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To cite this article: Zygmunt Bauman & Mark Haugaard (2008) Liquid modernity and power: A dialogue with Zygmunt Bauman , Journal of Power, 1:2, 111-130, DOI: [10.1080/17540290802227536](https://doi.org/10.1080/17540290802227536)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540290802227536>



Published online: 30 Jul 2008.



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Liquid modernity and power: A dialogue with Zygmunt Bauman¹

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In this discussion, Zygmunt Bauman and Mark Haugaard debate the relationship of the changing nature of liquid modernity. They analyze how power relations in liquid modernity use a fundamentally different logic **from solid modernity**. In the former, **power is exercised by controlling limiting possibilities, while the liquid modern elites dominate through uncertainty and insecurity**. The contemporary condition is characterized by insatiable consumption, mobility, the contingency of social relations and flexibility. **The old elites sought 'cultural capital' while the new elites 'consume' and 'seduce'**.

the ideal keeps shifting - your subject position is never certain

Keywords: power; culture; liquid modernity; civilization; consumption; elites

Mark Haugaard: In the literature on power, there are basically two broad traditions of power analysis. There are those, following in the footsteps of Robert Dahl to Steven Lukes, who tend to argue that power is linked to agency. Power is essentially viewed in terms of the actions of individuals prevailing over each other. In contrast, those influenced by Michel Foucault tend to view power as more flexible, as inherent in systems, in which power flows almost unseen, except in its effects, and finds its end in beings who are constituted as objects of power, through their constitution as social subjects. In the latter interpretation, power is more pervasive and less tangible. As has been argued by Stewart Clegg in *Frameworks of Power* (1989), the former could be interpreted as a modernist view of power and the latter a post-modernist one. Applying this to your work, it could be argued that the Lukesian view of power is particular to modern society as a solid thing, made of steel, used by agents situated in bureaucratic edifices. In contrast, the Foucauldian view of power would characterize the present liquid world. Would you see each of these social orders as embodying different forms of power? If so, how would you describe these forms of power?

Zygmunt Bauman: This is not how I see the solid-to-liquid changes in the substance of power and in its theorizing. What we have been calling 'power' when applying it to human affairs, was throughout the modern era at least the ability to cause things to be or to become as one wished them to be or become, or to use the OED definition, 'ability to act or affect something strongly' – presumably by 'possession of control or command over others'. In simple words, we may say – to get things done whether the people affected like it or not and whether they are better off or worse off in the result. Power so understood was present in all human congregations; in modern times, however, it turned like so many other tacitly assumed and 'matter of fact' aspects of reality into an 'art object': designed, calculated, constructed and monitored. It also became an object of study, and at least since Niccolò

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Machiavelli, a matter of ‘technique’. And it is the technique mostly – the way of ‘getting things done’ and the methods used to increase the probability that they will be done indeed – that has undergone a radical change in the passage from the ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ variety of modernity.

Foucault’s contribution to understanding how power works in modern society was twofold. One was what you have described as the emphasis put by Foucault on the ‘pervasiveness’ and ‘ubiquitousness’ (and hence ‘invisibility’) of power: contrary to the popular imagery, power is not an object stocked in presidential palaces or the offices of state officials but like blood conducted to all organs of ‘social organism’ (like families or workplaces) through the network of something akin to ‘capillary’ vessels, veins and aortas. **Power is not an object stocked in governmental safes that can be acquired by revolutionaries storming and occupying the Winter Palace; it cannot be ‘taken over’ by assaulting and removing its present holders ‘on high’. It is present in every tissue and cell of society – and it is also constantly reproduced and replenished by daily routine conduct.** And so the perpetual modern ambition of ‘changing society’ or ‘creating New Man’ is unlikely to be fulfilled by changing the occupants of the ‘seats of power’. Thus, Foucault’s insight was a reflection on the ever-more-evident bankruptcy of numerous totalitarian and authoritarian experiments in building ‘New Orders’ and re-shaping society by force and by design. I believe that this insight retains in full its validity; true, that it could only be made once historical development brought into sharp focus what used to be unnoticed before – but once made, it bears all the marks of a non-temporal truth. It grasps a universal feature of all societies at all times.

Foucault’s second contribution, however – his analysis of ‘panoptical power’, after the pattern of Hegel’s Owl of Minerva – caught the technique of power specific to the ‘solid’ variety of modernity at a time when it was already leaving center stage. **As Thomas Mathiesen (1997) suggested, panoptical power was replaced by a ‘synoptical’ one – when the majority was watching the selected few (idols, celebrities, etc.) with the intention of taking the example and emulating, or as Pierre Bourdieu put it, normative regulation was being replaced by seduction and policing by PR.** Both observations hold true, but in my view what underpinned the departures they grasped was **a substantive change in the nature of domination: obtaining discipline through ‘precarization’, deepening the uncertainty under which the subjects of power choose, decide and act, rather than through ‘management’ – surveillance, coercion and punishment. In other words, we move from cutting down the options to multiplying them, from making the setting of actions more ‘transparent’ and predictable to making it, on the contrary, more opaque and less calculable. It is because of the haunting uncertainty and insecurity that the subjects are inclined to engage in ‘synoptical’ endeavors and are growing increasingly sensitive to PR and its temptations.** If the flipside of the ‘solid modern’ domination-through-order-building was the totalitarian tendency, the flipside of the ‘liquid-modern’ **domination-through-uncertainty is the state of ambient insecurity, anxiety and fear.**

MH: In reading your description of the two social orders, I have often wondered if it is a mistake to see them in terms of progression – if indeed that is your intention. From the founders of sociology we have inherited habit of seeing traditional society and modern society in a discontinuous progressive way: we move from traditional society to modern, from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. Yet, if we look at a phenomenon like nationalism, we see a modern *Gemeinschaft*. What happens with the phenomenon of nationalism is that a transformation takes place in which traditional rationality takes on new forms, commensurable with the modern world. Foucault (1970) also views society in terms of discontinuities, yet when we read his description of the Renaissance *episteme* in *The Order of Things*, it is actually quite familiar from reading astrology in the tabloids and from alternative

medicine. So, I think what happens in the moment of transition is not so much the death of forms of thinking and their concomitant ways of life; rather it is their transformation. If we look at the gardening metaphor versus the liquid world, it seems to me that if we look to the nineteenth century we can also see a precursor of liquid modernity in what I would term the jungle metaphor. The latter metaphor is the one that informs Darwinian evolutionary theory and free-market economics. Each metaphor has its own utopia and holocaust. For the gardening metaphor, it is in the perfectly ordered society versus the Holocaust; with respect to the jungle metaphor, it is the perfect market versus famine in areas that are not 'fit for survival'. What has happened recently is that the jungle metaphor has morphed into liquid modernity. It is dominant at the moment, so it is less clear how the gardening metaphor is manifesting itself as yet. Maybe it is in the dream of a 'world order', which informs US foreign policy.

If you look to the nineteenth century, would you consider it plausible to argue that the gardening metaphor was in competition with the jungle metaphor? Do you think that liquid modernity has replaced the older modern gardening metaphor, or do you consider the transformation hypothesis a plausible interpretation of the present? In general, do you think that history is characterized by radical discontinuities or transformations?

