

Chasing Elusive Society

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Now, as in C. Wright Mills' times, the job of sociological imagination is a simultaneous, reciprocal translation between private and public stories: a translation of the individually faced and privately tackled problems into public, collectively confronted issues and of public interests into the individually pursued life strategies. Since its inception, the place of sociology has been in the 'agora,' that private–public meeting place, where, (as Cornelius Castoriadis kept reminding us) the *olkos* and the *ecclesia* come face to face, hoping to make themselves understood to each other through a principal yet benevolent, and above all attentive dialogue.

The raw stuff processed by sociological imagination is human experience. The end-product of sociological imagination (called 'social reality') is cast of the metal smelted from the ore of experience. Though its chemical substance cannot but reflect the composition of the ore, the contents of the product also bear the mark of the smelting process which divides the ore's ingredients into useful product and waste, while its shape depends on the mould (that is, the cognitive frame) into which melted metal has been poured.

The products of sociological imagination, imagined social realities, may therefore vary in composition and shape even if the same experience supplies the raw material for the processing. Not any social reality, though, can be melted and moulded from the given ore of human experience: one may expect contemporaneous products, however different they might otherwise be, to carry a 'family resemblance' betraying their common origins. But we can also suppose that once the deposits of a certain kind of ore are depleted and a different type of ore is fed into the furnaces, the smelting techniques would be, sooner or later, modified and the moulds recast.

I suggest, and wish to argue, that the roots of the present-day reorientation of sociological inquiry, the shifts in our understanding of the products to be sought and the techniques likely

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to lead to their finding, are best understood if traced to the seminal change in the common experience of being-in-the-world.

The Managerial Imagination

The kind of imagination destined to lead to the ‘orthodox consensus’ (so dubbed by Anthony Giddens) which prevailed in most sociological departments still a couple of decades ago, had been triggered and set in motion by the experience of life carried (to quote Talcott Parsons for a change) inside a ‘principally coordinated space.’ Following the habit of Minerva’s owl, known to spread its wings by the end of the day (that is, not very long before the Sun rises on not just another, but different, day). Parsons summed up the history of social thought as a consistent, even if overly long, vitiated and contorted, effort to crack what he considered to be the principal mystery of all human existence, first hinted at by Hobbes: how is it that the actions of *voluntary* actors are nevertheless not random, and that out of the yarn of individually motivated actions regular and lasting *patterns* are woven? As if following Karl Marx’s maxim that ‘the anatomy of man is the key to the anatomy of ape,’ Parsons was also to rewrite the history of sociology as a long pilgrimage towards a preordained destination, namely his own discovery of the ‘system’ as the desperately sought ultimate and conclusive answer to the Hobbesian query. A ‘system’ with two strong arms: one (the ‘structure’) gripping actors from the outside and setting limits to their freedom, the other (‘culture’) reaching into the actors’ interior, that place where wishes and purposes are sown and incubate, and kneading free will into a shape which makes the steeliest of structural grips feel as a comfortable, caring, embrace.

To that ‘system’ Parsons imputed a purpose and that purpose was the system’s own survival: staying alive for as long as possible in a form that changed as little as possible. Whatever else the system could be ostensibly concerned with, it aimed first of all at its own stability over time. For this purpose, the system ‘maintained its pattern’ by managing—defusing and neutralizing—the tensions which threatened it. Whatever served this task, whatever helped to preserve the status quo and its immunity to tangential or shearing forces, was ‘functional’: whatever contravened the managing efforts, pressed for change and so added tension, was ‘dysfunctional.’ The system was in a good state of health (defined by Parsons as homeostatic ‘self-equilibration’) if and only if it successfully cultivated the first category of attributes and fought back the second. Structure and culture were principal contraptions serving this twofold task. They operated differently and used different tools, but converged on the same target. They cooperated and complemented each other in the on-going war of attrition waged against randomness and contingency as well as against mutations of the pattern. Both were essentially conservative forces, meant to keep things in steady shape.

However odd that picture of social reality may seem to us who happen to live in the ‘software’ rather than ‘hardware,’ the ‘liquid’ rather than ‘solid’ phase of modernity, it did square rather well with a society imagined after the pattern of an administrative office. In the ‘hardware,’ ‘solid’ phase of modernity, much of the experiential evidence pushed imagination in that direction. The main pressure to which men and women of that society were likely to be subjected was the requisite of conformity to standards and of following the routines ascribed to the allotted statuses and roles. That kind of society might have had little time and even less sentiment for inherited constraints and shown little restraint in sweeping them out of the way, but was bent on contending ‘new and improved’ constraints of its own

and, at any rate, did not take lightly any *individual* tinkering with the norms. The borderline between norm-following and deviation was clearly drawn and well guarded. Antiquity of custom might have been devalued as a title to authority, but new routines were brought into being—meant to bind tighter yet, and unlike the dilapidated and putrefied routines they came to replace bind for a very long time to come. Individual human plants might have been uprooted and forcibly ‘disembedded’ from the beds in which they have been left to germinate and sprout in the *ancien regime*, but solely in order to be ‘reembedded’ (and earnestly seek ‘reembedding’) in the beds laid out in a better planned and rationally designed societal garden.

Modernity was a response to the gradual yet relentless and alarming disintegration of the *ancien regime* with its archipelago of loosely linked and essentially self-reproducing local communities, capped by supra-local powers known for their enormous greed but fairly limited managerial ambitions and capacities. That was, in Ernest Gellner’s memorable phrase, a ‘dentistry state’—specializing in extracting by torture: by and large, the managerial skills of princes were confined to the creaming-off of surplus produce, and they stopped well short of intervening in its production.

‘Wealth of the nations’—if that idea cropped up at all—was viewed by the rulers of premodern state as something one may enjoy or suffer, but should placidly accept like one did the other inscrutable verdicts of Providence. It only came to be seen as a task and an object of scrutiny, concern, design and action, at the time when the monotonous self-reproduction of the conditions under which goods used to be produced, and above all the solidity of what came to be viewed as ‘social,’ as distinct from the divine order—could no more be relied upon. As Alexis de Tocqueville demonstrated, the *ancien regime* collapsed well before the French revolutionaries boldly went where no one before dared or thought necessary or rewarding to go—into the heretofore unexplored territory of legislating a new, artificially designed, monitored and administered, man-made order into the messy and unwieldy human affairs.

Modernity was born under the sign of such order—order seen as a task, as a matter of rational design, close monitoring and above all pernickety management. Modernity was bent on making the world manageable and on its daily management; the zeal to manage was whipped up by the not altogether groundless conviction that when left to themselves things will go bust or run amuck. Modernity set about eliminating the accidental and the contingent. If the notorious ‘project of modernity’ can be adumbrated at all, it can be only envisaged as a retrospective gloss on the firm intention to insert determination in the place where accidents and games of chance would otherwise rule; to make the ambiguous *eindeutig*, the opaque transparent, the spontaneous calculable and the uncertain predictable, to inject purpose in things and then make them to strive for the attainment of that purpose.

