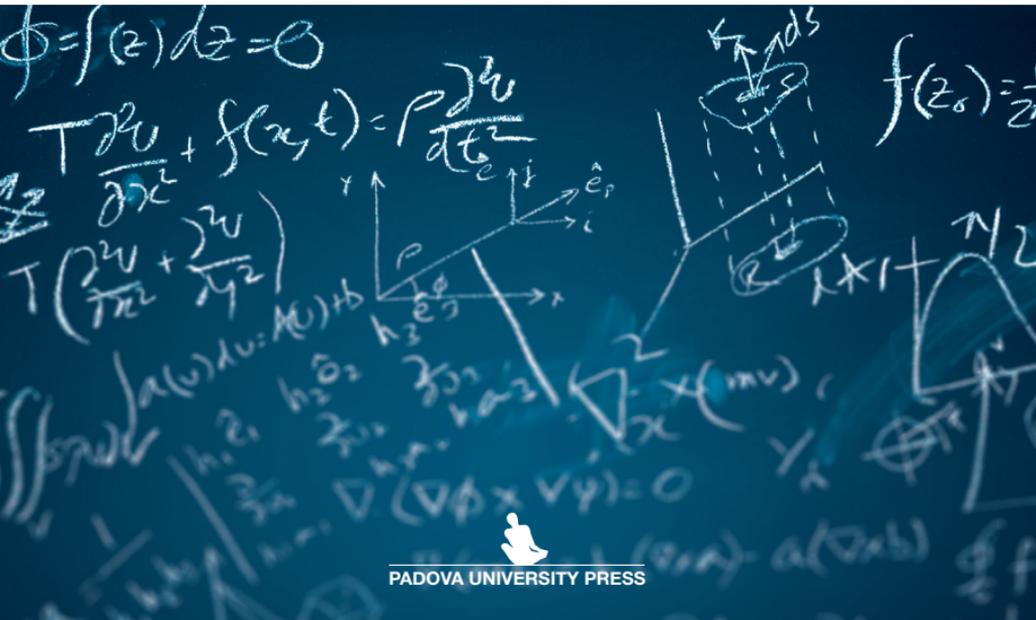


ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

Liquid modern challenges  
to education

LECTURE GIVEN AT THE COIMBRA GROUP  
ANNUAL CONFERENCE - PADOVA, 26 MAY 2011



*Liquid modern challenges to education*  
by Zygmunt Bauman

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## INDEX

INTRODUCTION	<i>I</i>
PRESENTATION OF THE AUTHOR	<i>IV</i>
LIQUID MODERN CHALLENGES TO EDUCATION	<i>1</i>
FROM LINEAR TO POINTILLIST TIME	<i>3</i>
DOWN IN THE INFORMATION DELUGE	<i>7</i>
FROM BALLISTIC TO SMART MISILES	<i>15</i>
THE END OF MERITOCRACY?	<i>29</i>
ZYGMUNT BAUMAN. BIBLIOGRAPHY	<i>39</i>

## INTRODUCTION

The reflections and thought provoking comments proposed by Zygmunt Bauman in this Occasional Paper are aimed at further investigating the theme which he addressed on the occasion of the Annual General Assembly of the Coimbra Group. The event, hosted at the University of Padova on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2011, was focussed on the mission of European Universities in a globalised world, which seems to require quite a different approach in order to face the new challenges emerging everyday and affecting the education system as much as the rest of society.

In such a prolonged period of crisis, the university education system should also reflect upon itself, upon its meaning, targets and main focus, in the light of the changed scenario. In such self-reflection exercise, the opinions and suggestions of distinguished philosophers, sociologists, as well as other scholars and scientists from different fields might be useful to help us keep up with

the new expectations and responsibilities arising from the altered context.

We believed that the standpoint of an eminent sociologist such as Zygmunt Bauman could be a precious and appropriate stimulus for us academics to reflect upon the difficulties, problems and concerns we experience today from an external perspective. Although the mission of education might have remained the same throughout the history, we need to accept that a major change has to occur in the way young people are taught in this ever changing "consumer society". To assess the great shifts which should take place in the field of education, we only need to consider how learning methods today are still too similar to the past and how the uncertainty and unpredictability which today prevail in the market world and society should call for an evolution and a complete re-thinking of our approach.

The message we find in this Occasional Paper is that the new situation probably requires an extensive overhaul of the entire system, almost a revolution, rather than continuing with adjustments to adapt to the changed context, as has frequently been the case in recent years.