ZB: I agree with you: communities and associations are not successive, but coexisting and complementary forms of human togetherness (even if Tönnies correctly spotted the implicit and all-too-often explicit tendency – ambition, intention, project – of his times to eliminate the first completely and replace it with the second). But I don't think that the jungle is the proper metaphor for the present day emergent and increasingly prevailing *life-strategies*. To start with, it does not belong to the same classification of which gamekeeping and gardening were parts ('jungle' is not a term from the vocabulary of behavior, but from the vocabulary of behavioral conditions). Through the tropes of gamekeepers and gardeners, I tried to grasp and better comprehend the motives/patterns of human actions dominant (though not necessarily exclusive), respectively, in the pre-modern and modern societies. Recently, I added a third metaphor, that of the 'hunter', meant to grasp the new dominant emerging response to the liquid-modern conditions of chronic precariousness and uncertainty.

Unlike the two types that happened to prevail before his tenure started, the hunter could not care less about the overall 'balance of things' – whether 'natural' or designed and contrived. The sole task hunters pursue is another 'kill', big enough to fill their game-bags to capacity. Most certainly, they would not consider it to be their duty to make sure that the supply of game roaming in the forest will be replenished after the hunt. If the woods have been emptied of game due to a particularly successful hunt, hunters may move to another relatively unspoiled wilderness, still teeming with would-be hunting trophies. It may occur to them that sometime, in a still undefined future, the planet could run out of non-depleted forests. This is not, however, an immediate worry and certainly not *their* worry. It won't jeopardize the results of the present hunt, and so surely this is not a prospect which a single hunter or a single hunting association would feel obliged to ponder, let alone to do something about.

We are all hunters now, either believing that being a hunter 'pays', or we are nudged/pressed/compelled to act like hunters – on the penalty of eviction from hunting, if not of relegation to the ranks of the game. No wonder, then, whenever we look around we are likely to see mostly other lonely hunters like us or hunters hunting in packs, which we also occasionally try to do. What we do and see is called 'individualization'. And we would need to try really hard to spot a gardener who contemplates a pre-designed harmony beyond the fence of his private garden and then goes out to bring it about. We certainly won't find many

gamekeepers with similarly vast interests and sincerely entertained ambitions (that being the prime reason for the people with ‘ecological conscience’ to be alarmed and trying their best to alert the rest of us, so far with too little effect: as shown by the most recent Ipsos MORI survey conducted in Britain, ‘although 70 per cent thought “the world will soon experience a major environmental crisis”, virtually nobody said they were prepared to do anything about it beyond trying to reuse plastic bags and recycle some rubbish’ (*The Guardian* 2007). That increasingly salient and dangerous absence of people with the gamekeeper mentality is called ‘deregulation’.

MH: While we can agree with Foucault that power does not reside in presidential palaces, there is also a certain danger to arguing that it is everywhere. As has been pointed out by Lukes in his second edition of *Power: A Radical View* (2005), if power is everywhere, if it is all-persuasive, and there is no escape from power, is power then not synonymous with socialization itself? Is this not sociologically problematic, analogous to the way that functional sociology, in the hands of Parsons, became guilty of creating an over-socialized concept of the self? The only difference would appear to be that in Foucault, power is occupying the space which Parsons attributed to internalization of norms and so on? There is also a parallel normative problem, if freedom is no longer the opposite of domination, rather it constitutes domination in its most subtle form, is there not a danger of making social critique impossible?

With respect to the image of synoptical power, I wonder if it could be argued that it constitutes the logical extension panoptical power? The idea of the panopticon is that the prisoner or worker (the subject of power) should internalize the gaze of the observer. Once they do this, they become objects of self-examination. When subject to self-examination they must judge themselves relative to some standard, which is provided by these media-created beings of the TV and tabloids. Maybe gardening goes on but it goes on in our own bodies, which are examined for imperfections, which can be made over to fit with the image of the imagined perfect selves of the few. Could it perhaps be argued that the object of gardening is no longer to create perfect societies but to cultivate the perfect individualized self?

ZB: Critical theory, at least in the Frankfurt school edition, was always an admittedly ‘hoping against hope’ undertaking. Can you find in the whole *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1972]) – as a matter of fact, in the whole of the Adorno/Horkheimer/Benjamin *oeuvre* – a single recipe for changing the world – or at least stripping it of its most odious afflictions? Adorno kept repeating that we think because we can’t not think, that aloofness (indeed, splendid isolation) is the best – perhaps the only – shape dissent, protest and opposition may take, and that the task of critical thought is to protect from oblivion the values which the world neglects/pushes aside/destroys. His writings have been, correctly, compared to a message in the bottle; counting on an unknown sailor in an unknown time, of an unknown degree of literacy, curiosity and commitment, who would pick it up, read it, comprehend it, absorb it and put it in action? Social critique is the art of doing the impossible, undertaken on the (again correct) assumption that *refraining* from it is precisely that last nail to the coffin of the task’s plausibility.

But let’s focus on ‘socialization’. Well, we are billiard balls and cue-holders at the same time. We always were, and probably will forever remain. In my latest book *The Art of Life*, now in production, I say (dropping the philosophical/sociological jargon) that what we call ‘fate’ sets the range of options and what we call ‘character’ makes the choice between them. This, in my view, is always the case – but the proportions of fate and character in

life-itinerary vary. They are different in totalitarianism than in democracy, different in solid and in liquid modernity, and different in a society of producers and in a society of consumers. And in each of those societies, they are different for every stratum in the social hierarchy. **In our particular liquid-modern society of consumers, what haunts and oppresses most of us most is not the dearth, but the profusion – indeed, excess – of options. This bane comes coupled with the scarcity of reliable signposts and authoritative guides** – and that uncertainty about the future which you rightly select as the most problem-pregnant factor of the present condition. How distinct is our condition from that of the heroes of the *Bildungsromane*–*Buddenbrocken* family, for instance – for whom trajectory was all but pre-charted, unlikely to change in their lifetime, and the sole art required from them was to follow that pre-ordained trajectory faithfully, using the pre-designed tools and deploying pre-defined skills. **Both fate and character, in varying degrees, have been now ‘liquidized’.** If the traditional image behind sociologizing about ‘socialization’ was that of ‘growing from roots’ in a pre-selected flower (or vegetable) bed – today we would rather think of anchors being intermittently cast and drawn by Flying Dutchmen exploring the uncharted seas.

I leave it to you to decide, under which conditions critical theorizing can boast more urgency and importance – Buddenbrooks’ or our contemporaries’?

One more comment: synopticon does not seem to me a ‘logical extension’ to panopticon. ... You won’t find in Jeremy Bentham (and all his self-acknowledged or unaware successors up to Frederick Taylor and the ‘Fordist Factory’ managers) any consideration of the inmates’ ‘self-reflection’ as a link in the chain of actions meant to obtain their unconditional discipline. The inmates were to be reduced to the bare choice between survival and demise; it is their self-preservation (one would say: animal) *instinct* (the admittedly pre-reflexive urge) that was counted on.

