewarded accordingly. The term 'lower class', also common then though now shunned, belonged for a change to the imagery of a socially mobile society, in which people are on the move and each position is but momentary and in principle amenable to change. That term evoked an image of a class of people who stand or are cast at the bottom of a ladder that they may (with effort and luck) climb to escape from their present inferiority.

The term 'underclass' belongs, however, to a thoroughly different imagery of society: it implies a society that is anything but hospitable and accommodating to all, a society mindful instead of Carl Schmitt's reminder that the defining mark of sovereignty is the prerogative to *exempt* and *exclude*, and to set aside a category of people to whom the law is applied by *denying* or *withdrawing* its application. 'Underclass' evokes an image of an aggregate of people who are cast off-limits to *all* classes and the *class hierarchy itself*, with little chance and no need of readmission: people without a role, making no useful contribution to the lives of the rest, and in principle beyond redemption. People who in a class-divided society form no class of their own, but feed on life-juices of all other classes, thereby eroding the class-based order of society; just like in the Nazi imagery of a race-divided human species, Jews were not charged with being another, hostile race, but with being a 'no-race race', a parasite on the body of all other 'right and proper' races,

an erosive force that dilutes the identity and integrity of all races and so saps and undermines the race-based order of the universe.

Let me add that the term 'underclass' has been exquisitely well chosen. It evoked and enlisted associations with the 'underworld' – Hades, Sheol; those deeply entrenched primal archetypes of the netherworld, that murky, damp, musty and formless darkness that envelops those who wander away from the well ordered, saturated with meanings land of the living . . .

Individuals summarily exiled to the 'underclass' by no stretch of imagination can be visualized as forming a meaningful, integrated 'totality'. They can be only filed and listed together thanks to similarity of their conduct. The inventory of people crowded together in the generic image of the underclass, described by Herbert J. Gans, strikes the reader above all by its bewildering variegation:

This behavioural definition denominates poor people who drop out of school, do not work, and, if they are young women, have babies without benefit of marriage and go on welfare. The behavioural underclass also includes the homeless, beggars, and panhandlers, poor addicts to alcohol and drugs, and street criminals. Because the term is flexible, poor people who live in 'the projects', illegal immigrants, and teenage gang members are often also assigned to the underclass. Indeed, the very flexibility of the behavioural definition is what lends itself to the term becoming a label that can be used to stigmatize poor people, whatever their actual behaviour. (Gans, 1995: 2)

An utterly heterogeneous and extremely variegated collection indeed. What can give at least an appearance of sense to the act of putting them all together? What do single mothers have in common with alcoholics, or illegal immigrants with school dropouts?

One trait that does mark them all is that other people, those who wrote up the list and the list's prospective readers, see no good reason for their existence and may imagine themselves to be much better off if they were not around. People are cast in the underclass because they are seen as totally useless; as a nuisance pure and simple – something that the rest of us could do nicely without. In the society of consumers – a world that evaluates anyone and anything by their commodity value – they are people with no market value; they are the uncommoditized men and women, and their failure to obtain a status of proper commodity coincides with (indeed, stems from) their failure to engage in a fully fledged consumer activity. They are *failed consumers* – the walking symbols of the disasters



that await fallen consumers, and of the ultimate destiny of anyone failing to acquit herself or himself of the consumer's duties. All in all, they are the 'end is nigh' or the 'memento mori' sandwich men walking the streets to alert or frighten the *bona fide* consumers. They are the yarn from which nightmares are woven – though as the official version would rather have it, they are ugly yet greedy weeds, which add nothing to the harmonious beauty of the garden but famish the plants, sucking out and devouring a lot of the feed.

Since they are all useless, it is the dangers they portend and stand for that dominate their perception. Everyone else in the society of consumers would gain if *they* vanished. Think: everyone else would gain when *you* fall out from the consumer game and *your* turn to vanish arrives . . .

'Uselessness' and 'danger' belong to the large family of W.B. Gallie's 'essentially contested concepts'. When deployed as tools of designation, they therefore display the flexibility that makes the resulting classifications exceptionally suitable for the accommodation of all the most sinister demons of the many that haunt a society tormented by doubts about the durability of any kind of usefulness, as well as by diffuse, unanchored yet ambient fears. The mental map of the world drawn with their help provides an infinitely vast playground for successive 'moral panics'. The obtained divisions can be stretched with little effort to absorb and domesticate new threats, while at the same time allowing dissipated terrors to focus on a target that is reassuring just for being specific and tangible.

This is, arguably, one, yet tremendously important use that the uselessness of the underclass offers to a society in which no trade or profession can be any longer certain of its own long-term usefulness and so of its guaranteed market value; and a similarly important service, which the dangerousness of the underclass offers to a society convulsed by anxieties too numerous for it to be able to say with any degree of confidence what there is to be afraid of, and what is to be done to assuage the fear.

All that has been said above does not mean, of course, that there are no beggars, drug-users or unwed mothers – the kind of miserable and therefore repugnant people referred to as clinching arguments whenever the existence of an underclass is questioned. It does mean, though, that their presence in society does not in the slightest suffice to prove the existence of the 'underclass'. Plunging them all into one category is a decision of the filing clerk or his or her supervisors, not the verdict of 'objective facts'. Collapsing them into one entity, charging them all collectively with parasitism and harbouring malice and unspeakable dangers for the rest of society, is an exercise in *value-laden choice*, not a *description*.

Above all, while the idea of the underclass rests on the presumption that the true society (that is, such totality as holds inside everything necessary to keep it viable) may be smaller than the sum of its parts, the aggregate denoted by the name 'underclass' is *bigger* than the sum of its parts: in its case, the act of inclusion adds a new quality that no part on its own would possess otherwise. 'Single mother' and an 'underclass woman' are *not* the same creatures. It takes a great deal of effort (though little thought) to recycle the first into the second.

Contemporary society engages its members primarily as consumers; only secondarily, and in part, does it engage them as producers. To meet the standards of normality, to be acknowledged as a fully fledged, right and proper member of society, one needs to respond promptly and efficiently to the temptations of the consumer market; one needs to regularly contribute to the 'supply-clearing demand', whereas in case of economic fallback or stagnation be part of the 'consumer-led recovery'. All this the poor and indolent, people lacking decent income, credit cards and the prospect of a better time, are not fit to do. Accordingly, the norm that is broken by the poor of today, the norm the breaking of which sets them aside and disqualifies them as 'abnormal', is the norm of *consumer competence* or aptitude, not that of *employment*.

First and foremost, the poor of today (that is, people who are 'problems' for the rest) are 'non-consumers', not 'unemployed'. They are defined in the first place through being flawed consumers, since the most crucial of the social duties that they do not fulfil is that of being active and effective buyers of goods and services that the market offers. In the book-balancing of a consumer society, the poor are unequivocally a liability, and by no stretch of imagination can they be recorded on the side of present or future assets.