Reflecting, recycling and reprocessing the modern experience, social science, itself a modern invention, set about exploring the mysterious ways in which free will is deployed in the production of regularities, norms and patterns—those ‘social facts’ of Emilie Durkheim: external, coercive, blind to individual tussle and deaf to individual yearnings. In their practical application, so the incipient social science hoped, such findings would be of use in the construction of new and improved regularities, norms and patterns and making them stick and hold once they have been put in place. Social thought shared with the rest of modern science the urge to ‘know nature in order to master it’ and so make it more suitable to the needs of human species. In the case of social science though, ‘mastering nature’ meant primarily mastering the human species itself, and that meant guiding and streamlining the moves of all and any individual member of that species.

I remember being taught social psychology a half century ago mostly by the results of laboratory experiments with rats, in which hungry rats were sent through twisted corridors of a skillfully constructed maze in search of food, while the speed with which they learned, through trial and error, the shortest way to the target was carefully monitored. The less time they took to reach the pellet of food which was their reward, the more successful their learning process, the royal road to survival, was concluded to be. I was lucky to have had sensible teachers and not one of them suggested that ‘rats are like humans’: but there was a tacit agreement among us all, teachers and students alike, that from the rats’ behaviour in the maze we could learn a lot about the logic of our own human life in our own maze-like world; not because the rats were ‘like humans,’ but because the maze constructed in the experimenters’ laboratory seemed so similar to the world in which we, the humans, searched, discovered and learned our ways in our daily lives. Like the maze, our world seemed to be made of solid, impenetrable and impervious walls that could not be broken through and that would last without change of shape if not forever, then surely for the duration of our learning; like the maze, our world was full of forking paths and crossroads—each one with a single right turn but many seductive yet deceptive turns leading to a blank wall or away from the target; as in the laboratory maze, the reward for finding the right passage was in that world of ours placed each time in the same spot; learning the way to that spot and then following it with relentless monotony was apparently the sole art needed to be mastered.

To cut the long story short: the laboratory maze was a miniature replica of the ‘big world’ of humans; more exactly, of the visualization of that world by the countless humans who experienced it daily. Constructors of the maze were ‘within reason,’ or at least not wide off the mark, when they insisted that whatever goes on in the rat heads cannot be established with any degree of certainty, but this is a minor irritant only, since the mysterious things called thoughts or emotions can be left out of account without damage to the precision with which the learning process has been measured and the course of streamlining, regularizing and routinizing the learning creatures’ behaviour has been modelled. Taking a shortcut from the stimulus to the response might have been dictated by technical necessity, but no harm is done once that shortcut is taken to be the sole thing which counts is the quantifiable relation between ‘input’ and ‘output’—the forces operating ‘out there,’ in the world, and the learners’ reactions to such forces.

Emile Durkheim, the advocate of ‘external’ and coercive ‘social facts’ as the genuine driving force of individual conduct, and Max Weber, the advocate of the ‘understanding sociology’ bent on the ‘explanation at the level of meaning,’ might have suggested and deployed cognitive strategies in many ways incompatible, but there was an underlying agreement between them on at least one point: individual actors are not good judges of the causes of their own actions, and so their individual judgements are not the stuff of which good sociological accounts of ‘social reality’ can be made and ought to be better left out of account. What really makes the individuals tick, including their genuine, not self-assessed motives, is located in the world outside and more often than not eludes their grasp. According to Max Weber:

In the great majority of cases actual action goes on in a state of inarticulate half-consciousness or actual unconsciousness of its subjective meaning. The actor is more likely to ‘be aware’ of it in a vague sense than he is to ‘know’ what he is doing or be explicitly self-conscious about it. In most cases his action is governed by impulse or habit. Only occasionally, and, in the uniform action of large numbers, often only in the case of a few individuals, is the subjective meaning of the action, whether rational or

irrational, brought clearly into consciousness.... [I]t is the task of the sociologist to be aware of this motivational situation and to describe and analyse it, even though it has not actually been concretely part of the conscious ‘intention’ of the actor: possibly not at all, at least not fully.¹

While according to Durkheim, the representations which we, the ordinary and sociologically unenlightened folks, ‘have been able to make in the course of our life’ of the ‘facts properly so called,’

having been made uncritically and unmethodically, are devoid of scientific value, and must be discarded. The facts of individual psychology themselves have this character and must be seen in this way. For although they are by definition purely mental, our consciousness of them reveals to us neither their real nature nor their genesis. It allows us to know them up to a certain point.... [I]t gives us confused, fleeting, subjective impression of them, but not clear and scientific notions of explanatory concepts.²

Each one of the two great codifiers of the rules by which the game of sociology was to be played for many years to come might have ignored the significance of the other codifier’s propositions and failed to acknowledge his participation in the same game, and yet both saw eye to eye when it came to the dismissal of the effectively independent role of individuals as autonomous agents. That dismissal was, after all, what the project of modern order was about, and the role of sociology, overtly proclaimed or tacitly presumed, was to smooth up the way to the implementation of that project in practice. The sociologists’ bird’s eye view—external and thereby ‘objective’ and *wertfrei*—of the springs, causes and effects of individual actions, can be seen in retrospect as a theoretical gloss over the managing agencies’ treatment of the society at large, the whole of society as well as its variously cut out segments, as *objects of normative regulation and administration*. The strategy of sociological work had to be legislative and monological if the promise to render that work of any use to the managerial needs was to be held—but also to retain its credibility: its reasonable correspondence with daily reiterated lay experience.

The founders of modern sociology had their doubts as to the wisdom of the project they examined and described as social reality. Sometimes, not unlike God who had second thoughts about the quality of His sixth day’s job and uncharacteristically abstained for describing it as good, they had been haunted by a dark premonition that something of ultimate value has been left out of account once humankind embarked, or had been pushed, on the road on which the ordering/ rationalizing zeal kept it moving since. Weber famously agonized about the slow yet relentless erosion of individuality, Durkheim equally famously bewailed the threats to the ethics of solidarity.

Not so, though, the lesser minds who followed the path which the founders, prudently, spattered with warning signs and used intermittently both the bright and the somber colours of the palette to sketch. The managerial perspective which the founders studied in the fashion in which the entomologists examine the bizarre ways of an insect species, was by most of the followers whole-heartedly embraced and made their own. Paul Lazarsfeld’s sole worry was that sociology, presumably because of its youth, was not yet fit to raise human

¹ From Weber, M. (1971). In J. E. T. Eldridge (Ed.), *Theory of social and economic organization* (pp. 102, 93). London: Nelson.

² From Durkheim, E. (1972). *Les regles de la methode sociologique*. In A. Giddens (Ed.), *Emile Durkheim: Selected writings* (p. 59). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

society to the level of reliability and predictability of a machine—the idea which he expressed with exemplary clarity in his 1948 speech to Oslo students (as quoted by Mills):

[S]ociology is not yet in the stage where it can provide a safe basis for social engineering.... It took the natural sciences about 250 years between Galileo and the beginning of the industrial revolution before they had a major effect upon the history of the world. Empirical social research has a history of three or four decades.