MH: What you say concerning fate and character reminds me of Anthony Giddens’ theory of structuration. He argues that structuring social actors have a certain autonomy with regard to structural reproduction. This is not to claim that they are always equally autonomous but simply that structuration is not driven externally as some kind of irresistible force. According to the theory, actors reproduce social structures out of a desire for ontological security, which is maintained as long as their habitus or practical consciousness knowledge is sufficient to allow them to adopt a ‘natural attitude’ in social situations. **If our current condition is one of increased choice and precarization, in which everything is less certain, could it be argued that the central dynamic of modern power takes place through increasing agents’ sense of ontological security? Let us not forget that the central dynamic of early capitalism, as described in *The Protestant Ethic* (Weber 2007), is also a deep sense of insecurity (from a different source, admittedly) which leads to compulsive behavior. This raises the question: how do these compulsions manifest themselves? Is it in a neurotic pursuit of goods and services that, as you observe, can never be satisfied because they are not ends in themselves?**

ZB: I coined the term ‘structuration’ in my book, *Culture as Praxis*, published almost 40 years ago in 1972, to denote the *activity* of imposing a pattern on interaction (and that means reducing the set of possibilities and by the same token, the degree of uncertainty). Activity present in *all* social action, all perception of the situation and all the following action, cannot proceed otherwise but through manipulating sets of oppositions (we would say today, *après la lettre*, that the decision-reaching chain of actions has a digital nature); something akin to Noam Chomsky’s vision of ‘generative grammar’ (Chomsky 1992). I drew inspiration from

the analyses of Claude Levi-Strauss, who found the idea of structure as a solid, stable entity, preceding acting subjects and determining their actions, misleading – a hypostasis, ‘objectifying’ verbs into a noun. *Structure, I learned from Levi-Strauss, exists solely in the activity of structuration; implying otherwise, is like speaking of a not-blowing wind or not-flowing river.* Since then, I washed my hands (and mind) of the *querelles* between the ‘determinists’ and ‘voluntarists’, as endless as they are barren since misbegotten. And of the individual versus society pseudo-problem, fascinating (because being played in the vacuum of pure abstraction, and thus offering a game guaranteed never to end) only for the contemporary heirs of medieval schoolmen.

The whole issue of ‘individual autonomy’ was born of modern managerial practice and conceived by the modern managerial spirit. It first appeared in philosophers’ and social scientists’ views in the form of an anomaly and a stumbling block – and only subsequently has been theorized as a puzzle and cognitive challenge. Given the self-equilibrating capacity and pattern-maintenance contraptions of ‘routine’ and pre-determination with which the ‘system’ aimed at by management was to be equipped, individual autonomy in all its manifestations (initiative, own set of values and preferences, own selection of ‘significant others’ and loyalties, own behavioral principles to follow, etc.) could not but be seen as a case of disruption – turbulence, derangement and all in all, one of those obstacles that needs to be dismantled, suppressed or at least neutralized for the duration, as in Max Weber’s ‘ideal type of bureaucracy’. *On entry to bureaucratic office, all passions (that ultimate subjective *Erlebnis*, resisting objectification) had to be left in the cloakroom* together with hats, coats and umbrellas.

In the late 1930s, in a book aptly named *The Managerial Revolution*, James Burnham suggested that managers, once hired by the owners of the machines with the brief to drill, discipline and supervise their operators and elicit maximum effort from the labor force, have taken the real power from their employers, the stockholders. *Managers originally had been hired since day-to-day management of essentially unwilling and resentful laborers was an awkward and cumbersome task, a chore which the owners of machinery would not relish doing themselves;* no wonder they used their profits and wealth to buy services they hoped would release them from labors everyone would gladly abandon if given the means to do so. As it transpired, however, the function of ‘managing’ – forcing or cajoling other people to do, day in day out, something which they rather would not do – proved to be the real power. The hired managers turned into real bosses. *Power was now in the hands of those who managed other people’s actions rather than of those who owned the ‘means of production’.* Management became real power, a turn of events which Karl Marx in his vision of the imminent confrontation between capital and labor did not anticipate.

Managing – in the original sense bequeathed from the times when profitable industrial process was conceived after the model of *a homeostatic machine kept on a steady, immutable course and going through pre-designed repetitive motions* – was indeed a chore. It required *meticulous regimentation and close panoptical supervision.* It needed the imposition of a monotonous routine bound *to stultify the creative impulses of both the managed and the managers.* *It generated boredom and a constantly seething resentment threatening to self-combust into an open conflict.* *It was also a costly way of getting things done:* instead of enlisting the non-regimented potential of hired labor in the service of the job, it used precious resources to stifle them, excise them and keep them out of mischief. All in all, day-to-day management was not the kind of task which resourceful people, people in power, were likely to relish and cherish: they would not perform it a moment longer than they had to, and given the power resources at their disposal, they could not be expected to put off that moment for long. And they did not.

The current ‘great transformation mark two’ (to invoke Karl Polanyi’s memorable phrase), the emergence of a widely lauded and welcome ‘**experience economy**’, signals that this moment of ‘emancipation of the managers from the burden of managing’ has arrived. Using Burnham’s terms, one could describe it as the Managerial Revolution Mark Two, though this time there was no change of power-holders. This is more a *coup d’état* rather than a revolution: proclamation from the top that the old game is abandoned and that new rules of the game are in force. People who prompted the revolution remained at the helm, if anything settled more securely than before; revolution has been initiated and conducted in the name of adding to their power, of further strengthening their grip and of immunizing their domination against resentment and rebellion they used, before the revolution, to generate. After the second managerial revolution, the power of the managers has been reinforced and made well-nigh invulnerable through cutting off all the restraining and otherwise inconvenient strings previously attached to it.

During that second revolution, the managers banished routine and invited spontaneity to occupy the vacant rooms. They refused to manage; instead, they demanded from the residents, on the threat of eviction, that they *self-manage*. The right to extend the lease has been made the subject of recurrent competition: after each round, the most playful and the best performing win the next term lease, though not a guarantee, or even an increased likelihood, of emerging unscathed from the next test. On the walls of the ‘experience economy’ banquet suite there is the reminder that ‘you are as good as your last success’ (but not as your last but one) is scribbled. Favoring subjectivity, playfulness and ‘performativity’, present-day organizations have to, wish to and do prohibit long-term planning and the accumulation of merits. This, indeed, may keep the residents constantly on the move – in the feverish search for ever new evidence that they are still welcome and that the lease is likely (even if not certain) to be prolonged (for a time, of course, until further notice).

As a consequence of the second managerial revolution, functions hitherto jealously guarded as the managers’ sole and indivisible prerogative have been ‘contracted out’ to the ‘co-operators’, and thereby replaced by market-type (‘if not fully satisfied, return the commodity to the shop’) relations, or ‘subsidiarized’ to each employee individually, thereby shifting responsibility for the performance, and the obligation to bear its consequences, from the managers’ to the employees’ shoulders. The sign of genuine domination is nowadays the facility with which performance of orthodox managerial tasks is avoided, having been moved sideways or down in the hierarchy, whereas the inability to drop awkward managerial routines on other people’s shoulders may be taken as an unmistakable sign of inferiority.

Two birds have been hit with one stone. First, as a whole or at least in large part, there has been an emancipation from the unpleasant and resented aspects of managerial position. Second, large new areas of the (direct or indirect) employees’ selves or personalities, theretofore left outside the package deal obtained by the managers when ‘buying labor’, become wide open to exploitation once the ‘empowered’ employees become self-managing. Self-managing employees can be relied upon to reach for resources which managers could not reach, to deploy the parts of themselves off-limits to the bosses in traditional labor contracts, and not to count hours spent in serving the aims of the employing company – as well as to control and neutralize such parts of themselves which could be potentially counterproductive or disruptive, or at least difficult to tame and disable, if they were admitted to the shared workplace under the rule and direct responsibility of the managers.