Recast as collateral casualties of *consumerism*, the poor are now and for the first time in recorded history purely and simply a worry and a nuisance. They have no merits that could relieve, let alone redeem, their vices. They have nothing to offer in exchange for the taxpayer's outlays. Money transferred to them is bad investment, unlikely to be repaid, let alone to bring profit. They form a black hole that sucks in whatever comes near and spits back nothing, except vague but dark premonitions and trouble.

The poor of the society of consumers are totally useless. Decent and normal members of society – the bona fide consumers – want nothing from them and expect nothing. No one (most importantly, no one who truly counts, speaks up and is listened to and heard) needs them. For them,

zero tolerance. Society would be much better off if the poor just burnt their tents and allowed themselves to be burned with them – or left. The world would be that much more endearing and pleasant to inhabit without them inside. The poor are not *needed*, and so they are *unwanted*.

The sufferings of contemporary poor, the poor of the society of consumers, do not add up to a common cause. Each flawed consumer licks his or her wounds in solitude, at best in the company of their as yet unbroken family. Flawed consumers are lonely, and when they are left lonely for a long time they tend to become loners; they do not see how society or any social group (except a criminal gang) can help, they do not hope to be helped, they do not believe that their lot can be changed by any legal means save football pools or a lottery win.

Unneeded, unwanted, forsaken – where is their place? The briefest of answers is: out of sight. First, they need to be removed from the streets and other public places used by us, the legitimate residents of the brave consumerist world. If they happen to be fresh arrivals and have their residence permits in less than perfect order, they can be deported beyond boundaries, and so evicted physically from the realm of obligations due to the carriers of human rights. If an excuse for deportation cannot be found, they may still be incarcerated in far-away prisons or prison-like camps, best of all in the likes of the Arizona desert, on ships anchored far from sailing routes, or in high-tech, fully automated jails where they see no one and where no one, even the prison guards, is likely to meet them face to face very often.

To make the physical isolation foolproof, one can reinforce it with mental separation, resulting in the poor being banished from the universe of moral empathy. While banishing the poor from the streets, one can also banish them from the recognizably *human* community: from the world of *ethical* duties. This is done by rewriting their stories from the language of deprivation to that of depravity. The poor are portrayed as lax, sinful and devoid of moral standards. The media cheerfully cooperate with the police in presenting to the sensation-greedy public lurid pictures of the crime, drug- and sexual promiscuity-infested ‘criminal elements’ who seek shelter in the darkness of their forbidding haunts and mean streets. The poor supply the ‘usual suspects’ rounded up, to the accompaniment of public hue and cry, whenever a fault in the habitual order is detected and publicly disclosed. And so the point is made that the question of *poverty* is, first and foremost, perhaps solely, the question of *law and order*, and one should respond to it in the way one responds to other kinds of law-breaking.

Exempt from human community, exempt from public mind. We know what may follow when this happens. The temptation is strong to get rid altogether of a phenomenon demoted to the rank of sheer nuisance and unredeemed, not even mitigated, by any ethical consideration that might be due to a harmed, offended and suffering Other; to wipe out a blot on the landscape, to efface a dirty spot on the otherwise pleasingly pure canvas of an orderly world and normal society.

Alain Finkelkraut reminds us, in his recent book, of what might happen when the ethical considerations are effectively silenced, empathy extinguished and moral barriers taken away:

Nazi violence was committed not for the liking of it, but out of duty, not out of sadism but out of virtue, not through pleasure but through a method, not by unleashing of savage impulses and abandonment of scruples, but in the name of superior values, with professional competence and with the task to be performed constantly in view. (Finkelkraut, 1996)

That violence was committed, let me add, amidst a deafening silence from people who thought themselves to be decent and ethical creatures yet saw no reason why the victims of violence, who long before ceased to be counted among the members of the *human* family, should be targets of their *moral* empathy and compassion. To paraphrase Gregory Bateson, once the loss of moral community is combined with the advanced technology of tackling whatever is seen as a vexing problem, 'your chance of survival will be that of a snowball in hell'. Once coupled with moral indifference, rational solutions to human problems make indeed an explosive mixture.

Many human beings may perish in the explosion, yet the most salient among the victims is the humanity of those who escaped the perdition.

Imagination is notoriously selective. Its selectiveness is guided by experience, and particularly by the discontents it spawns.

Every type of social setting produces its own visions of the dangers that threaten its identity – visions made to the measure of the kind of social order it struggles to achieve or to retain. If the self-definition, simultaneously descriptive and postulative, can be thought of as a photographic replica of the setting, visions of threats tend to be the negatives of those photographs. Or, to put this in psychoanalytical terms, threats are projections of a society's own inner ambivalence and ambivalence-born anxieties about its own ways and means; about the fashion in which that society lives and intends to live.

A society unsure about the survival of its mode of being develops the mentality of a besieged fortress. The enemies who lay siege to its walls are its own, very own 'inner demons' – the suppressed, ambient fears that permeate its daily life, its 'normality', yet that, in order to make the daily reality endurable, must be squashed and squeezed out of the lived-through quotidianity and moulded into an alien body: a tangible enemy with a name attached, an enemy whom one can fight, and fight again, and even hope to conquer.

Such tendencies are ubiquitous and constant – not a specificity of the present-day, liquid modern society of consumers. The novelty, however, will become evident once we recall that the danger that haunted the 'classic', order-building and order-obsessed modern state presiding over the society of producers/soldiers was that of the *revolution*. The enemies were the revolutionaries, or, rather, the 'hot-headed, hare-brained, all-too-radical reformists', the subversive forces trying to replace the extant state-managed order with another state-managed order, a counter-order reversing each and any principle by which the present order lived or aimed to live. As the self-image of orderly, properly functioning society has changed since those times, also the image of the threat has acquired a fully new shape.

Whatever has been registered in recent decades as rising criminality (a process, let us note, that happened to run parallel to the falling membership of the Communist or other radical, 'subversive' parties of 'alternative order') is not a product of malfunction or neglect, but consumer society's own product, logically (if not legally) legitimate. What is more, it is also its inescapable product, even if disqualified on the authority of all official quality commissions. The higher is the consumer demand (that is, the more effective is the market seduction of prospective customers), the more is the consumer society safe and prosperous – while, simultaneously, the wider and deeper grows the gap between those who desire and are *able* to satisfy their desires (those who have been seduced and proceed to act in the way in which the state of being seduced prompts them to act), and those who have been properly seduced but are *unable* to act in the way the properly seduced are expected to act. Truthfully praised as a great equalizer, market seduction is also a uniquely, incomparably effective divider.