For Talcott Parsons, on whose work, in his own conviction, the history of social thought, barring a few regrettable errors and silly deviations, converged with implacable logic, system-management was already the essential truth of social reality and therefore unravelling the secrets of managerial wisdom as embodied in the system's daily works was the prime task of sociological theorizing. In C. Wright Mills translation from Parsons' notoriously esoteric language into plain English, that wisdom consisted in supplying the system with all the means needed for self-equilibration, that is for remaining steadfastly, come what may, identical with itself:

There are two major ways by which the social equilibrium is maintained, and by which—should either or both fail—disequilibrium results. The first is 'socialization,' all the ways by which the newborn individual is made into a social person.... The second is 'social control,' by which I mean all the ways of keeping people in line and by which they keep themselves in line. By 'line' of course, I refer to whatever action is typically expected and approved in the social system.³

Not everybody among the practicing sociologists, to be sure, kept oneself 'in line' with this recipe for sociology as a science and art of 'keeping in line.' Robert S. Lynd for instance was deeply annoyed and repelled by the general tone of *American Soldier*, a study celebrated in sociological departments across the US and elsewhere as the pattern for future sociology to emulate:

These volumes depict science being used with great skill to sort out and to control men for purposes not of their own willing.... With such socially extraneous purposes controlling the use of social science, each advance in its use tends to make it an instrument of mass control and thereby a further threat to democracy.⁴

Mills' own verdict left no room to doubt: 'To say that "the real and final aim of human engineering" or of "social science" is to "predict" is to substitute a technocratic slogan for what ought to be a reasoned moral choice.'⁵ Of voices of ethical concern there was, indeed, no shortage. They would not however by themselves muster a power of conviction strong enough to shift the sociological establishment in its tracks. To give sociology a chance to follow the course suggested by the moral critics' reprimands and exhortations something more needed to happen, though.

And it did.

³ Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination* (pp. 100, 32). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Lynd, R. S. (1949). The Science of Inhuman Relations. *New Republic*, 121(9), 22–25 (27 August).

⁵ *The sociological imagination*, p. 117.

The Collapse of Social Engineering

The last part of the twentieth century happened to be the time of what deserves to be called the ‘Great Transformation Mark Two’; a departure which took trained sociologists, as much as the sociologically uninitiated, by surprise—and unprepared. Just as most of the members of sociological profession were busy polishing off finer details of scientific management masquerading as ‘behavioural science,’ just as they discovered the ‘corporatist state,’ ‘administered society’ and ‘Fordist factory’ as the shape of things to come, just as they followed Michel Foucault in selecting Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon as *the* prototype and ultimate embodiment of modern power—social realities started to run wild and flow away from their carefully woven conceptual net, and with fast accelerating speed.

The substance of the current Great Transformation Mark Two is the collapse of the ‘social engineering’ ambitions and the agencies willing and able to make them flesh. Before François Lyotard could declare the demise of ‘grand metanarratives,’ the decline of grand models of a predesigned and closely and comprehensively administered ‘societal order’ has started in earnest; a truly watershed-like shift in social practices began, best captured (with the benefit of hindsight) in Peter Drucker’s pithy proclamation of ‘no more salvation by society.’

The ‘managerial revolution,’ at its peak when James Burnham discovered it and presented it as (what else?) another historical inevitability, has all but met its own counterrevolution and restoration and gone into reverse. These days, the art of management increasingly relies on the refusal to manage and on leaving the yesterday subjects of management to find, like currencies do in the present-day deregulated exchanges, ‘their own level.’ Domination has now found lighter, less burdening, less awkward and less constraining strategies than continuous and ubiquitous surveillance, meticulous minute-by-minute taylorist-style regulation and dense net of sanctions, all calling for bulky administrative offices and setting up permanent garrisons on the conquered territory. It looks that the chapter of panopticon-style rule is about to be closed. Following the lead of ‘Fordist’ factories and the mass-conscript army barracks, the clumsy, unwieldy, troublesome and above all exceedingly costly panoptical structures are being phased out and dismantled.

It is no longer the job of the managers to keep their subordinates in line and guide their every move; and if it still is their job here and there, it tends to be resented as counterproductive and as making no economic sense. It is now up to the subordinates to capture the eye of superiors, to vie with each other for their attention and to make them wish to *purchase* services which once upon a time the superiors, in their avatar past as bosses, supervisors or foremen, *forced* them to provide. As the Sorbonne economist Daniel Cohen points out, ‘there are no more white collars who give orders to blue collars—there are only collars of mixed colours who confront the task they have to resolve.’ Not much is left of the managers’ management once it is up to the managed to prove their mettle and convince the managers that they won’t regret hiring them. Employees have been ‘empowered’—the endowment which boils down to bearing responsibility for making themselves relevant and valuable to the company. ‘It is no more the company which supervises its employees. It is now the turn of the employees to demonstrate (their usefulness) to the company.’⁶

This fateful departure has been greeted by many with panegyrics, inspired by unqualified enthusiasm. The dissolution of the managerially designed routines has been proclaimed to be a historic act of ‘empowerment,’ the ultimate triumph of individual

⁶ Cohen, D. (1999). *Nos temps modernes*. Paris: Flammarion (pp. 48, 56, 60).

authenticity and self-assertion which modernity in the first period of its history abominably failed to deliver turning out instead, and in huge volumes, the obedient and cowardly, dull and conformist mentality of the ‘other-directed.’ The presently occurring departure might have been all these things which its worshippers and panegyrists repute it to be—but it also, as Boltanski and Chiapello have recently explained,⁷ portends the end of security once associated with status, hierarchy, bureaucracy, fixed career tracks and tenure. The void left by security, long-term visions and planning is filled by an accelerating succession of episodic projects, each one in case of its successful implementation offering not much more than a slightly enhanced chance of ‘employability’ in other, yet undisclosed and in principle unadumbrated, but equally short-lived or explicitly fixed-time projects. Projects are blatantly short-term and until-further-notice; and so it is their profusion, their ever growing supply, preferably excess, that are deemed and hoped to compensate the lack of durability and secure prospects.

Integration-by-succession-of-short-term-projects needs little, or no control from the top. No one has to force the runners to keep running; as far as the fitness to stay in the race is concerned, the burden of proof has shifted decisively to the runners and to all those who wish to join in the race. Speaking in terms of costs and effects (the sole way of speaking that ‘makes economic sense’), no other form of social control is more efficient than the spectre of insecurity hovering over the heads of the controlled. That spectre reminds them of what Ralph Waldo Emerson observed a long time ago, that, ‘in skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed.’