Niels Åkerstrøm, professor at the Copenhagen Business School, compares the present situation of the employee in an organization to that of a partner in contemporary marriage

or in a living-together couple. Here and there, the state of emergency tends to be a norm, not an exception. Here as there,

[one] is always in doubt about how much he is loved or not. ... One craves confirmation and recognition in the same way one does in marriage. ... [T]he question about whether they are part of something or not drives the individual employee's behaviour. (Kirketerp 2007, pp. 58–59)

'The code of love', Åkerstrøm believes, drives the strategy of the 'new type' organization. And so, no labor contract (just as no living-together agreement) is fixed forever; 'for better or worse' and 'till death do us part', partners are kept perpetually *in statu nascendi*, uncertain about the future, constantly in need to prove yet more convincingly their deserving of the boss' or the partner's sympathy and dedication. 'Being loved' is never earned in full, it remains forever conditional, and the condition is the constant supply of ever new proofs of one's ability to perform, to succeed, to be again and again 'one up' on the others. The job is never finished just as the right to love and recognition is never complete and unconditional, there is no time to rest on laurels, laurels wilt and fade in no time, successes tend to be forgotten the moment after being scored, life in the company is an infinite string of emergencies. This is an exciting and exhausting life, exciting for the adventurous, exhausting for the weak-hearted.

MH: Sorry, you are, of course, correct that you coined the term 'structuration'. It is a peculiar fact that certain terms become associated with thinkers who are not necessarily the originators of them. Similarly, 'habitus' has become associated with Bourdieu, yet Elias and Mauss also used it. I also agree that the agency-structure problem is not a real intellectual issue, except for those who, for some perverse reason, insist on either an agent or a subject-centered worldview. However, in Giddens' characterization of structuration as a response to ontological insecurity, I think there is an interesting insight which has direct relevance to what you are saying, and curiously, it is not one that Giddens develops in his characterization of modernity (for instance, Giddens [1990]).

Based upon Erik Erikson, Giddens argues that routinization is essential for ontological security (1984, pp. 60–73). The first act of socialization of a baby is to learn that mother, the breast, or food and love returns. We all know how amusing small children find games of peek-a-boo, which are games about object permanence. These are essentially early acts of structuration, which are made possible by a knowledge of routine, which constitutes the habitus and acts as the basis of ontological security. Torture works on the principle of destroying the habitus. Taking Jews to the camps in horrendous conditions in which they were forced to defecate in public was an act of torture which deliberately undermined their sense of front and back region – of course, this was nothing relative to what was to come later. In this vein, George Orwell says somewhere that the ultimate form of torture is forcing someone to learn that two and two makes five.

What I like about your characterization of the contemporary condition is precisely that while you recognize that it may entail increased reflexivity, you also recognize (unlike Giddens) that this reflexivity is accompanied by insecurity. While the use of insecurity has been used as a form of domination in torture, and also in tyranny (for instance under Stalin), what is new is its use as a basis for power in democratic societies. Possibly the reason that it is not contested is that this insecurity is made to appear attractive because it links into the liberal idea of autonomy, which underpins our form of democracy – being 'flexible' is a term of commendation. The idea of the free agent, who rejects tradition and authority, is the Kantian enlightened human being – which is a laudable aspiration. However, the Kantian

reflexive agent is one who reflects upon a stable world and realizes his or her reason by changing the world – like a sculptor realizing self-consciousness by molding clay. This is a different dynamic from that of the dependent employee who is constantly reflecting upon the world because those on whom he or she depends for employment can withdraw at any moment. **It is like the baby playing peek-a-boo in a world in which there is no object permanence. This creates the need for compulsive behavior, which manifests itself in hard work (directed at ensuring that the employer does not relocate), compulsive consumption (which is not about need), or fundamentalist religious belief where certainty is restored through ritual.** With regard to the latter, it is noticeable that it is not the ‘vagabonds’, the human ‘waste’, who are attracted to fundamentalism, it is frequently the more educated middle classes. Or more precisely, I suspect, those who may have tried to create stability through hard work and find satisfaction in consumption but in practice, have found that ‘success’ offers them neither. This is akin to the way in which, according to Ernest Gellner (1983), the most fervent nationalists are those who went for the dream of integrating into the culture of ‘megalomania’ but found that the latter failed to deliver, and as a consequence, returned to ‘their roots’. So, in a curious way, **enforced enlightenment (the contemporary condition), unlike voluntary enlightenment (the Kantian quest), has the potential to lead to the desire for its opposite: obedience to authority.** Does this make sense and fit with your perspective or have I misunderstood you?

ZB: To get the facts straight: when coining the term ‘structuration’ I was inspired by Levi-Strauss, or rather, I elaborated on his (Kantian in its essence) deconstruction of the idea of **structure as an on-going effort to perceive (more correctly, engrave), through the imposition of differences,** an intelligible order amidst an undifferentiated (and so formless) mass – a process universal in the work of culture, starting from **the first ‘ordering’ feat in human history: the prohibition of incest, or dividing the female half of the species into sexually eligible and non-eligible categories.** On the other hand, the invention of the gardening metaphor is unjustly, yet commonly, ascribed to me, whereas I merely borrowed it from Gellner, only adding the tropes of gamekeepers (and later the hunters) to mark the gardener’s constitutive oppositions. Sunk in the recondite trajectories of collective memory, we are all collateral victims once and unintentional culprits some other time. By the way, this is not necessarily a circumstance to be bewailed: it saves thoughts from the sorry fate of so many other human endeavors that fall under the private property rule.

Borrowing, though, more often than not (perhaps always) means recycling. **Every repetition, as Derrida insisted, is an iteration, not reiteration; just as you can’t enter the same river twice, you can’t draw a sentence/expression from one context to another without willy-nilly modifying its meaning** – infusing it with another, new-context-bound flavor. **If in doubt, read Jorge Luis Borges’ story of Pierre Menard, who managed to repeat, word for word, the signifiers of Cervantes’ *Don Quijote*, only to fail abominably to repeat the signifieds which Cervantes’ words evoked** in readers, analysts and critics, which but his ‘own’ words, of a twentieth-century writer, could not. Every quotation is for that reason burdened with the sin of deformation – at least with its risk. The issue which you now raise – of the ‘rule by uncertainty’ - may well illustrate the complexity of this quandary.

The idea of domination founded on casting the dominated in a (permanent) state of uncertainty, I derived from Michel Crozier’s (1964) *Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (an old and by now unduly forgotten study) that found each side in inner-office conflicts applying a similar strategy: striving to submit the other side to rules as strict and straightforward as possible (and so making their gambits and responses predictable), while leaving to itself a range of options as wide as possible (and so rendering itself ‘an unknown variable’ in its

antagonists' equation and a source of their endemic uncertainty). My other inspiration was Michail Bakhtin with his vision of the 'cosmic fear' (the horror of 'the tremendous': of awesome, impenetrably mysterious, intractable Nature), in the likeness of which all earthly powers struggle to model their own domination, which in their hands assumes the form of 'official fear'. Official fear, unlike its 'cosmic' original, is not however natural, 'inborn', instinctual or intuitive. It needs to be artificially produced by the powers that be and is artificially produced by them, by flexing publicly their muscle and making public, in no uncertain manner, the off-putting fate prepared for those who withstand or defy the command. Flexing the muscle may take the form of coercive and punitive measures, or of washing hands Pontius Pilate style, and leaving the hapless to the dire consequences of their haplessness. The cruel fate the insubordinate may expect comes in the form of an afflicted pain arising from one's inadequacy when it comes to coping with the task of biological and/or social survival.