One of the most pronounced and widely commented upon features of consumer society is the elevation of novelty and degradation of the routine. Consumer markets excel in dismantling extant routines and preempting the rooting and entrenchment of new ones – except for a brief time span needed to empty the warehouses of the implements designed to service them. The same markets, however, attain a yet deeper-reaching

effect: for the properly trained members of the society of consumers, all and any routine and everything associated with routine behaviour (monotony, repetitiveness) become unbearable; indeed, unliveable. 'Boredom' – absence or even temporary interruption of the perpetual flow of attention-drawing, exciting novelties – turns into a most resented and feared bugbear of the consumer society.

To be effective, the enticement to consume, and to consume more, must be transmitted in all directions and addressed indiscriminately to everybody who will listen. But more people can listen than can respond in the fashion that the seductive message was meant to elicit. Those who cannot act on the desires so induced are treated daily to the dazzling spectacle of those who can. Lavish consumption, they are told, is the sign of success, a highway leading straight to public applause and fame. They also learn that possessing and consuming certain objects and practising certain lifestyles is the necessary condition of happiness; and since 'being happy', as if following belatedly Samuel Butler's premonitions, has become the mark of human decency and of entitlement to human respect – it tends to become as well the necessary condition of human dignity and self-esteem. 'Being bored', in addition to making one feel uncomfortable, is turning thereby into a shameful stigma, a testimony of negligence or defeat that may lead to a state of acute depression as much as to socio- and psycho-pathic aggressiveness. To quote Richard Sennett's recent observation,<sup>2</sup> 'with regard to anti-social behaviour I think this is a real problem for poor people . . .', especially perhaps for the 'poor adolescents who are in the grey zone between where they could tip over into being criminals or not'. 'The tipping point' has a lot to do 'with things like boredom, having something to do, having something to belong to'.

If the privilege of 'never being bored' is the measure of a successful life, of happiness and even of human decency, and if intense consumer activity is the prime, royal road to victory over boredom, then the lid has been taken off human desires; no amount of gratifying acquisitions and enticing sensations is likely ever to bring satisfaction in the way the 'keeping up to the standards' once promised. There are now no standards to keep up to – or rather no standards which, once reached, could authoritatively endorse the right to acceptance and respect and guarantee its long duration. The finishing line moves forward together with the runner, the goals keep forever a step or two ahead as one tries to reach them. Records keep being broken, and there seems to be no end to what a human may desire . . . 'Acceptance' (the absence of which, let's recall, Pierre Bourdieu defined as the worst of conceivable deprivations) is ever

more difficult to attain and yet more difficult, nay impossible, to be felt lasting and secure.

In the absence of unshakeable authorities, people tend to look for guidance to currently celebrated personal examples. When doing it, however, dazzled and baffled people learn that in the newly privatized ('outsourced', 'contracted out') and thus 'liberated' companies, which they may still remember as hard up and austere public institutions constantly famished for cash, their present managers draw salaries measured in millions, while those sacked for ineptitude from their managerial chairs are indemnified, again in millions of pounds, dollars or euros, for their botched and sloppy work. From all places, through all communication channels, the message comes loud and clear: there are no precepts except that of grabbing more, and no rules, except the imperative of 'playing your cards right'. But if winning is the sole object of the game, those who deal after deal get poor hands are tempted to opt for a different game where they can reach for other resources, such as they can muster.

From the point of view of the casino owners, some resources – those that they themselves allocate or circulate – are legal tender; all other resources, and particularly those beyond their control, are prohibited. The line dividing the fair from the unfair does not look the same, however, from the side of the players, particularly from the side of the would-be, aspiring players, and most particularly from the side of the poorly provided aspiring players, such as have no access or limited only access to the legal tender. They may resort to the resources they *do* have, whether recognized as legal or declared illegal, or opt out of games altogether – though that latter move has been by market seduction made all but impossible to contemplate.

The disarming, disempowering and suppressing of hapless and/or failed players is therefore an indispensable supplement to integration-through-seduction in a market-led society of consumers. The impotent, indolent players are to be kept outside the game. They are the waste-product of the game, a waste-product that the game cannot stop sedimenting without grinding to a halt and calling in the receivers. Were the sedimentation of waste to stop or even be mitigated, the players wouldn't be shown the horrifying sight of the (sole and only, as they are told) alternative to staying in the game. Such sights are indispensable in order to make the players able and willing to endure the hardships and the tensions that their lives lived in the game gestate – and the sights need to be shown repeatedly if the awareness of how awesome the penalties for slackness and neglect tend to be, and so also refreshed and reinforced the players' willingness to go on with the game.

Given the nature of the game now played, the misery of those left out of it, once treated as a *collectively caused* blight that needed to be dealt with and *cured by collective means*, can be only reinterpreted as a proof of an *individually* committed sin or crime. The dangerous (because potentially rebellious) *classes* are thereby redefined as collections of dangerous (because potentially criminal) *individuals*. Prisons deputize now for the phased-out and fading welfare institutions, and in all probability will have to go on readjusting to the performance of this new function as the welfare provisions continue to be tapered.

To make the prospects bleaker yet, the growing incidence of conduct classified as criminal is not an obstacle on the road to a fully fledged and all-embracing consumerist society; it is, on the contrary, its natural and perhaps indispensable accompaniment and prerequisite; admittedly, for a number of reasons – but the main reason among them is perhaps the fact that those left out of the game (the flawed consumers, whose resources do not measure up to their desires, and who have therefore little or no chance of winning while playing the game by its official rules) are the living incarnations of the ‘inner demons’ specific to consumer life. Their ghettoization and criminalization, the severity of the sufferings administered to them and the overall cruelty of the fate visited upon them, are – metaphorically speaking – the principal ways of exorcizing such inner demons and burning them out in effigy. The criminalized margins serve as *soi-disant* tools of sanitation: the sewers into which the inevitable but poisonous effluvia of consumerist seduction are drained off, so that the people who manage to stay in the game of consumerism need not worry about the state of their own health.

If this is, however, the prime stimulus of the present exuberance of what the great Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie called ‘the prison industry’ (Christie, 1993; Gans, 1995: 75), then the hope that the process can be slowed down, let alone halted or reversed in a thoroughly deregulated and privatized society animated and run by the consumer market, is – to say the least – slight.

The concept of the ‘underclass’ was coined and first used by Gunnar Myrdal in 1963, to signal the dangers of de-industrialization, which he feared to be likely to render a growing fraction of the population permanently unemployed and unemployable – not because of deficiency or moral faults in the people who found themselves out of work, but purely and simply because of the lack of employment for all those who needed, desired and were able to undertake it.



In Myrdal's view, the imminent arrival of what would be later called 'structural unemployment', and so also of an 'underclass', was not to be a result of the failure of work ethics to inspire the living, but of society's failure to guarantee conditions under which the kind of life that work ethics recommended and inspired could be lived. The coming 'underclass' in Myrdal's sense of the word was to consist of the victims of *exclusion* from productive activity, to be a collective product of *economic* logic – a logic over which the parts of the populations earmarked for exclusion had no control and little if any influence.