The ‘new and improved’ power relations follow the pattern of commodity market which put allurement and seduction in the place once occupied by normative regulation and substituted PR for command, and needs-creation for surveillance and policing. It is true that the orthodox techniques of power-assisted integration, by and large discarded now as the means of keeping the mainstream on course, go on being deployed in keeping the ‘underclass’ of the excluded, of the seduction-blind and publicity-deaf or too poor or indolent to properly respond to either, at a distance or in secure confinement and out of mischief; but for most of us the new techniques of power offer an often exhilarating experience as enhanced freedom to choose and a chance to make rational choices (according to some sociologists quick to recast the new form of domination into social scientific wisdom, we are now all ‘rational choosers’ and we have been all along, though like M. Jourdain we failed to notice in the past). As Ulrich Beck pithily put it, ‘how one lives becomes the *biographical solution of systemic contradictions*.’⁸

The new techniques of domination result in endemic inconclusivity of choices and all too often in their inconsequentiality—so that one choice would not preempt other choices yet to be confronted, while all choices resent being fit into whole life project, still a few decades ago perceived as a ‘must.’ And no wonder they resist—since from the ‘system,’ now deprived of the headquarters with a fixed and permanent address, only diffuse and confusing, controversial and mutually contradictory signals keep coming daily in daily growing quantity. Flexible identity, constant readiness to change and the ability to change on short notice, absence of commitments of the ‘till death do us part’ style, rather than conformity to rough-and-ready standards and staunch loyalty to the ways once selected, appear to be the least risky of conceivable life-strategies.

⁷ Boltanski, L., & Chiapello, E. (1999). *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard (pp. 143, ff).

⁸ Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society: Towards a new modernity*. London: Sage (p. 137, transl. by Mark Ritter).

These are indeed profound changes; social reality is no more as it used to be at the time when the founding fathers of sociology set about cracking the mystery of a society hiding behind human fate; and not as it used to be for a while later, when George Orwell and Aldous Huxley penned down the nightmares of their time, the first of barefaced totalitarianism and the second of totalitarianism masquerading as a universal obligation of strictly rationed happiness; and not even as it appeared later still to Hannah Arendt who ascribed to modern society an endemic totalitarian tendency or Michel Foucault who picked Bentham's Panopticon as the key to understand the clockwork of social reality. And so life is not as it used to be for its users in those now largely bygone times. The context of human life, and the meaning of reasonable life strategy have changed; but will sociology, dedicated to the study of that context and that strategy follow suit?

There is no certainty that it will; yet less is it sure that it must. But in as far as sociology remains an on-going commentary on human experience the profound shift in the composition of that experience prompted by the above signalled departures needs to find, sooner or later, its reflection in sociological concerns and strategies.

Life-challenges, life-tasks and life-pursuits tend to assume today colour and shape quite different from those they bore half a century ago. They used to be, essentially, responses to the order-design and order-build-and-maintenance concerns of power. They are today, again essentially, responses to the fading and demise of such concerns. They could be understood and be so amenable to genuine conversation only if they are put in the context in which they belong—that of the retreat of the agencies striving to substitute predesigned and ready-made routines for individual choices and the steady pressure to seek and adopt biographical solutions to unpredictability, incoherence, often inanity of the socially constructed condition constantly 'on the move.'

Of what needs to be done to reestablish and reinvigorate the link between sociological work and the social agenda, we may take a clue from Franz Rosenzweig, one of the more insightful yet less often read modern thinkers, who suggested many years ago a sharp distinction, indeed an opposition, between 'logical' and 'grammatical' modes of thinking, both fast entrenched in the practice of intellectual work.

The first, 'logical' mode 'means thinking for no one else and speaking to no one else'⁹—and so enjoys a good deal of independence from those it thinks about. This mode, we may comment, is a tempting option, since it offers the welcome shelter from the confusion with which messy life of *hoi polloi* is fraught and the risks and anxieties to which any engagement with that life may lead—while the high and mighty are likely to lend a sympathetic ear to a thought that thrives on the *hoi polloi* silence and does nothing to make them audible. This kind of thinking has been in Rosenzweig view a dominant feature of the extant academic philosophy, a symptom of 'apoplexia philosophica',¹⁰ which secured for that philosophy astonishing longevity but also rendered it totally irrelevant to human life. Let me add that most of the orthodox sociology can be, with little distortion, and particularly in its current 'zombie,' posthumous phase, put fairly and squarely in the same category.

⁹ "The new thinking," in *Franz Rosenzweig: His life and thought*, presented by Nahum Glatzer. New York, Schocken 1961, p. 200.

¹⁰ Franz Rosenzweig, *Understanding the sick and the healthy*, transl. by Nahum Glatzer, Cambridge Massachusetts, Harvard University Press 1999, p. 59.

The second, the ‘grammatical thinking,’ is described by Rosenzweig as having a structure akin to speech:

‘Speaking’ means speaking to some one and thinking for some one. And this some one is always a quite definite some one, and he has not merely ears... but also a mouth....

Speech is bound by time and nourished by time and it neither can nor wants to abandon this element. It does not know in advance just where it will end. It takes its cues from others. In fact, it lives by virtue of another’s life, whether this other is the one who listens to a story, answers in the course of a dialogue, or joins in a chorus.... In actual conversations something happens.¹¹

Surfing the Network

In an interview conducted a decade ago, Ed McCracken of the Silicon Graphics company spelled out the few basic assumptions on which a new business philosophy, in his view badly overdue and so urgently needed, needs to be built:

The key to achieving competitive advantage isn’t reacting to chaos; it’s producing that chaos....

Our feeling is that this rapid, chaotic rate of change will continue forever and will continue to accelerate....

Irreverence is important in highly creative environment... Fun and irreverence also make change less scary....

For example, we recently replaced two old divisions with five new ones. We brought a New Orleans band and held a wake on our Mountain View campus. We filled two coffins with paraphernalia from each division and then buried them. This ceremony reinforced our philosophy that we must view life as it is and how it might be rather than how it was.¹²

Norman Augustine was summing up the strategy already followed by most successful among business companies and aimed at by all the rest, when he suggested that ‘the most important lesson became self-evident: there are only two kinds of companies—those who are changing and those who are going out of business.’¹³ Change has become a must and its own purpose, needing no other justification. As Richard Sennett noted to be the case in contemporary America, ‘perfectly viable businesses are gutted or abandoned, capable employees are set adrift rather than rewarded, simply because the organization must prove to the market that it is capable of change.’¹⁴ Staying put invites disaster—and so does, by implication, the intention to capitalize on past achievements instead of running after new ones, to stick to the forms and methods of action that proved effective in the past but are of no more use, to entrench and fortify what has been gained and proved profitable.

¹¹ “The new thinking,” p. 199.

¹² Quoted after Steven E. Prokesh, “Mastering chaos at the high-tech frontier: An interview with silicon graphics” Ed MacCracken, in *Harvard Business Review*, November–December 1993, pp. 142–144.

¹³ Augustine, N. R. (1997). Reshaping an industry: Lockheed Martin’s survival story. In *Harvard Business Review* (p. 85, July–August).