What I might have added to Crozier's and Bakhtin's observations combined, was the paradox rooted, irremovably, in the very foundation of fear-based domination in both its forms: rulers need to produce and intensify an 'official fear' while presenting themselves as the (possibly the sole) salvation, the bulwark protecting the frightened against the dangers they fear, and the dialectics involved in the (never completely victorious) struggle to resolve that paradox. The paradox in question was first tackled, and resolution attempted, by ecclesiastical powers; those powers could resort to the already available supplies of 'cosmic fear' – and yet had to attend daily, untiringly repeating the call *memento mori*, to the viability and magnification of its horrifying impact. I tried to grasp that paradox in an article (Bauman 2004) which was written on the 50th anniversary of Stalin, the master supreme in the art of handling that paradox.

MH: Institutionalized religion has a ready-made cosmic existential fear which it can use to characterize itself as a 'savior'. In this covenant, domination takes place through a trade-off between security and obedience. Of course, to say that churches had ready-made existential fear is not entirely correct: preaching hell-fire and damnation was perceived to be necessary to augment these fears. Stalin had to largely manufacture fear, which he could then protect individuals from. The pact was between the security of being a compliant and informing 'friend' of the state, coupled with protection from the arbitrary tyranny of being classified as an 'enemy'.

The modern state in Western democracy has neither this existential fear nor the possibility of arbitrary tyranny. So, it has to use and create different sources of fear. Ready-made, like the existential fear that institutionalized churches use, the state has the imminent environmental catastrophe. In place of the end of the world wrought by a wrathful God, we have the very real effects of our own actions upon the environment. The problem with this fear is that, carried to its logical conclusion, it has the possibility of undermining the logic of the current dominant ideology – neo-liberalism. The other forces for insecurity are derived from the market which, as you observe, 'thrives under conditions of insecurity; it capitalizes on human fears and feelings of haplessness' (Bauman 2006, p. 135). In contrast to the social democratic welfare state, in the new marketized neo-liberal world, everything from health and employment to old age is a personal problem. The so-called 'unintended effect' of neo-liberalism is globalization which augments fears through the constant movement of capital, which makes jobs insecure and creates the threat of the 'economic migrant'. It is often argued by the prophets of neo-liberalism that they are in favor of a retreat of the state. Rather, could it not be argued that what we are witnessing is a re-deployment of the state? The state has to protect us from a 'flood of immigrants', and the insecurity created by the economy and

the environment is re-deployed as fear and anxiety surrounding everyday life. The state has to protect us from the mysterious bird flu, contaminated eggs and unlicensed sailing instructors. This deployment of anxiety about the trivia of everyday life is curious, though, because it has to be created and yet is highly successful. As anyone knows who has tried to teach people sailing, take groups on walking trips or build a house, 'safety' has become sacred, and in its name, people are willing to tolerate endless regulations, demands for certification and pay for limitless insurance. Yet, in the past, people accepted that certain activities were dangerous. The ultimate manifestation of this contemporary condition is when governments set up inquiries to examine accidents in 'adventure sports' – adventure without danger? The question is why have people become anxious about these things? How are social actors duped into reinventing their fears derived from the effects of marketization into these everyday fears? Is the secret that it taps into underlying existential fears which the institutionalized churches used? In *Liquid Fear*, you suggest that it is linked to the banishment of death from everyday life; could you perhaps explain the feedback mechanisms of this process?

If these fears create possibilities for an expansion of the state, to what extent are neo-liberals conscious of what they are doing? Obviously, we cannot posit a conspiracy, and yet it is mysterious the extent to which this ideology has become hegemonic. For instance, throughout the twentieth century, it was taken for granted that hospitals were becoming more hygienic, yet now we would appear to be returning to the situation of the nineteenth century where people are fearful of going to the hospital because they are repositories of disease. The cause is clear (privatization of cleaning contracts), yet the chosen solution is a greater marketization, coupled with ever-stringent regulation. Do we explain the hegemony of neo-liberalism in terms of its functionality to this re-deployment of state power, or are there other ways of explaining it?

ZB: I would shift the emphasis elsewhere and say that neo-liberalism sustains its hegemony through diverting the fears of the threat to security away from itself; namely, through using the weapons of deregulation and privatization to move (push or seduce) popular fears away from such existential insecurities as arise from the shifting of state responsibilities sideways (to the markets) and trickling them downward to the individually run 'life politics' (that is, from the kind of insecurities which the neo-liberal state is bent on cultivating and so stoutly refuses to tame or mitigate) towards insecurities which the neo-liberal state swears to handle and hopes to be seen (or at least visualized) as handling: people who became busy 24 hours a day and seven days a week coping with worries about that second kind of danger would have little time to meditate on the dangers of the first kind. Besides, whatever complaint against that first kind that people may articulate, they would hardly address it to the state since they no longer believe that the government (or any other human agency for that matter) is fit to tackle them. The worsening of life prospects and the breakdown of social standing come in the form of natural catastrophes – that is, of such blows as can neither be predicted nor prevented, that strike randomly and with no warning and bear the nature of intrinsically irrational occurrences which humans collectively organize and rational action can do little to stave off. (When it comes, for instance, to another bout of 'economic depression', the only exit from trouble that ministers are able and keen to offer leads perplexed and frightened individuals back to their private gardens: the way out of the depression, ministers suggest, may be a consumer's decision to go deeper into debt and to consume yet more).

French criminologist Antoine Garapon found that the three crimes Frenchmen fear most and for which they demand sternest punishment are *tabagisme* (exposure to cigarette fumes), speeding and all varieties of sexual assault. All three kinds are personally committed

offences, aimed at or menacing or harming personal bodies. Popular anxiety and vigilance seems to have moved away from public affairs and focused on the interface between the individual body and the world: the frontier which in a society of sensation seekers and avid consumers is, and cannot but remain, the site of intense border-traffic fraught with uncalculated, and probably incalculable, risks. The stage has thereby been well prepared for the new political formula of the state as, first and foremost, the guardian of individual bodily integrity and well-being – a curious development, indeed. State powers seek legitimacy in the field they never before showed inclination to enter, let alone to care for or cultivate. The modern state started with instructing farmers how to grow grains and breed cattle and telling industrialists how to run their factories; the liquid-modern state takes it upon itself to instruct men and women what to eat and what to avoid eating and how to raise children. Liquid-modern governments are set to promote their subjects' self-concern at the expense of concerns with the affairs of the state.

MH: I think you are absolutely correct, people will eventually no longer regard social welfare as the business of the state. It is for charity workers funded by philanthropists, most of whom live as tax exiles. As observed by the American billionaire Leona Helmsley, tax is for little people. I know from teaching that the idealistic student who, in the past, would have been attracted to political activism is now gravitating toward charities and NGOs. Recently one of our postgraduates interviewed some of these students who are active in the voluntary sector and asked them if they had ever thought of going into politics. What was curious was not that they rejected the idea but that they did not understand the question. They were totally nonplussed at the idea that there might be a connection between politics and solving social problems. So, it would seem that we are now entering an age, a bit like the end of the nineteenth century, in which philanthropy and charity are considered the appropriate ways of dealing with social issues.