Myrdal's hypothesis was not, however, paid much public attention, whereas his premonitions were all but forgotten. When much later, on 29 August 1977, the idea of the 'underclass' was presented to the public again, via a cover story in *Time* magazine, it was injected with a significantly altered sense: that of 'a large group of people who are more intractable, more socially alien and more hostile than almost anyone had imagined. They are the unreachable: the American underclass'. A long and continually expanded list of all sorts of categories followed this definition. It included juvenile delinquents, school dropouts, drug addicts, 'welfare mothers', looters, arsonists, violent criminals, unmarried mothers, pimps, pushers, panhandlers; a roll-call of the inner demons of a well-off, comfortable, pleasure-and-happiness seeking society – the names of overt fears of its members and hidden burdens of their consciences.

'Intractable'. 'Alien'. 'Hostile'. And, as a result of all this, *unreachable*. No point in stretching out a helping hand: it would simply hang in the void, or – worse still – be bitten. Those people are beyond cure; and they are beyond cure because they have *chosen* a life of disease.

When Ken Auletta undertook in 1981–82 a series of exploratory excursions into the 'underclass' world, reported in the *New Yorker* and later collected in a widely read and highly influential book,<sup>3</sup> he was prompted, or at least so he averred, by the anxiety felt by most of his fellow-citizens:

I wondered: who are those people behind the bulging crime, welfare, and drug statistics – and the all-too-visible rise in antisocial behavior – that afflicts most American cities? . . . I quickly learned that among students of poverty there is little disagreement that a fairly distinct black and white underclass does exist; that this underclass generally feels excluded from society, rejects commonly accepted values, suffers from *behavioral*, as well as *income* deficiencies. They don't just tend to be poor; to most Americans their behavior seems aberrant.

Note the vocabulary, the syntax, and the rhetoric of the discourse within which the image of the underclass was generated and settled. Auletta's text is perhaps the best site to study them, because unlike most of his less scrupulous successors, Auletta was cautious not to give reason to a charge of a simple 'underclass bashing'; he leant over backward to manifest his objectivity and to show that he no less pitied than he censured the negative heroes of his story.<sup>4</sup>

Note first that the 'bulging crime' and 'bulging welfare', welfare- and drug-statistics, are mentioned in one breath and set at the same level before the narrative and the argument started. No argument, let alone proof, was presumed needed, let alone offered, to explain why the two phenomena have found themselves in each other's company and why they have been classed as instances of the same 'antisocial' behaviour. There was no attempt even to argue explicitly that drug-pushing and living on social welfare are similarly antisocial phenomena of the same order.

Note as well that in Auletta's (and his numerous followers') description, underclass people *reject* common values, but they only *feel* excluded. Joining the underclass is an *active* and action-generating initiative – a deliberate step of taking a side in the two-sided relationship in which 'most Americans' find themselves on the other, the receiving end: that of a *passive*, victimized and suffering target. If not for its antisocial mentality and hostile deeds, there would be no public trial, as there would have been no case to ponder, neither a crime to punish nor a negligence to repair.

The rhetoric was followed by practices, which supplied their retrospective 'empirical proof' and from which the arguments were drawn that the rhetoric failed to provide by itself. The more numerous and widespread such practices became, the more self-evident seemed the diagnoses that triggered them, and the lesser was the chance for the rhetorical subterfuge ever being spotted, let alone unmasked and refuted.

Most of Auletta's empirical material was drawn from the Wildcat Skills Training Center, an institution established with the noble intention of rehabilitating and restoring to society the individuals accused of falling out with the values cherished by society, or rather of putting themselves beyond its boundary. Who was eligible for admission to the centre? A candidate had to be a fairly recent prison convict; or an ex-addict still undergoing treatment; or a female on welfare, without children under the age of six; or a youth between 17 and 20 who had dropped out of school. Whoever set the rules of admission must have decided beforehand that such 'types', so *distinct* to an untrained eye, suffered from *the same* kind of problem, or rather *presented* society with the same kind of problem – and therefore needed, and

were eligible for, the same kind of treatment. But what started as the rule-setters' decision turned into the reality of the Wildcat Center inmates: for a considerable time they were put in each other's company, subjected to the same regime, and daily drilled into the acceptance of the commonality of their fate. Being the insiders of the Wildcat Center supplied for the duration all the social identity they needed and could reasonably work to obtain. Once more an audacious thesis turned into self-fulfilling prophecy thanks to the actions it triggered; once more a word had become flesh.

Auletta was at pains to remind his readers time and again that the condition of 'underclassness' was *not* a matter of poverty, or at least couldn't be explained *solely* by it. He pointed out that if 25–29 million Americans lived below the poverty line, only an 'estimated 9 million did not assimilate' and 'operated outside the generally accepted boundaries of society', set apart as they were 'by their "deviant" or antisocial behaviour' (Auletta, 1982: 28). The implicit suggestion was that the elimination of *poverty*, were it at all conceivable, would not put an end to the underclass phenomenon. If one may be poor and yet 'operate within accepted boundaries', then poverty can't be blamed and factors other than poverty must be responsible for descending into the underclass. These factors were seen to be thoroughly subjective, individual afflictions – psychological and behavioral – perhaps more often to be found among those living in poverty, but not determined by it.

Let me repeat: according to those suggestions, descent into the underclass was a matter of choice; a direct choice in case of an open challenge to social norms, or an oblique choice deriving from the inattention to norms or from obeying them not zealously enough. The underclass status was a choice, even if a person fell into the underclass simply because he or she failed to do or was too lazy to do what they could and was obliged and expected to do in order to stave off the falling. Choosing not to do what was needed to attain a certain goal, in a country of free choosers, is almost automatically, without a second thought, interpreted as choosing *something else* instead; in the case of the underclass the *unsocial* behaviour was chosen. Falling into the underclass was an *exercise in freedom* . . . In a society of free consumers curbing one's freedom is impermissible; but equally impermissible was refraining from denying or curtailing freedom to such people who would use their liberty to curtail other people's freedoms, by begging, pestering or threatening, fun-spoiling, burdening consciences and otherwise making lives of other people uncomfortable.