¹⁴ Sennett, R. (1998). *Corrosion of character: The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*. New York: Norton (p. 51).

Transience and in-built obsolescence turn into assets, certainly the source of instant and short-term gains—but short-term gains are the only gains that count in a world no longer ruled by norms which have but a sporting chance to outlast the actions that abide by them. In the short term, asset-stripping makes ‘more economic sense’ than asset-building; taking apart what was there before is more expedient and promises more profit than the laborious job of putting them together. Andrei Schleifer and Larry Summers explained why this should be the case¹⁵ during corporate takeovers, mergers and reshuffles, ‘outsourcing,’ ‘reengineering’ and ‘rationalizing’ bouts, profits are derived from the breach of contract: from getting rid of costly commitments like old and highly-paid staff, liquidizing local investments while leaving the hosts of less resourceful ‘stakeholders’ in the lurch; in short, from taking money and running away.

Breaching contract is in the short term a highly profitable step to take for the powerful—those mobile, volatile and versatile enough to take it. But because such steps are being taken, and because the ‘stakeholders’ know only too well that they may be taken at any place and time and without warning, confidence—that adhesive which holds together the known present and imagined futures, the substance which cements scattered actions into long-term trajectories—is waning. Entering long-term commitments, just as relying on other people’s long-term commitments, ‘acquires more trappings of irrational conduct as it ever more spectacularly jars with the evidence of day-to-day experience. On the other hand, friability of contracts, volatility of commitments and temporariness of engagements look increasingly like ‘rational choices.’ Aided and abetted by rational actors, they become self-propelling and self-accelerating.

Frames in which life-projects, that experiential stuff of which images of ‘society’ as a lasting and solid totality used to be woven, turn brittle and fragile; however useful at the moment, cognitive frames can no more be reasonably assumed to outlast concerns with the tasks-at-hand. Fragility of frames becomes, in its turn, the experiential premise of what François Dubet¹⁶ dubbed the ‘disappearance of society.’ Whatever ‘totality’ is imagined instead, is (as Boltanski and Chiapello suggest) composed solely of the mosaic of individual destinies, meeting in passing for a brief moment only, and solely in order to drift again their separate ways, with enhanced vigour, a moment after.

Using Gary Becker’s distinction of the types of ‘capital’ which individuals, sent adrift, can count on to keep them seaworthy, and adding to Becker’s ‘general’ and ‘specific’ human capital a third, ‘biographic’ capital, Daniel Cohen points to the daunting inadequacy of all three:

Working in the Fordist factory of old, a worker is always a worker (providing he does not drink, as Ford said), whatever trajectory he follows. In the world starting today, the risk of ‘losing everything’ is permanent. The high-class professional, owner of ‘unique’ knowledge, may brutally descend into incompetence with the appearance of a new technology; ‘specific’ worker is, by definition, one that risks everything in case his company goes bankrupt or decides to make its employees redundant. Finally, the third kind of capital, collected in the course of individual life, can be lost when the workers are permanently excluded from the labour market and fall into the vicious circle of poverty and desocialization.¹⁷

¹⁵ Schleifer, A. & Summers, L. (1988). Corporate takeovers as breach of trust. In A. Auerbach (Ed.), *Corporate takeovers, causes and consequences*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶ Dubet F. (1994). *Sociologie de l'Experience*, Paris, Seuil 1994, p. 52.

¹⁷ *Nos Temps Modernes*, p. 91.

Having examined a long series of declarations of faith made on various occasions by contemporary business leaders, and using gods of Greek mythology as metaphorical headings for their classification, Hatch, Kostera and Kolminski suggest that Hermes—the archetype of decentralized communication and change as a positive value¹⁸—is the most common type among the emergent business elite. Nigel Thrift confirms this finding when noticing the remarkable change in vocabulary and cognitive frame which mark the new, predominantly global and exterritorial, business elite.¹⁹ To convey the gist of their own actions, they use metaphors of ‘dancing’ or ‘surfing’; they no longer speak of ‘engineering’ but instead of cultures and networks, teams and coalitions, and of influences rather than of control, leadership and management. They are after looser forms of organization—such as could be put together, dismantled and reassembled at short notice or without notice. It is such fluid, endemically unstable forms of assembly which fit best their view of the surrounding world as ‘multiple, complex, and fast-moving, and therefore “ambiguous,” “fuzzy” and “plastic,”’ ‘uncertain, paradoxical, even chaotic.’

Today’s business organization has an element of dis-organization deliberately built into it: the less solid and the more fluid it is, the better. Like everything else in the world, any sort of knowledge, skills and know-how cannot but age quickly; and so it is the ‘refusal’ to accept established knowledge, the unwillingness to go by precedents and to recognize the wisdom of accumulated experience, that tend to now be seen as precepts of one-upmanship in the on-going race for effectiveness and productivity.

Boltanski and Chiapello suggest that ‘savoir-faire’—the know-how, the acquired skills of doing things—are being gradually, but relentlessly displaced by ‘savoir-être’ as the quality most valued among the present and aspiring members of the business elite. ‘Savoir-être’ turns now also into the decisive factor of recognition, promotion and enrichment. ‘Savoir-être,’ the knowing-how-to-move-in-the-world, means more than anything else the quality of being well connected, capable to communicate easily and to have a wide circle of similarly well-connected people with whom to communicate. One may say that to ‘know how to be’ is to develop an expanding network of communication with oneself at the centre, or better still to position oneself at the interface or crossing point of a great number of networks. Multiplying the links while refusing to accord preference to any of them, let alone grant to any one’s own exclusive commitment—this seems to be the strategy most likely to lift its practitioner to the top. Living in a network, moving through the network, shifting from one network to another and back with growing speed and facility, travelling light and being constantly on the move—all this is what it means to be and to stay on top. The passage from ‘savoir-faire’ to ‘savoir-etre’ boils down, in other words, to *putting the accent on polyvalence, on flexibility of employment, on the ability to learn and to adapt to new functions rather than on the possession of skills and acquired qualification, on the capacity to gain trust, to communicate, to ‘relate’...*²⁰

This shift in emphasis and the associated revaluation of values is according to Boltanski and Chiapello a manifestation of ‘the new spirit of capitalism’ which finds its fullest expression in the life-style of the emergent global business elite. But the other parts of the global elite, the world-wide academia and culture industry, follow closely. As Richard Rorty caustically observed: ‘Platoons of vital young entrepreneurs fill the front cabins of

¹⁸ Mary Jo Hatch, Monika Kostera, Andrzej Kozminski, *Managers, artists, priests* (MS), chapter 3: “Myths and managers.”

¹⁹ Nigel Thrift, “The rise of soft capitalism,” in: *Cultural values*, April 1997, p. 52.