Zygmunt Bauman

## PRESENTATION OF THE AUTHOR

Zygmunt Bauman was born in Poznań, Poland, in 1925 and is a sociologist and philosopher. Due to repeated acts of persecutions against the Jews, he was forced to escape in the former Soviet Union in 1939. After the end of the war, he started to study first Sociology and then Philosophy at the University of Warsaw. Being driven out of Poland by the anti-Semitic purge in 1968, Bauman, who had also lost his chair at the University of Warsaw, first went to Israel, where he taught at Tel Aviv University and then moved to the UK, where he accepted a chair in Sociology at the University of Leeds in 1972. Since then, he has almost always published in English.

Bauman is considered the theorist of postmodernity and is particularly renowned for his analyses of the links between modernity and the Holocaust and for his description of the shift from modernity to postmodernity – compared to the solid and the liquid forms of society – and of the ensuing ethical issues. He has more

recently focussed on the transformations in politics and society brought about by globalisation. *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (1998), *Liquid Modernity* (2000) and *Liquid Life* (2005) are among his many works which delve into the issues described above.

On the occasion of his speech delivered during the Annual General Assembly of the Coimbra Group, which took place in Padova on 26<sup>th</sup> May last, Bauman dwelled on the mission of European Universities in a globalised world, in the light of the role they played in the past and the role they are playing now. This Occasional Paper further develops the author's thoughts presented on that occasion, in the wider scenario of the consumer society, or better the postmodern society. Through the comments and considerations proposed in this paper, Bauman illustrates the challenges faced by Universities in the present time from a sociological point of view and provides numerous examples taken from various fields and sectors.

## LIQUID MODERN CHALLENGES TO EDUCATION

Without much ado we would, I guess, all agree that the mission of education, since articulated by the Ancients under the name of *paidea*, was, remains and probably will remain preparing the young to life. If this is so, however, then education (including the university education) faces now the deepest and most radical crisis in its rich-in-crises history: a crisis affecting not just this or that of its inherited or acquired customs, but very *raison d'être*. We are expected now to prepare the young for the life in a world that (in practice even if not in theory) renders the very idea of "being prepared" (that is, adequately trained and skilled, and not being taken by surprise by events and shifting trends) null and void. Padova University was established in the times when the Gothic Cathedrals, meant to survive if not for eternity than surely until Second Coming. In common with all the other universities, it is now expected to perform its "preparing for life" mission in time, when most architects would not

accept a permission to build unless a permission to dismantle, in 20 years or less, is attached.

Stephen Bertman<sup>1</sup> coined the terms 'nowist culture' and 'hurried culture' to denote the way we live in our kind of society. Apt terms indeed – and such as come particularly handy whenever we try to grasp the nature of the liquid-modern human condition. We may say that more than for anything else, this condition stands out for its (thus far unique) *re-negotiation of the meaning of time*.

<sup>1</sup> See STEPHEN BERTMAN, *Hyperculture: The Human Cost of Speed*, Praeger, 1998.

## FROM LINEAR TO POINTILLIST TIME

Time in the liquid-modern 'society of consumers' era is neither cyclical nor linear, as it used to be in other known societies of modern or pre-modern history. It is *pointillist* instead – broken up into a multitude of separate morsels, each morsel reduced to a point ever more closely approximating its geometrical idealization of non-dimensionality. As we surely remember from school lessons in geometry, points have no length, width or depth: they exist, one is tempted to say, *before* the space and time; both space and time are yet to begin. But like that unique point which, as the state-of-the-art cosmogony postulates, preceded the 'Big Bang' that started the universe, each point is presumed to contain an infinite potential to expand and the infinity of possibilities waiting to explode if properly ignited.

Each time-point is believed to be pregnant with a chance of another 'Big Bang', though this time on much more modest, 'individual universe' scale – and the successive points continue to be believed to be so pregnant, regardless what might have happened to the previous ones and despite the accumulating experience showing that most chances tend to be wrongly prejudged, overlooked or missed, that most points prove to be barren, and most stirrings are stillborn. A map of pointillist life, has it been charted, would have looked like a graveyard of imaginary or unfulfilled possibilities. Or, depending on the point of view, like a cemetery of wasted chances: in a pointillist universe, the rates of infant mortality and miscarriages of hopes are very high.

Precisely for that reason a 'nowist' life tends to be a 'hurried' life. The chance which each point might contain will follow it to its grave; for *that* particular, *unique* chance, there will be no 'second chance'. Each point might have been lived-through as a new beginning, but more often than not the finish would have come right after the start, with pretty little happening in between. Only an unstoppably expanding multitude of new beginnings may – just may compensate for the profusion of false starts. The

vast expanses of new beginnings believed to be waiting ahead – the points whose 'Big Bang potential' has not yet been tried and so remains thus far un-discredited – allows to salvage the hope from the debris of premature endings or, rather, stillborn gambits.

In the 'nowist' life of the avid consumer of new *Erlebnisse*, the reason to hurry is not the urge to *acquire* and *collect*, but to *discard* and *replace*. There is a latent message behind every commercial, promising new unexplored opportunity of bliss: no point in crying over spilt milk. Either the 'Big Bang' happens right now, at this very moment and at the first try, or loitering in that particular point makes sense no longer; it is time to move to another point.