The decision to separate the 'problem of the underclass' from the 'issue of poverty' hit several birds with one stone. Its most obvious effect, in a

society famous for its beliefs in litigation and compensation, was to deny the people assigned to the underclass the right to press charges and 'claim damages' by presenting themselves as victims (or even 'collateral' only victims) of societal malfunction or wrongdoing. In whatever litigation might follow their case, the burden of proof would be shifted fairly and squarely onto the plaintiffs. It is they who would have to shoulder the burden of proof – demonstrate their goodwill and determination to be 'like all the rest of us'. Whatever was there to be done had to be done, at least to start with, by the 'underclassers' themselves (though of course there was never a shortage of appointed supervisors and self-appointed legally trained counsellors to advise them as to what it was exactly that they were expected to do). If nothing happened and the spectre of the underclass refused to vanish, the explanation was simple and easy. It was also clear who was to blame. If the rest of society had something to reproach itself for – it was only for its insufficient determination to curtail the underclassers' iniquitous choices and limit the damage they caused. More police, more prisons, ever more severe, painful and feared punishments, seemed then the most obvious means to repair the mistake.

Perhaps more seminal yet was another effect: the *abnormality* of the underclass *normalized* the presence of poverty. It is the underclass that was placed outside the accepted boundaries of society, but the underclass was, as we remember, only a fraction of the 'officially poor'. It is precisely because the underclass was named as the truly big and urgent problem that the bulk of people living in poverty were not such a great issue that would need to be urgently tackled. Against the background of the uniformly ugly and repulsive landscape of the underclass, the 'merely poor' (the 'decent poor') shone as people who – unlike the 'underclassers' – would eventually make themselves all the *right* choices and find their way back into the accepted boundaries of society. Just as falling into the underclass and staying there was a matter of choice, so the rehabilitation from the state of poverty was also a choice – the right choice this time. The tacit suggestion conveyed by the idea that the descent of a poor person into the underclass is the outcome of choice is that another choice might accomplish the opposite and lift the poor from their social degradation.

A central and largely uncontested – since unwritten – rule of a consumer society is that being free to choose requires competence: knowledge, skills and determination to use the power of choice.

Freedom to choose does not mean that all choices are right – there are good and bad choices, better and worse choices. The kind of choice

eventually made is the evidence of competence or its lack. The 'underclass' of the society of consumers, the 'flawed consumers', is presumed to be an aggregate composed of the individual victims of wrong individual choices and taken to be a tangible proof of the personal nature of life catastrophes and defeats, always an outcome of incompetent personal choices.

In his highly influential tract on the roots of present-day poverty, Lawrence C. Mead (1992) singled out the individual actors' incompetence as the paramount cause of the persistence of poverty amid affluence, and of the sordid failure of all successive state-run policies to eliminate it. Purely and simply, the poor lack the competence to appreciate the advantages of work-followed-by-consumption; they make wrong choices, putting 'nowork' above work, and so cutting themselves off from the delights of bona-fide consumers. It is because of that incompetence, says Mead, that the invocation of the work ethic (and obliquely, yet inevitably, also of the allures of consumerism) falls on deaf ears and fails to influence the choices of the poor.

The issue therefore – so the story goes – hinges on whether the needy can be responsible for themselves and, above all, on whether they have the competence to manage their lives. Whatever external, supra-individual causes one might have cited, a mystery in the heart of 'nowork' remains – the deliberate, *actively* chosen *passivity* of the seriously poor, their failure to seize the opportunities that the others, the normal people like us, willingly embrace. 'To explain nowork', says Mead:

I see no avoiding some appeal to psychology or culture. Mostly, seriously poor adults appear to avoid work, not because of their economic situation, but because of what they believe . . .

Psychology is the last frontier in the search for the causes of low work effort . . . Why do the poor not seize [the opportunities] as assiduously as the culture assumes they will? *Who exactly are they?* . . . The core of the culture of poverty seems to be inability to control one's life – what psychologists call inefficacy. (Mead, 1992)

The opportunities are there; are not all of us the walking proofs of that? But opportunities must be also seen for what they are, namely the opportunities to be embraced, the chances one would refuse only at one's own peril – and that takes competence: some wits, some will, and some effort. The poor, the 'failed consumers', obviously lack all three.

Readers of Mead would welcome the news as, all things considered, good, reassuring news: *we* are decent, responsible people, we offer the poor

opportunities – whereas *they* are irresponsible, they indecently refuse to take them. Just like the medics reluctantly throw in the towel when their patients consistently refuse to cooperate with the prescribed treatment, it is our turn to give up our efforts to awake the flawed consumers from their slumber in the face of the stubborn reluctance of the poor to open themselves up to the challenges, but also to the rewards and the joys, of consumer life.

It may be shown, though, that the ‘psychological factors’ may act in a precisely opposite way; that the failure of the ‘flawed consumers’ to join in the society of consumers as its legitimate members results from causes quite opposite to their alleged decision of ‘non-participation’. In addition to living in poverty, or at least below the required level of affluence, people classified as ‘underclass’ are condemned to social exclusion and deemed ineligible for the membership of society that requires its members to play the consumerist game by the rule precisely because they are, just like the well-off and the rich, all-too-open to the power-assisted seductions of consumerism – though unlike the well-off and the rich they can’t really afford to be seduced. As the conclusions derived from N.R. Shrestha’s study (quoted by Russell W. Belk) suggest:

the poor are forced into a situation in which they either have to spend what little money or resources they have in senseless consumer objects rather than basic necessities in order to deflect total social humiliation or face the prospect of being teased and laughed at.

The heads you lose, the tails they win. For the poor of the society of consumers, the non-embracing of the consumerist model of life means stigma and exclusion, while embracing it portends more poverty that bars the admission. (Belk, 2004: 69)

‘As the need for public services has increased, American voters have come to favour reducing the supply of care that government provides, and many favour turning to the beleaguered family as a main source of care’ notes Hochschild (2003: 213ff.). They found themselves, however, falling out of the frying pan into the fire.

The same consumerist pressures that associate the idea of ‘care’ with an inventory of consumer commodities like ‘orange juice, milk, frozen pizza and microwave ovens’, strip the families of their social-ethical skills and resources, and disarm them in their uphill struggle to cope with the new challenges; challenges aided and abetted by the legislators, who attempt to

reduce state financial deficits through the expansion of 'care deficit' ('cutting funds for single mothers, the disabled, the mentally ill, and the elderly').

A state is 'social' when it promotes the principle of the *communally endorsed*, collective insurance against individual misfortune and its consequences. It is primarily that principle – declared, set in operation and trusted to be working – that recasts the otherwise abstract idea of 'society' into the experience of a felt-and-lived community through replacing the 'order of egoism' (to deploy John Dunne's terms), bound to generate the atmosphere of mutual mistrust and suspicion, with the confidence-and-solidarity-inspiring 'order of equality'. It is the same principle that lifts members of society to the status of *citizens* – that is, makes them stakeholders in addition to being stock-holders: beneficiaries, but also actors – the wardens as much as wards of the 'social benefits' system, individuals with acute interest in the common good understood as the network of shared institutions that can be trusted, and realistically expected, to guarantee the solidity and reliability of the state-issued 'collective insurance policy'.