²⁰ *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*, p. 151.

transoceanic jets, while the back cabins are weighted down with paunchy professors like myself, zipping off to interdisciplinary conferences held in pleasant places.’ But, he adds, ‘this newly acquired cultural cosmopolitanism is limited to the richest 25% of Americans.’²¹

It is this kind of life-experience, shared by the ‘richest,’ or rather best connected, most at home in the web of global communication and most mobile 25% of Americans and somewhat smaller percent of Europeans, which is processed by new sociology into the new image of social reality and recycled into a new strategy of sociological vocation. The new elite’s experience of lightness, detachment, hovering, leapfrogging, prancing, surfing and gliding needs a new conceptual net to be caught; such new language has not been slow in being coined. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, in a scornful critique of some of the most influential among the current sociological fashions, called that ‘newspeak’ resorted to by all sectors of the global elite ‘la nouvelle vulgate planétaire.’²² Among many conceptual keys once deployed by sociology to open up hidden compartments of human experience but now falling out of use, diagnosed as too rusty or reevaluated retrospectively as having been unfit from the start, ‘society’ is the first term of sociological vocabulary to be scoffed at and to go, to be replaced by ‘network.’

Society? Difficult to Imagine

Few of our contemporaries remember that when it first appeared in the language of the emerging science of sociology, ‘society’ was a metaphor, as all metaphors selective, laying bare certain features of the object to which it was applied while assigning lesser importance to its other traits. From those parts or aspects of the world to which the sociologists assigned topical relevance and which they set to explore, the metaphor of society drew to the surface and made salient the quality of being a ‘company.’ According to OED ‘fellowship, companionship,’ ‘association with OED ‘fellowship, companionship,’ ‘association with one’s fellow men, esp. in a friendly or intimate manner’ are the oldest meanings of the word ‘society.’ Some other meanings, all preceding the adoption of the term by sociology, were those of ‘a number of persons associated together by some common interest or purpose’ first recorded in 1548, of ‘the state or condition of living in association, company or intercourse with others of the same species’ ‘adopted by a body of individuals for the purpose of harmonious co-existence or for mutual benefit, defence, etc.’ (1553), of ‘a corporate body of persons having a definite place of residence’ (1588) and ‘the aggregate of persons living together in a more or less ordered community’ (1639).

There is a common denominator to all such primordial and presociological uses of the word ‘society.’ All of them, explicitly or implicitly, conveyed images of closeness, proximity, togetherness and mutual engagement. ‘Society’ could be used as a metaphor because the kind of experience which the sociologists struggled to grasp and articulate was that of a number of people sharing the same place, interacting in many if not all of their activities, meeting each other often and talking to each other on many occasions. Being united in such a way, that quantity of people faced the prospect of living in close proximity of each other for a long time to come—and for that reason the unity of life-setting was capped by the effort to close ranks,

²¹ Richard Rorty, *Achieving our country: Leftist thought in twentieth-century America*, Harvard University Press 1998, p. 86.

²² In *Le Monde Diplomatique* of May 2000, p. 6–7.

to make the co-existence ‘harmonious,’ ‘orderly’ so that ‘mutual benefits,’ benefits for all involved, may follow.

The choice of metaphors to be used in the narratives of human experience was then, as it is now, the job performed by the thinking and articulate few, and it has always been the *experience of that chosen category* which prompted the articulation, while simultaneously supplying the looking glass through which experiences of other humans, the human experience as such, was to be examined. Having that in mind, we may say that for the thinking elite of the early modern era the choice of ‘society’ as a metaphor made a lot of sense. It chimed well with what they knew and felt; the kind of ‘sociological imagination’ it triggered stayed close to their daily experience.

That was, after all, the time of ‘solid modernity,’ of building tough frames and enclosures meant to last, of integration and unification: of fastening together dispersed workshops into factories, of welding archipelagoes of scattered communal islands into the compact continents of nation-states, of cementing diffuse and variegated dialects, customs and ways of life into one nation of one language, purpose, and government. However split, at odds with each other, antagonistic and quarrelsome the various parts of the new wholes might have been—togetherness, companionship, interaction were the order of the day, as was the awareness of being doomed to share company for a long time to come and the ‘we will meet again’ feeling. Such parts of the elite as practiced *vita contemplativa* as much as their brothers-in-arms dedicated to *vita activa* faced the same predicament, the same destiny and the same prospects: namely, the present and future engagement with the rest of the people enclosed within the boundaries of the nation-state. ‘Being in each other’s company’ was their joint fate which would be better reforged into their joint vocation. Policing social order nationally or locally—the task of political and economic managers—and the cultivation of patriotic or republican sentiments—the task of thinkers reflecting on the task of the managers—were aspects of the same engagement. And the metaphor of ‘society’ was an insight into the experience of engagement.

Admittedly, society was from the start an ‘imagined entity.’ But when Benedict Anderson, to universal joy and acclaim of social-science practitioners, coined the concept of ‘imagined community,’ he followed, as most of us do most of the time, the habits of Minerva’s owl. The concept was born just when the object it named was about to dissolve in sunset twilights. ‘Society’ could grip human imagination because it did not know being imaginary, and as long as there were no reasons to discover that it was, nor to embrace that truth in case it had been suggested. Most of its life society spent in the garb of *reality*.

This is, anyway, how Emile Durkheim, writing *Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique* at the threshold of a now bygone era, could still unpack in good conscience the meaning of ‘society’ while counting on comprehension and approval of his fellow society-members. ‘Society’ was reality, full stop—and it was easy to argue and demonstrate that it did not differ in any important respect from other objects which we consider real for the fact that we can neither wish them away nor try to pass through the space they occupy without bruising heads or knees. Reality, Durkheim pointed out, ‘is to be recognized by the power of external coercion which it exercises or is capable of exercising over individuals,’ and that power can be sensed in its turn in the ‘existence of some definite sanctions or by the resistance offered against every individual act that tends to contravene it.’ In short, you know reality when you see it, and you know it by the pain you suffer, pain caused by its ‘imperative and coercive power.’²³ Durkheim did not, and had no reason to, entertain any

²³ Quoted after *Emile Durkheim: Selected writings*, p. 64.

doubt that the hard proof of society's reality is all on the plate of our shared daily experience. It was that experience that taught each and every human that society is real—sociologists were there only to put that lesson into words and set exam papers.

Metaphors help imagination. And so did the metaphor of 'society.' Without it, imagination would spill all over the vast expanses of anything but cohesive and consistent human experience, desperately seeking a common estuary yet unable to find it. Though imagination hovers above the level of daily experience, it is the images made familiar through that experience which allow us to play the game of reading shapes into the clouds and constellations in the sky. The reality of society was to Durkheim an empirical fact. In his time, it was easy to extrapolate the reality of society from the evidence abundantly supplied by everybody's experience. The kind of experience which supplied the most convincing and least contentious proofs was that of coercive power. It was that widespread sense of coercive power constraining individual freedom that set the imagination on the move and prompted it to gestate a credible image of a forceful entity that made sense of the experience which started the whole process.