In a society of producers now receding into the past (at least in our part of the globe), the advice in such a case would have been 'try harder'; but not in the society of consumers. Here, the failed tools are to be abandoned rather than sharpened and tried again with a greater skill, more dedication and better effect. And so should be abandoned the appliances that stopped short of delivering the promised 'full satisfaction', as well as the human relationships that delivered a 'Bang' not exactly as 'Big' as expected. The hurry ought to be at

its most intense when one is running from one point (failed, failing, or about to start failing) to another (yet untried). One should be wary of Faust's bitter lesson: of being cast in hell when wishing the moment – just because it was a pleasing one – to last forever.

## DROWN IN THE INFORMATION DELUGE

The speed that casts the prospect of taming and assimilation of innovations beyond the ordinary human's capacity must overshoot any target made to the measure of the already recorded demand. New products appear as a rule first, and only then seek their applications; many of them travel to the dumping site without finding any. But even the lucky few products which managed to find/conjure up a need, a desire or a wish for which they might demonstrate to be, or eventually become relevant, soon tend to succumb to the pressure of 'new and improved' products (that is, products that promise to do all they could do, only quicker and better - with an extra bonus of doing a few things which no consumer as yet thought of needing and intended to buy) well before their working capacity meets its preordained end. Most of life aspects and life-servicing gadgets grow, as Eriksen points out, on *exponential rate* – whereas in all cases of

exponential growth a point must be reached when the offer exceeds the capacity of the genuine or contrived demand; more often than not, that point arrives before another yet more dramatic point – the point of the natural limit to supply – will have been reached.

Such pathological (and eminently wasteful) tendencies of all and any exponentially growing production of goods and services could be conceivably spotted in time, recognized for what they are and perhaps even manage to inspire remedial or preventive measures – if not for one more, and in many ways special, exponential process, resulting in excess of *information*. As Ignazio Ramonet calculates<sup>2</sup>, during the last 30 years more information has been produced in the world than during the previous 5000 years, while ‘a single copy of the Sunday edition of the New York Times contains more information than a cultivated person in the eighteenth century would consume during a lifetime’. Just how difficult, nay impossible to absorb and assimilate, and so endemically wasteful, such volume of information is – one can glean for instance from Eriksen’s<sup>3</sup> observation that ‘more

<sup>2</sup> See IGNAZIO RAMONET, *La Tyrannie de la communication*, Galilée 1999, p.184.

<sup>3</sup> *Tyranny of the Moment*, p.92.

than a half of all published journal articles in the social sciences are never quoted'. That many articles are never read by anyone except the 'anonymous peer reviewers' and copy editors. It is everybody's guess how small is the fraction of the articles' contents that ever manages to find their way to the social-sciences discourse.

'There is far too much information around' – Eriksen concludes.<sup>4</sup> 'A crucial skill in information society consists in protecting oneself against the 99.99 per cent of the information offered that one does not want'. We may say that the line separating meaningful message, the ostensible object of communication, from background noise, its acknowledged adversary and obstacle, has all but disappeared. In a cut-throat competition for the scarcest of scarce resources – the attention of would be consumers – the suppliers of would-be consumer goods desperately search for the scraps of consumers' time still lying fallow, for the tiniest gaps between moments of consumption that still could be hopefully stuffed with more information, hoping that some section of those at the receiving end of the communication channel, would in the course of their desperate searches for the bits of

<sup>4</sup> *Tyranny of the Moment*, p.17.

information would come by chance across the bits which they don't need yet the suppliers wish them to absorb, and then would be sufficiently impressed to pause or slow down to absorb them rather than the bits they sought. Picking up fragments of the noise and converting them into a meaningful message is by and large a random process. 'Hypes', those products of the PR industry meant to separate 'desirable objects of attention' from the non-productive (read: *unprofitable*) noise (like the full-page commercials announcing a *première* of a new film, launching of a new book, the broadcasting of a heavily subscribed by the advertisers TV show, or an opening of a new exhibition), serve to divert for a moment, channel and condense in one direction the continuous and desperate, yet scattered search for 'filters' – focusing attention, for a few minutes or a few days, on a selected object of consuming desire.