If we go back to the panopticon/synopticon opposition, the manner in which these new elites legitimize themselves puzzles me. The panopticon was a reversal of the feudal world, in which the many also observed the few. However, in feudal society, especially as it was going into decline, the feudal aristocracy did everything in their power to prove that they were different from the observing masses. As described by Elias (1994), through the 'civilizing process' they deliberately cultivated different manners, ways of dress and speech to create the myth around themselves that they were special, and thus a legitimate elite. The bourgeoisie imitated these manners, and so the desire for distinction was passed on to the capitalist world that followed. What is curious about the new elites at the center of the synopticon is that they continually emphasize how similar they are to the observing masses. They may own super-yachts and so on, but they listen to the same music, consume the same food and even dress in the same way – except that the labels are different. In fact, in some instances, their cultural capital, if they have any, is that they are even more incompetent than most in managing their lives – they have addictions, relationship problems and so on. To use the image of the Owl of Minerva again, it seems that Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1986) was written just when that world was about to disappear. In my lectures on social theory, I still include a lecture on the book, but students continually tell me that they find the work dated. So, how do we explain the dominance of a new elite who legitimize themselves by their ordinariness?

It could be that we are entering a more egalitarian age, but the facts fail to support this. When de Tocqueville commented on the US in the 1830s, he was struck by the informality of American society, which he attributed to its relative equality compared to Europe. In the late nineteenth century, the so-called 'Gilded Age', a certain formalization of manners took

place in the US as disparities of wealth grew, which appeared to confirm de Tocqueville's perception of a correlation of equality and informalization. Yet, we are living in an age of growing disparity without an increasing cultivation of cultural capital as difference. Neither can the explanation be a modesty of a puritan kind: flaunting your wealth is becoming increasingly legitimate, rather than less so. How do we explain the fact that ordinariness, similarity rather than difference, is the key to the legitimacy of our new elites, or are appearances deceptive?

ZB: Stephen Fry (2007), a personality looked up to by anybody in London who wishes to be somebody in the world of connoisseurs of the latest cultural fashions, felt it necessary to explain and justify to the *Guardian* readers why it is all right for a person like him, acclaimed as a paragon of the most refined and sublime culture credentials, to slip once a week into 'dork' garb and dedicate his column to the latest electronic gadgets: contraptions deemed to belong to the 'popular' (in the past, in times blissfully unaware of 'political correctness', known as the 'mass'), rather than to high or high-brow culture (denominations no longer used in the present politically correct vernacular, except as a snub – in derision and inverted comas). Fry begins his plea with a confession: he possesses a quality which he suspects may be held against him by at least some slow-to-move-on-with-the-times *Guardian* readers: 'Digital devices rock my world. This might be looked on by some as a tragic admission. Not ballet, opera, the natural world, Stephen? Not literature, theatre or global politics?' And he hurries to pre-empt the potential charges:

Well, people can be dippy about all things digital and still read books, they can go to the opera and watch a cricket match and apply for Led Zeppelin tickets without splitting themselves asunder. ... You like Thai food? But what is wrong with Italian? Woah, there ... calm down. I like both. Yes. It can be done. I can like rugby football and the musicals of Stephen Sondheim. High Victorian Gothic and the installations of Damien Hirst. Herb Alpert's Tijuana Brass and the piano works of Hindemith. English hymns and Richard Dawkins. First editions of Norman Douglas and iPods. Snooker, darts and ballet ... [A] love of gismos doesn't make me averse to paper, leather and wood, old-fashioned Christmases, Preston Sturges films and country walks. Nor does it automatically mean that I read Terry Pratchett, breathe only through my mouth and bring my head slightly too close to the bowl when I eat soup.

Some limits are still respected, and their trespassing is ill advised: Pratchett is left beyond the pale (because of being the second most widely read author in Britain, and therefore too common? As common as some table manners, like bowing the head over a soup bowl, instead of lifting the hand?). *In toto*, however, this public confession and plea begs to be read as a point-blank challenge to Bourdieu's idea of 'distinction', that – as you've rightly pointed out – ruled and streamlined our thinking of 'culture' for the last three decades.

Fry himself is known to be a trend-setter, but he is also a most reliable spokesman for (and walking embodiment of) the trends currently set. He may be trusted to speak not just in his own name but in the name of hundreds of thousands of card-carrying and million aspiring members of the 'cultural elite' – people who know the difference between *comme il faut* and *comme il ne faut pas* and are first to note the moment when that difference becomes different from what it used to be a moment earlier. He did not err this time either. According to the report written by Andy McSmith (2007) and published in the online edition of *The Independent*, most authoritative academics gathered in a most authoritative university – Oxford – have proclaimed that the 'cultural elite does not exist'.

Here, McSmith, searching for an adequately hard-hitting and stirring title, however, got it wrong: what John Goldthorpe, the most reputable Oxford social-science researcher, and

his team of thirteen have concluded (from the data collected from the UK, Chile, Hungary, Israel, Netherlands and the US) is that what can be found no longer are top people distinguishing themselves from their inferiors by going to the opera and admiring whatever currently has been branded 'high art', while turning up their noses at 'anything as vulgar as a pop song or mainstream television' (McSmith 2007). The leopard of the cultural elite is very much alive and biting – it has only changed its spots. Its new spots can be called, since Richard A. Petersen of Vanderbilt University applied that word in 1992, 'omnivorousness' – opera *and* pop songs, 'high art' *and* mainstream television; a bit from here, a morsel from there; now this, now that. As Petersen recently put it: '[W]e see a shift in elite status group politics from those highbrows who snobbishly disdain all base, vulgar, or mass popular culture ... to those highbrows who omnivorously consume a wide range of popular as well as highbrow art forms'.² In other words: *Nihil* 'cultural' *a me alienum puto* seems to be the new elite's credo, though there is nothing 'cultural' with which I'd identify unwaveringly and uncompromisingly, to the exclusion of other enjoyments. I am everywhere at home, though (or because) that somewhere I'd call my home is nowhere. It is no longer one (refined) taste against another (vulgar). It is instead omnivorousness against univorousness, the readiness to consume-it-all against a selective disgust. *Elite is alive and well, livelier and busier than ever before, too engrossed in all things cultural to have time to proselytize and convert.* Apart from 'stop fussing, be less selective' and 'consume more', it has no message to convey to the crowds of the univores down in the cultural hierarchy.

At its birth, the idea of 'culture' was intended to stand for an instrument of (power-assisted) progress towards a universal human condition. 'Culture' then denoted a *proselytizing* mission, intended to be undertaken and adumbrated in the form of a resolute and sustained effort of *universal* cultivation and enlightenment, of social amelioration and spiritual uplifting and the promotion of the 'lowly' to the level of those 'on top'. Or, in Matthew Arnold's inspired and widely echoed phrase from the book under the evocative title *Culture and Anarchy*, as a labor that 'seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light' (1869, p. 40) – unpacked in the preface to *Literature and Dogma* (1873) as the job awaiting the seekers: 'Culture is the passion for sweetness and light, and (what is more) the passion of *making them prevail*' (1873, p. 59, emphases added).

'Culture' entered modern vocabulary as a declaration of *intent* – as a name of an intended *mission yet-to-be-undertaken*. Similar to the idea from which the intended action drew its metaphorical name – that of *agri*-culture, which juxtaposed the farmers and the field full of plants they farmed – it served a writ on prospective missionaries, designating in one go the relatively few called to cultivate and the many who awaited to be the objects of cultivation: wardens and their wards, teachers and the taught, producers and their products.