The application of such a principle may, and often does, protect men and women from the plague of *poverty*; most importantly, however, it can become a profuse *source of solidarity*, able to recycle 'society' into a common good, shared, communally owned and jointly cared for, thanks to the defence it provides against the twin horrors of *misery* and *indignity* – that is of the terrors of being excluded, of falling or being pushed overboard from a fast accelerating vehicle of progress, of being condemned to 'social redundancy', denied the respect due to humans and otherwise designated as 'human waste'.

'Social state' was to be, in its original intention, an arrangement to serve precisely such purposes. Lord Beveridge, whom we owe the blueprint for the post-war British 'welfare state', believed that his vision of a comprehensive, collectively endorsed insurance for *everyone* was the inevitable consequence or rather indispensable complement of the liberal idea of individual freedom, as well as necessary condition of *liberal democracy*. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's declaration of war on fear was based on the same assumption. The assumption was reasonable: after all, freedom of choice can't but come together with uncounted and uncountable risks of failure, and many people are bound to find such risks unbearable, fearing that they may exceed their personal ability to cope. For many people, freedom of choice will remain an elusive phantom and idle dream, unless the fear of defeat is mitigated by the insurance policy issued in the name

of community, a policy they can trust and rely on in case of personal failure or a freak blow of fate.

If freedom of choice is granted in theory but unattainable in practice, the pain of *hopelessness* would be surely topped with the ignominy of *haplessness* – as the daily tested ability of coping with life challenges is that very workshop in which self-confidence of individuals, and so also their sense of human dignity and their self-esteem, are cast or melted away. Besides, without the collective insurance, there would hardly be much stimulus to political engagement – and certainly not for the participation in a democratic ritual of elections, as indeed no salvation is likely to arrive from a political state that is not, and refuses to be, a *social* state. Without social rights *for all*, a large and in all probability growing number of people would find their political rights useless and unworthy of their attention. If political rights are necessary to set *social* rights in place, social rights are indispensable to keep *political* rights in operation. The two rights need each other for their survival; that survival can be only their joint achievement.

Social state is the ultimate modern embodiment of the idea of community: that is, an institutional incarnation of such an idea in its modern form of an abstract, imagined totality woven of reciprocal dependence, commitment and solidarity. Social rights – rights to respect and dignity – tie that imagined totality to daily realities of its members and found that imagination in the solid ground of life experience; those rights certify, simultaneously, the veracity and realism of mutual trust *and* of the trust in the shared institutional network that endorses and validates collective solidarity.

The sentiment of 'belonging' translates as trust in the benefits of human solidarity, and in the institutions that arise out of that solidarity and promise to serve it and assure its reliability. Quite recently, all those truths have been spelled out in the Swedish Social Democratic Programme of 2004:

Everyone is fragile at some point in time. We need each other. We live our lives in the here and now, together with others, caught up in the midst of change. We will all be richer if all of us are allowed to participate and nobody is left out. We will all be stronger if there is security for everybody and not only for a few.

Just like the carrying power of a bridge is not measured by the average strength of its pillars, but by the strength of the weakest pillar, and grows together with that strength, the confidence and resourcefulness of a society is measured by the security, resourcefulness and self-confidence of its weakest sections and grows as they grow. Contrary to the assumption of



the 'third way' advocates, social justice and economic efficiency, loyalty to the social state tradition and ability to modernize swiftly (and, most significantly, with little or no damage to the social cohesion and solidarity), need not be and are not at loggerheads. On the contrary: as the social democratic practice of the Nordic countries amply demonstrates and confirms, 'the pursuit of a more socially cohesive society is the necessary precondition for modernization by consent' (Taylor, 2005: 32).<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to the grossly premature obituaries scribbled by the promoters and heralds of the 'third way', the Scandinavian pattern is nowadays anything but a relic of the past and now frustrated hopes, and of the blueprints dismissed now by popular consent as outdated. Just how topical and how much alive its underlying principles are, and how strong are its chances of inflaming human imagination and inspiring action, is shown in the recent triumphs of the emergent or resurrected social states in Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil or Chile, gradually yet indefatigably changing the political landscape and popular mood of the Latin part of the western hemisphere, and bearing all the marks of that 'left hook' with which, as Walter Benjamin pointed out, all truly decisive blows tend to be delivered in human history. However hard it may be to perceive that truth in the daily flow of consumerist routines, this is the truth nevertheless.

To avoid misunderstandings, let it be clear that the 'social state' in the society of consumers is neither intended nor practised as an alternative to the principle of consumer choice – just as it was not meant to be nor acted as an alternative to the 'work ethic' in the society of producers. The countries with firmly established principles and institutions of a social state happen to be also the countries with impressively high levels of consumption, just as the countries with firmly established principles and institutions of a social state in the societies of producers were also the countries with thriving industry.

The meanings of social state in the society of consumers, just as it was in the society of producers, is to defend society against the 'collateral damage' that the guiding principle of social life would cause if not monitored, controlled and constrained. Its purpose is to protect society against multiplying the ranks of 'collateral victims' of consumerism – the excluded, the outcasts, the underclass. Its task is to salvage human solidarity from erosion and the sentiments of ethical responsibility from fading.

In Britain, the neo-liberal assault against the principles of the social state was sold to the nation under Margaret Thatcher's slogan, as if quoted verbatim from the handbook of consumer market publicity and assured to

be sweet sounding to every consumer's ear: 'I want a doctor of my choice, at the time of my choice'. Tory governments that followed Margaret Thatcher followed the pattern she set faithfully – as in John Major's 'citizen charter' that redefined the members of the national community as satisfied customers.

Consolidation of the neo-liberal 'order of egoism' was conducted by the 'New Labour' administration under the code-name of 'modernization'. As years went by, few if any objects heretofore eliding commoditization escaped the modernizing zeal unscathed. Increasingly, for the dearth of yet unaffected objects (that is, areas of life still out of the consumer-market bounds), the yesterday 'modernized' setting became the objects of new rounds of modernization, letting in more private capital and yet more market competition. Rather than conceived as a one-off operation, 'modernization' turned into a permanent condition of social and political institutions, further eroding the value of duration together with the prudence of long-term thinking, and reinforcing the ambience of uncertainty, temporariness and until-further-notice-ness on which consumer commodity markets are known to thrive.

This was, arguably, the greatest service that activity of government rendered to the cause of neo-liberal revolution and to the uncontested rule of the 'invisible hand' of the market ('invisible' because eluding all efforts to watch, guess or predict, let alone to direct and correct, its moves; a 'hand' that any poker player dreams of, rightly expecting it to be unbeatable). All their particular marks notwithstanding, the successive bouts of modernization made the invisible hand yet more invisible, putting it ever more securely beyond the reach of the available instruments of political/popular/democratic intervention.