And yet the 'coercive power' on which Durkheim focused his argument was not the only experience that lent credibility to 'imagined totality.' There were others, whose role in prompting and guiding imagination became more protruding in the course of the century and particularly salient as the century ran to its close—together with the experiences which squared well with the image of a cohesive, coherent, 'aware of what it was doing,' sense-giving totality at the top. This image of society drew its credibility from the experience of coercive constraint—but also from the sense of collective insurance against individual misfortune, brought about by the establishment of collectively sustained welfare provisions, and above all from the sense of the solidity and continuity of shared social institutions endowed with life-expectation long enough to dwarf the time-stretches in which individual life-projects—whole-life projects—were accommodated. All imagination-feeding experiences seemed to lead in the same direction; they converged on the legislating—executive—judicial powers of the state and it was easy to tie them together in the image of 'society' as 'a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts,' accompanied by a wisdom, reason and purpose of its own and certain to outlast the life-span of any of its individual members.

The point is though, that all three types of experience—of consistent normative pressure, of protection against vagaries of individual fate, and of majestic longevity of collectively controlled order—began to fade fast in the last decades of the twentieth century, and were replaced by another experience, which no more suggested a 'company,' but rather (to borrow Keith Tester's description)²⁴ a world that 'separated from individuals,' a world that 'has experientially become increasingly like a seamless web of overlapping institutions with an independent existence'—but, let me add, existence of an undefined life-expectation, all too often brief and always 'until further notice.' The 'we will meet tomorrow' feeling, the sense of consistency and continuity suggesting a thinking, acting, quarelling yet cooperating company cemented by shared purpose and joint planning, has all but vanished from experience. And short of that feeling, experience can hardly lead imagination to the vision of 'society' in the sense which sociology kept implying for the last hundred years at least, or render that vision credible if offered now as the warrant of life-logic.

Most common, intense and absorbing experience, the experience most likely to supply the raw material for world-imaging, is that of the consumer: an experience of life as a series of consumer choices made in response to the attractions put on display by competing

²⁴ Keith Tester, *Moral culture*, Sage 1997, p. 6.

shopping malls, television channels and websites; but also in public places and inside private abodes increasingly shaped, but above all perceived and ‘made sense of,’ after their pattern.

Harvie Ferguson²⁵ made an inventory of context-related impressions likely to be obtained by the visitors to any cathedral or chapel of consumption. The multitude of shops and the orgy of commodities vying for attention ‘rather than appearing exhaustive, offer a continuously changing point of contact, with the ideally infinite, and therefore uncontainable, commodity world behind it.’ ‘Any actual display of goods,’ however, ‘can be, no more than an arbitrary sample from an ideal set of infinite possibilities.’ The set itself is bound to elude vision forever and remain unfathomable—stretching infinitely beyond the reach and defying the powers of imagination. The idea of a ‘totality,’ not to mention a ‘compact totality,’ a ‘whole’—is the last thing which the incurably partial and random sample of the set within vision would suggest. And finally—‘like dreaming, objects are lightly taken up and cast off. None has lasting value.’ Objects are to be used as long, but no longer, as their power to satisfy is untapped or at least not-fully-exhausted: each object carries a ‘use-by’ date from the start. No permanent link is thereby likely to be built between the object and its user. In the end, ‘it does not matter which commodity is chosen’—objects are but samples of a set that cannot and would not be ever embraced in full. And the activity of sampling gains, not loses, from being random.

I have dwelled on the consumer experience, but I do not suggest that this is the *only* contemporary life-lesson that makes ‘society’ into an unfitting metaphor for the imagined totality meant to tie together the various strads of human-being-in-the-world. On the contrary—the power of consumer experience over imagination is so overwhelming due to the corroboration it receives daily from all other aspects of individualized life; most significantly, from the accumulating evidence of the impotence of the state, that executive organ of society, to shape and monitor the setting in which individual life is conducted and individual problems are expected to be tackled and resolved; from the Houdini-style conduct of the managers eager to download off and away the risks of choice-taking and the burdens of responsibility for the results; and from the daily reiterated spectacle of vanishing acts performed by familiar signposts, landmarks and orientation points which used to mark life’s itineraries and allowed life-projects to be plotted.

Imagination has been often censured for its flights of fancy, and imagining a stable core of society behind the flux of apparently unconnected experiences is still conceivable; particularly if the image of ‘society’ is firmly settled in the vernacular, remains an integral part of an inherited world-image and a powerful presence in collective memory. That image however survives mostly thanks to the inertia of the widely shared cognitive frame; unlike in the relatively recent past, it is no more reinvigorated by fresh evidence. The current experience prompts imagination in a different direction.

The currently ‘lived through’ experience would rather suggest that the realities of the human world ought to be visualized after the pattern of late medieval God construed by the Franciscans (particularly the *Fratricelli*, their ‘Minor Brothers’ faction) and the Nominalists (most famously, William of Ockham). In Michael Allan Gillespie’s²⁶ summary, that Franciscan/Nominalist God was ‘capricious, fearsome in His power, unknowable, unpredictable, unconstrained by nature and reason and indifferent to good and evil.’ Above all, He

²⁵ Harvie Ferguson, “Watching the world go round: Atrium culture and the psychology of shopping” in: Roy Shields (Ed.), *Lifestyle shopping: The subject of consumption*, Routledge 1992, pp. 34–35.

²⁶ Michael Allen Gillespie, “The theological origins of modernity,” in: *Critical Review*, 13/1–2, 1999, pp. 1–30.

stayed steadfastly beyond the reach of human intellectual powers and pragmatic abilities. Nothing could be gained by the efforts to force God's hand—and since all attempts to do so were bound to be vain and only bore testimony to human conceit, they were both sinful and unworthy of trying. God owed nothing to the humans. Having put them on their feet and told them to seek their own ways, He retreated and retired and even if not in so many words, declared His *disinterestment* in human affairs.

In the essay 'Dignity of Man,' Giovanni Pico della Mirandola,²⁷ the great codifier of the Renaissance self-confident and ebullient ambitions, drew the sole conclusions that could sensibly be drawn from God's retreat. God, he concluded, made man

as a creature of undetermined nature, and placing him in the middle of the universe, said this to him: 'Neither an established place, nor a form belonging to you alone, nor any special function have We given to you, 0 Adam, and that for this reason that you may have and possess, according to your desire and judgment, whatever place, whatever form, and whatever function you shall desire... You, who are confined by no limits, shall determine for yourself your own nature....

It is society's turn now to follow the example of Franciscan/Nominalist God and to retire. Peter Drucker, that William of Ockham and Pico della Mirandola of the 'liquid modern' era rolled into one, summed up new wisdom, in keeping with the spirit of the age, in a sound-bite: 'No more salvation by society.' It is now up to human individuals to make the case 'according to their desire and judgment,' to prove that case and to defend it against the promoters of other cases. There is no point in invoking the verdicts of society (the last of the superhuman authorities to which the modern ear agreed to listen) in order to support one's case: first, the invocation won't be believed since the verdicts—if there are any—are unknown and bound to stay unknown; secondly, the sole thing one can be pretty sure of about society's verdicts is that they would never hold for long and that there is no knowing which way they would turn next; and thirdly, like God of late mediaeval times, society is 'indifferent to good and evil.' The retreat of society, like the retreat of God several centuries before, ushered in a time of, simultaneously, cognitive ignorance and ethical doubt.