'Culture' stood for the planned/hoped-for compact between those in the know (and confident of being in the know) and the ignorant (or defined as ignorant by those confident of being knowledgeable); a compact signed unilaterally and put into operation by the emergent 'knowledge class' seeking its setting-the-tune role to be duly respected in the emergent new order about to be built on the ruins of the *ancien regime*. The declared intent was to educate, enlighten, improve and ennoble *le peuple*, freshly re-cast as *les citoyens* of the newly established *état-nation*: the marriage of the emergent nation self-elevating into a sovereign state, with the emergent state claiming the role of the nation's guardian. 'The project of Enlightenment' allocated to culture (understood as the *labor of cultivation*) the status of a principal tool of nation, state and nation-state *building*; simultaneously, it appointed the knowledge-class that tool's principal operator. In its travels from political ambition to philosophical ruminations and back, the two-pronged objective of the enlightenment venture

(whether explicitly proclaimed or tacitly presumed) had promptly crystallized as the discipline of *state subjects* and the solidarity of *nationals*.

Today culture consists of *offers*, not *norms*. As already noted by Bourdieu, culture lives by seduction, not normative regulation; PR, not policing; creating new needs/desires/ wants, not coercion. This society of ours is a society of *consumers*, and just as the rest of the world as-seen-and-lived by consumers, culture turns into a warehouse of meant-for-consumption products – each vying for the shifting/drifted attention of prospective consumers in the hope of attracting them and holding their attention for a bit longer than a fleeting moment. Abandoning stiff standards, indulging indiscrimination, serving all tastes while privileging none, encouraging fitfulness and ‘flexibility’ (the politically correct name of spinelessness), and romanticizing unsteadiness and inconsistency is therefore the proper (the only reasonable?) strategy to follow; fastidiousness, raising brows, stiffening upper lips are not recommended. Philip French, the TV reviewer/critic of the same pattern-and-style-setting organ in which Fry’s apology was published, praised the New Year’s Eve 2007–2008 broadcast for promising ‘to provide an array of musical entertainment guaranteed to sate everyone’s appetite’ (2007/2008, p. 6). ‘The good thing’ about it, he explained, ‘is that its universal appeal means you can dip in and out of the show depending on your preferences’. A commendable and indeed a seemingly quality in a society in which networks replace structures, whereas the attachment/detachment game and an unending procession of connections and disconnections replace ‘determining’ and ‘fixing’.

The current phase of the graduated transformation of the idea of ‘culture’ from its original Enlightenment-inspired form to its liquid-modern reincarnation is prompted and operated by the same forces that promote emancipation of the markets from the remaining constraints of a non-economic nature – social, political and ethical constraints among them. In pursuing its own emancipation, the liquid-modern, consumer-focused economy relies on the excess of offers, their accelerated aging and the quick dissipation of their seductive power – which, by the way, makes it an economy of profligacy and waste. Since there is no knowing in advance which of the offers may prove tempting enough to stimulate consuming desire, the only way to find out leads through costly trial and error. A continuous supply of new offers, and a constantly growing volume of goods on offer, are also necessary to keep the circulation of goods rapid and the desire to replace them with ‘new and improved’ goods constantly refreshed – as well as to prevent consumer dissatisfaction with individual products from condensing into the general disaffection with the consumerist mode of life as such.

Culture is now turning into one of the departments in the ‘all you need and dream of’ department store into which the world inhabited by consumers has turned. As in other departments of that store, the shelves are tightly packed with daily restocked commodities, while the counters are adorned with the advertisement of latest offers destined to disappear soon together with the attractions they advertise. Commodities and commercials alike are calculated to arouse desires and trigger wishes (as George Steiner (1975) famously put it – for ‘maximum impact and instant obsolescence’). Their merchants and copywriters count on marrying the seductive power of offers with the ingrained desire of prospective customers for ‘one-upmanship’ and ‘getting an edge’.

Liquid-modern culture has no ‘people’ to ‘cultivate’. It has instead clients to seduce. And unlike its ‘solid modern’ predecessor, it no longer wishes to work itself. Its job is now to render its own survival permanent through temporalizing all aspects of life of its former wards, now reborn as clients.

MH: Yes, liquid modernity does not have people to cultivate, but I also think it is important to remember that, as described by Elias and Bourdieu, the top-down process of modernity

dissatisfaction with the product not the market

was also coupled with a bottom-up competition. Each class competed with the next for cultural capital. In the beginning it was court society, then the bourgeoisie competing with the aristocracy. Once the latter were irrelevant then it was the upper and lower bourgeoisie in competition, and finally, this was extended to include the working classes and colonized peoples. **Each class tried to outdo the one just below it, while the lower class tried to rise by imitating those above.** While this was a process which was obnoxious in many ways, based upon appalling snobberies, **the unintended effect was a gradual process of increasing internalization of restraint.** As is argued by Elias (1994) in *The Civilizing Process* and in the paper which follows, this constraint was necessary to create a social order in which power can change hands based upon discussion, rather than violent confrontation, which has been the norm in history. **In consumption, the cultural capital of the current elites is no longer based upon being more restrained than those below. In fact, the dynamic is the contrary.** The dialectic of consumption is premised upon the absence of constraint and forward planning. If this is the case, **my normative concern would be that we may be seeing the beginnings of a process of neo-feudalization, in which violence returns to everyday life.** In a way, the rise of the 'gated community' suggests precisely this, and maybe our new consuming elites sense intuitively that if everyone were to subject themselves to their lack of restraint, to their habitus, we would return to a social order in which everyday life presupposes individuals having access to the means of violence. Is this overly pessimistic?

ZB: Inside the tightly stratified societies marked by a sharp polarization of access to both material and symbolic values (prestige, respect, insurance against humiliation), it is the people situated 'in the middle', in the space stretching between the top and the bottom layers, that tended to be most sensitive to the threat of unhappiness. Whereas the upper classes *needed* do little, or next to nothing, to *retain* their superior condition, and the bottom classes *could* do little, or nothing at all, to *improve* on their inferior lot, for the middle classes everything they didn't have but coveted appeared to be for the taking, while everything they had and cherished could be easily – in a single moment of inattention – be lost. More than any other category of people, they were bound to live in a state of perpetual anxiety, constantly oscillating between the fear of unhappiness and brief intervals of apparent safety and its enjoyment (that life on a see-saw found exemplary portrayal in Thomas Mann's [1994 (1901)] saga *Buddenbrooks*).

The offspring of middle-class families would need to strive hard and lean over backwards if they wished to keep the family fortune intact and to recreate, by their own zeal and acumen, the comfortable social standing their parents enjoyed: it was mostly to narrate the risks and fears typically related to such a task that terms like 'fall', 'social degradation' or the agony and humiliation of being *déclassé* were coined. Indeed, the middle class was the only class of the class-divided society that remained permanently squeezed between two socio-cultural borders, each of the two borders reminiscent of a front line rather than of a safe and peaceful frontier. One (upper) border was a site of incessant reconnaissance sorties and feverish defense of the few bridgeheads on the other side; the second (lower) border had to be closely watched – as it could easily let intruders in, while offering little protection to insiders unless tightly sealed by them and intensely guarded.