A most salient collateral casualty of such governmental activity was, paradoxically (or not that paradoxically after all), the political realm itself, being relentlessly tapered and emaciated through 'subsidiarizing' or 'contracting-out' of more and more among the previously politically directed and administered functions to the admittedly non-political market forces. And as the deregulation and privatization of the economy proceeded at full speed, as the nominally state-owned assets were one by one released from political supervision, as personal taxation for collective needs stayed frozen, thereby impoverishing the collectively managed resources required for such needs to be met – the all-explaining and all-excusing incantation 'there is no alternative' (another of Margaret Thatcher's legacies) turned unstoppably (more correctly, *was* turned) into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The process has been thoroughly explored and its direction thoroughly documented, so that there is little point in restating once more what is public knowledge or at least had every chance to become public knowledge if given sufficient attention. What has been, however, left somewhat off the focus of public attention, while deserving all attention it could muster, is the role that almost every single ‘modernizing’ measure played in the *continuing decomposition and crumbling of social bonds and communal cohesion* – precisely the assets that could enable the British men and women to face, confront and tackle the old and new, past and future challenges of the consumerist *pensée unique*.

Among many bright and not so bright ideas for which Margaret Thatcher will be remembered was her discovery of the non-existence of society . . . ‘There is no such thing as “society” . . . There are only individuals and families’ she declared. But it took a lot more of her and her successors’ efforts to recast that figment of Thatcher’s fanciful imagination into a fairly precise description of the real world, as seen from the *inside* of its inhabitants’ experience.

The triumph of rampant, individual and individualizing consumerism over ‘moral economy’ and social solidarity was not a foregone conclusion. A society pulverized into solitary individuals and (crumbling) families would not be built without Thatcher first thoroughly clearing the building site. It would not be built without her successes in incapacitating the self-defence associations of those who needed collective defence, in stripping the incapacitated of most of the resources they could use to collectively recover the strength that had been denied to them or lost by them individually, in severely curtailing both the ‘self’ and the ‘government’ bits in the practice of local self-governments, in making many expressions of disinterested solidarity into punishable crime, in ‘deregulating’ factory and office staffs, once greenhouses of social solidarity, into aggregates of mutually suspicious individuals competing in an ‘each man for himself and devil takes the hindmost’, the ‘Big Brother’ of ‘The Weakest Link’ style, or in finishing the job of transforming the universal entitlements of proud citizens into the stigmas of the indolent or outcasts accused of living ‘at the taxpayer’s expense’. Thatcher’s innovations not only survived the years of successive governments – seldom questioned and by and large intact, but survived and emerged reinforced in the language of politics.

Today, as much as 20 years ago, the vocabulary of British politicians knows solely of individuals and their families as subjects of duties and objects of legitimate concern, while referring to ‘communities’ mostly as sites where the problems abandoned by the ‘great society’ on the government’s

behest need to be tackled in the cottage-industry mode (as, for instance, in the context of the mentally disabled dropped by the state-run medical care, or in the context of the need to stop the un- or under-employed, under-educated prospect-less and dignity-denied youngsters from 'tipping over' onto the side of mischief).

And as more and more water flows under the bridges, the world before the Thatcherite revolution is being all but forgotten by the elder, while never having been experienced by the young. To those who forgot or never tasted the life in that other world, it seems indeed that there is no alternative to the present one . . . Or rather any alternative has become all but unimaginable.

To the acclaim of some enthusiastic observers of the new trends, the void left behind by the citizens massively retreating from the extant political battlefields to be reincarnated as consumers is filled by ostentatiously non-partisan and ruggedly un-political 'consumer activism'.

The snag, however, is that such replacement does not widen the ranks of 'socially concerned' men and women involved and engaged in public issues (that is, bearing the qualities deemed to be the defining features of the citizens of a polis). The new variety of activism engages yet smaller parts of the electorate than the orthodox political parties, no longer expected, let alone trusted, to represent their voters' interests and so falling out of public favour, can currently manage to mobilize in the heat of election campaigns. And as Frank Furedi warns: 'Consumer activism thrives in the condition of apathy and social disengagement.' But does it fight back the spreading political apathy? Does it provide an antidote to the new public indifference to things once considered common/shared causes? It needs to be seen clearly, says Furedi, that:

the consumerist critique of representative democracy is fundamentally an anti-democratic one. It is based on the premise that unelected individuals who possess a lofty moral purpose have a greater right to act on the public's behalf than politicians elected through an imperfect political process. Environmentalist campaigners, who derive their mandate from a self selected network of advocacy groups, represent a far narrower constituency than an elected politician. Judging by its record, the response of consumer activism to the genuine problem of democratic accountability, is to avoid it altogether in favour of opting for interest group lobbying.

'There is little doubt that the growth of consumer activism is bound up with the decline of traditional forms of political participation and social engagement' is Furedi's verdict based on his thoroughly documented study. What one may doubt, however, is whether it brings about social engagement in a new form – and in a form that may yet prove similarly effective in laying the foundations of social solidarity as used to be, despite all their well-recorded shortcomings, the 'traditional forms'.

'Consumer activism' is a symptom of growing disenchantment with politics. To quote Neal Lawson – 'as there is nothing else to fall back on, it is likely that people then give up on the whole notion of collectivism and therefore any sense of a democratic society and fall back on the market (and, let me add, their own consumer skills and activities) as the arbiter of provision'.

The evidence, to be sure, is thus far ambiguous. A recent survey, conducted at the start of the 2005 electoral campaign,<sup>5</sup> suggests that 'contrary to popular perception the British public is not apathetic about politics. That is the conclusion of a new report from the Electoral Commission and the Hansard Society, which found that 77 per cent of those polled by MORI were interested in national issues.' It adds right away, however, that 'this high level of basic interest is compared to the minority 27 per cent who feel that they actually have a say in the way the country is run.' Judging from the precedents, one could surmise therefore (and rightly, as the elections that followed the survey have since shown) that the actual number of people eventually going to the electoral booths would fall somewhere between those two figures, landing closer to the lower of the two.

Many more people declare their interest in whatever has been branched and vetted in the press front-page headlines or on the TV 'news updates' as a 'national issue' than consider it worth their effort of walking to the polling station in order to give their vote to one of the political parties offered for their choice.

Furthermore, since in a society oversaturated with information headlines serve mostly (and effectively!) to erase from public memory the headlines of the day before, all issues recast by the headlines as of the 'public interest' have but a meagre chance to survive from the date of the latest opinion poll to the date of the nearest elections. Most importantly, the two things – the interest in 'national issues' as seen on TV or on front pages of the dailies, and the participation in the extant democratic process – just don't congeal in the minds of the rising number of citizens-turned-consumers of the pointillist-time era. The second – admittedly a long-term investment requiring time to mature – does not seem to be a relevant

response to the first, admittedly another 'infotainment' event with neither roots in the past nor a foothold in the future.