Deus turned *absconditus* triggered the Pyrrhonian crisis of the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries. *Societas* turned *abscondita* is triggering the Pyrrhonian crisis mark two—of the late twentieth and early (?) twenty-first centuries.

Will the Dead Rise?

Some Gods in the past are known to have been resurrected. The question is, can society perform (or be performed on) a similar miracle?

Unlike the resurrection of God which is the subject-matter of theology, the prospect of the resurrection of society as a credibly imagined totality is a sociological matter. That prospect translates into a thoroughly sociological question: can the individual experience fit (and prone) to be re-processed into the image of society be reborn, and what kind of social conditions must be met for that to happen?

For all we the ordinary and sociologically un-drilled people know, we are as before 'in a company.' The world into which our individual life-trajectories are woven is densely packed. Indeed, at no time before were we made daily aware of the co-presence of such an

²⁷ Quoted from the *Portable renaissance reader*, ed. by James Bruce Ross & Mary Martin McLoughlin, New York, Viking 1953, p.478.

enormous numbers of others: the streets we walk or drive through are crowded, but the screens of the TVs we watch and the computers we use to surf the cyberspace are even more so. Physical distance no longer matters: no part of the human race, however remote, is barred access to our experience.

But there are some other things which we, as long as we stay un-drilled sociologically, *do not know* and which we cannot gather from what we experience. Since we hear occasionally that what other people do and what happens to them somehow affects the life we live and the chances of living life the way we would like it to be lived—we guess that we may be travelling, all of us, aboard the same super-jumbo-jet; what we do not know, is who—if anybody—sits in the pilot cabin. For all we know, we may suspect that the cabin is empty and that the reassuring messages flowing from PA speakers are messages which have been recorded in unknown times, in places we'd never see and by people we would never meet. We can hardly keep trust in the impersonal wisdom of automatic pilots—as time and again we hear and watch yet more disturbing news: that people sitting in traffic-control towers failed to control and added to the chaos instead of guarding order. We cannot be sure about the airport to which we are heading—and even less the one at which we will eventually land. Last though not least, we have not the slightest idea what people like us, the passengers of a super-jumbo-jet, can do singly or severally to influence, change or improve all that, especially the course of the aircraft in which we are all locked....

This seems to be the crux of the problem—indeed the critical point around which the chances of society's rebirth rotate. What seems to be gone (whether forever or for the time being, remains to be seen) is the image of society as 'common property' of its members, which at least in principle can be conceivably tended to, run and managed in common; the belief that what each member does or refrains from doing, matters—to the society as a whole and all of its other members; and the confidence that 'we can do it'—we can do jointly what we jointly think can be done, see it through and watch the results; and the conviction that doing it or not doing it makes a difference, the sole difference that truly counts.

Such images and beliefs and that confidence rested once on the 'mutual fit' between ends and means, the problems and the powers required for their resolution. 'Society' armed with the resources of the nation-state could balance the books and provide the measure of security its members needed to exercise their freedom. This however does not seem to be the case any more in our fast globalizing world in which power is being evacuated from politics and the most crucial factors shaping the conditions under which individuals conduct their lives are no more controlled or even held in check by the only agencies of collective action discovered or invented in the history of modern democracy.

The paradox of rising individual freedoms coupled with the deepening sense of public impotence is not exactly new. Many years ago Max Horkheimer was alarmed by 'the helplessness of men before the opaque whole which they keep in existence' which he linked to the incompatibility of the 'continuing irrationality of society' and the poor state of knowledge at our disposal.²⁸ And he insisted that making the intellectual and situational grounds of historical action 'a topic of study and debate rather than taking them for granted or repressing them into silence' is a necessary condition of 'self-conscious history'—that is, of the recovery of collective 'public powers' currently missing. The kind of critical reflection which Horkheimer considered to be the means to that end would be itself 'a part of the development of society.'

²⁸ Max Horkheimer, *Critique of instrumental reason*, transl. by Matthew J. O'Connor & others, Seaburg 1974, p. 29.

The separation between individual and society in virtue of which the individual accepts as natural the limits prescribed for his activity is relativized in critical theory. The latter considers the overall framework which is conditioned by the blind interaction of individual activities... to be a function which originates in human action and therefore is a possible object of planful decision and rational determination of goals.²⁹

The problem is hardly new, then. What seems to be new is the question of agency capable of implementing whatever goals might have been ‘rationally determined’ and so render that ‘rational determination’ a worthy and sensible, and therefore attractive, proposition. The gradual dissipating of society as such ‘imagined agency,’ prompted by the experience of a growing gap between the globality of power and the locality of politics, between the magnitude of problems and the limitation of the instruments of action needed to confront and resolve them, is today a most vexing obstacle on the way to a ‘rational determination of goals’ and a major contemporary source of the widespread sense of ‘public impotence.’

As I tried to argue in *In Search of Politics* and in *Liquid Modernity*, the sense of impotence and the further desertion of the agora, that birthplace and homeground of effective agency of collective action and the site where private problems and public issues could meet and engage in a dialogue, are linked in a vicious circle; the two phenomena feed and reinforce each other. The less ground there is to believe that society may change anything that matters in the plight of individuals, the less reason there will be to reinvigorate the agora; and the more inexpedient and unenterprising the agora, the more credible the belief that little can be gained from attending to its health. Weakness of agency tends to be self-perpetuating and self-exacerbating—and arguably the greatest challenge that confronts sociology at the threshold of the twenty-first century.

I anticipate a question: is there a way back to a self-confident, lively agora, or rather a way forward to a new-style agora large enough to accommodate the enormity of tasks and responsibilities incubated in a ‘company’ stretched to the size of the planet? Well, in lieu of an answer I can only quote after Hannah Arendt—that supreme practitioner of the kind of *vita contemplativa* endemically pregnant with *vita activa*, the words which she herself quoted, with her whole-hearted approval, from Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, one of her spiritual heroes:

I am not duty-bound to resolve the difficulties I create. May my ideas always be somewhat disjunct, or even appear to contradict one another, if only they are ideas in which readers will find material that stirs them to think for themselves.

And I can quote Hannah Arendt’s own words that come closest to grasp her own personal credo—one that I share:

[Even] in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination [that] may well come less from theories and concepts than from the uncertain, flickering, and often weak light that some men and women, in their lives and their works, will kindle under almost all circumstances and shed over the time span that was given to them on earth.³⁰

²⁹ Max Horkheimer, *Critical theory, selected essays*, transl. by Matthew J. O’Connor & others, Herder & Herder 1972, pp. 229, 207.

³⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, Harcourt Brace & Co. 1995, pp. 8, IX.