Among the reasons to interpret the advent of the modern era as a transformation promoted mostly by middle-class interests (or following Karl Marx, as a victorious 'bourgeois revolution'), the typically middle-class obsessive concerns with the frailty and untrustworthiness of social standing, and equally obsessive efforts of its defense and stabilization loom very large indeed. One may surmise that it was the middle classes more than any other part of modern society that, paradoxically, while manifesting their commitment

to ‘progress’ and more generally ‘melting the solids’ and permanent change, and so making a virtue of necessity, at the same time acquired a ‘vested interest’ in fighting uncertainty, accident, randomness, all kinds of ‘disorder’ contingency. **When sketching the contours of a society knowing no unhappiness, utopian blueprints proliferating at the dawn of the modern era reflected, recycled and recorded predominantly middle-class dreams and longings; the society they portrayed was as a rule purified of uncertainties – and above all of the ambiguities and insecurities of social positions, the rights they bestowed and the duties they demanded.** However, the blueprints might have differed, **they were unanimous on choosing the duration, solidity and absence of change as the essential premises of human happiness.** (Magritte portrayed middle-class dreams when painting wonderfully blue sky rolled inside high walls separating/protecting it from sinister, impenetrably dark background.) **Inside the utopian cities (virtually all utopias were urban), positions were many and different, but every resident was safe and secure in the position allocated to him.** More than anything else, utopian blueprints visualized the end to uncertainty and insecurity: to wit, a fully predictable social setting free of surprises and calling for no further reforms and reshuffles. The ‘good’ or even the ‘perfectly good’ society divined in utopias was a society that will have paid once and for all to most typically middle-class anxieties.

One may say that **the middle classes were the avant-garde, experiencing and exploring, before the rest of society, the principal contradiction of the existential condition destined to become a well-nigh universal characteristic of modern life: the perpetual tension between two values, security and freedom,** equally coveted and indispensable for a happy life but frightfully difficult, alas, to reconcile and be enjoyed together. Because of its precarious position and the need to treat as a forever unfinished task what other parts of society could view as a wanted or unsolicited ‘free gift’ of fate which they needed do little to retain and could do little to change, the middle class was particularly predisposed to facing and confronting that tension. This circumstance may explain in part why the spread of the challenges and concerns originally specific to the middle class to the bulk of modern societies has been widely recorded, rightly though not necessarily for the right reasons, as ‘embourgeoisement’.

The liquid-modern era specializes, among other things, in the universalization of the individualization/privatization of life challenges and concerns, originally a specifically middle-class condition and world-view. **All ‘identities’,** from the top to bottom and the bottom to the top (with the partial exemption of the ‘underclass’, whose very name suggests its exclusion from the class system and so from the game to which everybody else is invited and welcome) **are viewed as fluid, transient, and simultaneously universally available and easy to be lost** if not individually attended. **The liquid-modern era specializes as well in the invention of shortcuts – mostly virtual, sometimes genuine.** **While the distances between top and bottom social positions grow daily, the contraptions allowing spanning, in the form of ‘celebrities’** (that late-modern version of the early-modern shoe-shine boy lifting himself by his bootstraps **from rags to riches**) **fill the gap and through them the public imagination.** Distances between positions may remain social as before, but jumping them is a thoroughly individual matter. On the other hand, **‘failed individuals’** replace ‘exploited classes’, fear of personal inadequacy replaces the fear of revolution, while ‘one-upmanship’ replaces the class struggle, and a ‘musical chairs’ game of exclusion substitutes for solidarity, closing ranks and marching shoulder to shoulder.

Max Scheler had already noted in 1912 (Scheler 1997 [1955]) that rather than experiencing values before comparing, **the average person appreciates a value only ‘in the course of, and through comparison’** with possessions, condition, plight or quality of (an)other person(s). The snag is that **a side effect of such comparison is quite often a discovery of the non-possession of some appreciated value.** That discovery, and yet more the awareness that

acquisition and enjoyment of that value is *beyond the person's capacity*, arouses the strongest sentiments and **triggers two mutually opposite, but equally vigorous reactions: an overwhelming desire** (all the more tormenting for the suspicion that it might be impossible to fulfil) **and *ressentiment*** – a rancor caused by **a desperate urge to ward off the self-depreciation and self-contempt through demeaning, deriding and degrading the value in question, together with its possessors.** We may note that composed of two mutually contradictory urges, the experience of humiliation begets a highly ambivalent attitude; a prototypical ‘cognitive dissonance’, a hotbed of irrational behavior and an impenetrable fortress against arguments of reason; and also **a source of perpetual anxiety and spiritual discomfort** for all those afflicted.

But afflicted, as Scheler anticipated, are a great number of our contemporaries; the ailment is contagious and few, if any, denizens of the liquid-modern society of consumers can boast of being fully immune to the threat of contamination. Our vulnerability, says Scheler, is unavoidable (and probably incurable) in a kind of society in which:

[the] relative equality of political and other rights and formally acknowledged social equality go hand in hand with enormous differentiation of the genuine power, possessions and education; **a society in which everyone ‘has the right’ of considering himself equal to everybody else, whom in fact he is however unable to equal.** (Scheler 1997, p. 49)

In such a society, vulnerability is also (at least potentially) universal. Its universality, as well as the universality of the temptation of one-upmanship with which it is intimately related, reflects the inner unresolvable contradiction of a society that for *all* its members sets a standard of happiness which *most* of those ‘all’ are unable to match or are prevented from matching. What the boutiques have done for the few chosen and straddling the peaks would surely lend authority and credibility to the promises of their high-street mass copies aimed at the lesser ones and the lowly. And the promise, in both cases, is strikingly alike: a promise to make you ‘better *than...*’ – and so overwhelm, humiliate, demean and diminish the others who dream of doing what you’ve done but failed. In short, the promise of the universal rule of one-upmanship working *for you*.

An influential newspaper addressed to, and read by, the ‘thinking-talking classes’, regularly reviews novelties of the computer games market. **Numerous computer games owe their popularity to the fun they offer: safe and freely chosen rehearsals of that practice of one-upmanship which in the real world is as risky and dangerous as it is obligatory and unavoidable.** Those games allow you to do what you may have been nudged into, or even perhaps might have wished to, doing but were prevented from because of your fear of getting wounded, or your conscientious objections to wounding others. Of one of such game, recommended as ‘ultimate carnage’ and a ‘last man standing’ ‘demolition derby’, the enthusiastically sounding and not particularly ironic reviewer writes:

The most fun [...] are the events that demand you crash with the timing and precision to hurl your rag doll of a driver through the windscreen and high into the air in one of many arena events. From firing your hapless protagonist down enormous bowling alleys to skimming him like a smooth pebble across vast expanses of water, each is in equal measure ridiculous, violent and hilarious to play.

Your dexterity (your timing and precision in delivering blows) against your protagonist’s ‘haplessness’ (his inability to repay you in kind) is what makes one-upmanship such fun and so ‘hilarious to play’. The self-esteem and the ego-boosting derived from the display of your supreme skills have been obtained at the expense of the protagonist’s humiliation. Your

dexterity could be no less, and yet half as gratifying and felt half fun or less, were it not for the protagonist in the rag-doll effigy, hurled through the windscreen while you stayed safely in the driver seat.

This is, if you wish, the diffuse and ubiquitous, individualized and privatized liquid-modern avatar of the pre-modern (feudal?) violence, whose social/psychological consequences were once described, by a most insightful social historian, Lucien Febvre, as ‘peur toujours, peur partout’ (1942, p. 380).

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Notes

1. This email exchange, between Leeds and Galway, took place during the spring of 2008.
2. See his summary of, and illuminating reflection on, two decades of his own and related studies in ‘Changing arts audiences: Capitalizing on omnivorousness’ (Petersen 2005).

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