The *Guardian* student website of 23 March 2004 informed us that 'three quarters (77 per cent) of first year university students are not interested in taking part in political protests . . . while 67 per cent of freshers believe that student protest isn't effective and doesn't make any difference, according to the Lloyds TSB/Financial Mail on Sunday Student Panel'. It quotes Jenny Little, editor of the student page in the *Financial Mail on Sunday*, who says: 'Students today must cope with a great deal – the pressure to get a good degree, the need to work part-time to support themselves and to get work experience to ensure that their CVs stand out from the crowd . . . It's not surprising that politics falls to the bottom of the pile of priorities for this generation, though, in real terms, it has never been more important.'

In a study dedicated to the phenomenon of political apathy, Tom Deluca (2005) suggests that the apathy is not an issue in its own right, but 'more a clue about the others, about how free we are, how much power we really have, what we can fairly be held responsible for, whether we are being well served . . . It implies a condition under which one suffers.' Political apathy 'is a state of mind or a political fate brought about by forces, structures, institutions, or elite manipulation over which one has little control and perhaps little knowledge'. Deluca explores all those factors in depth, to paint a realistic portrait of what he calls 'the second face of political apathy' – the 'first face' being, according to various political scientists, an expression of contentment with the state of affairs or the exercise of right to free choice, and more generally (as stated in the classic 1954 study by Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld and William McPhee, later rehashed by Samuel Huntington) as a phenomenon 'good for democracy' for the reason of 'making mass democracy work'.

And yet if one wants to decode in full the social realities to which rising political apathy provides a clue and which it signals, one would need to look even beyond the 'second face' that itself, as Tom Deluca rightly claims, has been unduly neglected or only perfunctorily sketched by the mainstream scholars of political science. One would need to recall the earlier meaning of 'democracy' that made it once into a battle cry of the self-same 'deprived and suffering masses' who today turn away from exercising their hard won electoral rights. They are consumers first, citizens (if at all) a distant second. To really become the first takes a constant vigilance and effort that hardly leaves time for activities for which the second would call.

Filip Remunda and Vit Klusák, students of the Prague Film School, financed by the Czech Ministry of Culture, have recently produced and

directed *Czech Dream* – a film unlike all other films; a large-scale social experiment rather than a mere documentary, and an exercise in portrayal of a social reality that may well expose the fiction hiding behind the notorious ‘reality TV’ shows.

Remunda and Klusak announced, in an intense country-wide advertising campaign, the imminent inauguration of a new supermarket. The campaign itself, planned and conducted by a commissioned PR company, was a masterpiece of the marketing art. It started with spreading rumours of an allegedly well guarded secret: a mysterious, extraordinary temple of consumerism, currently under construction in an undisclosed place, was bound to be shortly made available to customers. In subsequent stages, the campaign deliberately and successfully disturbed and disrupted the shopping/consumer routine of the viewers, by calling them to reflect upon their daily mundane, monotonous shopping practices and so recasting those heretofore unreflected-upon, habitual activities into issues to think about; this has been done by provoking the ‘targets’ of a publicity campaign to pause and ponder, and insinuating through slogans like ‘stop spending your money!’ or ‘do not buy’ that the moment to *delay* (how uncommonly!) their gratification has arrived, and then gradually beefing up curiosity and excitement by leaking ever more appetizing bits of information about delights awaiting those who agreed to postpone gratification of desires until the mysterious brand-new supermarket opened. The supermarket, the company behind it complete with its logo, and the wonders that company was to offer were all pure inventions of the film makers. But the excitement and lust it bred were quite real.

On the appointed morning and at the appointed place, finally revealed in hundreds of posters around the town, thousands of ready-to-act consumers gathered, only to face a long stretch of neglected, overgrown, unmowed lawn with the contours of a colourful, ornate building at its other end. With each of the thousands of eager customers desperate to arrive at the gate before the others, the crowd ran, gasping for breath, through the damp – only to reach a painted façade sustained by huge but obviously ad hoc assembled scaffolding, and hiding solely another stretch of similarly unmowed, unattended, overgrown and straggly grass . . .

As if in a flash of soothsayer vision, Günther Anders noted exactly half a century ago:<sup>6</sup>

It seems right to say that nothing defines us, the humans of the present, more than our incapacity to stay mentally ‘up to date’ regarding the progress of our products, that is to control the

rhythm of our own creation and to repossess in the future (which we call our 'present') the instruments which have taken hold of us . . .

It is not entirely impossible that we, who fabricate these products, are on the point of creating a world with which we won't be able to keep pace and which will completely exceed our power of 'understanding', our imagination and emotional endurance, as much as it will stay beyond the capacity of our responsibility.

## Notes

1. See Livingstone (1998: 416), here quoted after Belk (2004: 71).
2. See Richard Sennett's interview by Daniel Leighton (2006: 47).
3. Auletta (1982: xiii). The language of most current American debate concerning the phenomenon of the underclass is much more in line with the uncompromising, no-stops rhetoric of Edward Banfield: 'The lower-class individual lives from moment to moment.. Impulse governs his behavior, either because he cannot discipline himself to sacrifice a present for a future satisfaction or because he has no sense of the future. He is therefore radically improvident; whatever he cannot consume immediately he considers valueless. His taste for "action" takes precedence over anything else' (Banfield, 1968: 34–5). Let us note that the Banfield diatribe aimed at the 'underclass' sounds like a very accurate description of the 'ideal consumer' in a society of consumers. In this, as in most other discussions, 'underclass' serves as a dumping ground for the demons haunting the consumer's tormented soul.
4. Auletta's field research brought him too close to the objects of the standardized treatment not to notice how empirically faulty are the generalized labels and wholesale classifications. At the end of his book (Auletta, 1982), which presents one long story of a power-assisted *unification* of the underclass, he states: 'The one great lesson I learned from my reporting among the underclass and the poor is that generalizations – bumper stickers – are the enemies of understanding. It is perilous to generalize about the "lower class" . . . or about "victims" . . . or about poverty being "virtually eliminated" . . . or about government being "the problem"'. From a height of thirty thousand feet, everyone and everything looks like an ant' (p. 317). Expectedly, such warnings went unheeded. In its journalistic, political and popular reception, Auletta's study served as another reinforcement of the unified image of the underclass (see Mead, 1992: x, 12, 133, 145, 261).
5. See [www.politics.co.uk](http://www.politics.co.uk) of 1 March 2005.
6. See his *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (1956); here quoted from the French translation (2001), pp. 30 and 32.

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**Zygmunt Bauman** is Emeritus Profesor of Sociology, University of Leeds, UK. Recent publications include *Liquid Fear* (2006, Polity Press) and *Liquid Life* (2005, Polity Press). Address: 1 Lawnswood Gardens, Leeds LS16 6HF, UK. [email: Janzygbau@aol.com]

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