Moments are few, however, by comparison with the number of contenders, in all probability, multiplying at an exponential pace. Hence the phenomenon of 'vertical stacking' – a notion coined by Bill Martin<sup>5</sup> to account for an

<sup>5</sup> See BILL MARTIN, *Listening to the Future: The Tim of Progressive Rock 1968-1978*, Feedback 1997; quotation that follows, p. 292.

amazing stockpiling of music fashions, as gaps and fallow plots were all filled to the brim and overflowed by the ever rising tide of supplies, while the promoters had to feverishly struggle for stretching them beyond capacity. The images of 'linear time' and 'progress' were among the most prominent victims of the information flood. In the case of popular music, all imaginable retro styles found themselves crowded in one limited span of musicfans' attention together with all conceivable forms of recycling and plagiarism counting on the short span of public memory to masquerade as latest novelties; but the case of popular music is just one manifestation of a virtually universal tendency that affects in equal measure all areas of life serviced by the consumer industry. To quote Eriksen once more<sup>6</sup>:

Instead of ordering knowledge in tidy rows, information society offers cascades of de-contextualized signs more or less randomly connected to each other. [...]

Put differently: when growing amounts of information are distributed at growing speed, it becomes increasingly difficult to create narratives, orders, developmental sequences. The fragments threaten to become hegemonic.

<sup>6</sup> *Tyranny of the Moment*, p.109, 113.

This has consequences for the ways we relate to knowledge, work and lifestyle in a wide sense.

The tendency to a 'blasé attitude' toward 'knowledge, work and lifestyle' (indeed, towards life as such and everything it contains) had been noted by Georg Simmel, with astonishing foresight, already at the start of the last century<sup>7</sup>, as surfacing first among the residents of 'metropolis' – the big and crowded modern city:

The essence of the blasé attitude consists in the blunting of discrimination. This does not mean that the objects are not perceived, as is the case with the half-wit, but rather that the meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial. They appear to the blasé person in an evenly flat and grey tone; no one object deserves preference over any other.[...]

All things float with equal specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money.

<sup>7</sup> GEORG SIMMEL, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, here quoted in 1950 Kurt Wolff's translation, as reprinted in *Classic Essays on the Culture of Cities*, ed. by Richard Sennett, Appleton-Century-Crofts 1969, p.52.

Something like a fully-fledged version of the tendency Simmel spotted and described, so to speak, *avant la lettre* – an ever more salient phenomenon strikingly similar to that discovered and dissected by Simmel under the name of ‘blasé attitude’ – is currently discussed under a different name of ‘melancholy’. Writers to use that term tend to bypass Simmel’s augury/foreboding while going yet further back to the point where the ancients, like Aristotle, left it and the Renaissance thinkers, like Ficino or Milton, rediscovered and re-examined. In Rolland Munro’s rendering<sup>8</sup> the concept of ‘melancholy’ in its current use ‘represents not so much a state of indecision, a wavering between the choice of going one way or another, so much as it represents a backing off from the very divisions’; it stands for a ‘disentanglement’ from ‘being attached to anything specific’. To be ‘melancholic’ is ‘to sense the infinity of connection, but be hooked up to nothing’. In short, ‘melancholy’ refers to ‘a form without content, a refusal from knowing just *this* or just *that*’. I would suggest that in the idea of ‘melancholy’ stands in the last account for the

<sup>8</sup> ROLLAND MUNRO, *Outside Paradise; Melancholy and the Follies of Modernization*, in «Culture and Organization», 4/2005, p. 275-89.

generic affliction of the consumer, *homo eligens* by behest of the consumer society, resulting from the fatal coincidence of the compulsion/addiction of choosing with the inability to choose. To repeat after Simmel, it stands for the in-built transitoriness and contrived in-substantiality of things that surf with the same specific gravity over the tide of stimulations; in-substantiality that rebounds in the behavioural code of consumers as indiscriminate, omnivorous gluttony – that most radical, ultimate form of hedging the bets and the last-resort life strategy – considering the 'pointillization' of time and the non-availability of the criteria that would allow to separate the relevant from the irrelevant and the message from the noise.

## FROM BALLISTIC TO SMART MISSILES

It took more than two millenia, since the ancient Greek sages invented the notion of *paidea*, for the idea of 'life-long education' to turn from an oxymoron (a contradiction in terms) into a pleonasm (akin to a 'buttery butter' or 'metallic iron'). Though that remarkable transformation has occurred quite recently – in the last few decades, under the impact of the radically accelerated pace of change in the social setting in which both principal actors of education, the teachers and the learners alike, needed to act.

The moment they start moving, the direction of ballistic missiles and the distance of their travel have been already decided by the shape and the position of gun-barrel and the amount of gunpowder in the shell; one can calculate with little or no error the spot on which the missile will land, and one can choose that spot by shifting the barrel or changing the gunpowder dose. Such qualities of ballistic missiles made them

ideal weapons to use in a positional warfare – when the targets stayed dug into their trenches or bunkers and the missiles were the sole bodies on the move.

The same qualities make them however useless once the targets invisibly to the gunner start to move – particularly if they move faster than missiles can fly, and even more so if they move erratically, in an unpredictable fashion that plays havoc with all preliminary calculations of required trajectory. A smart, intelligent missile is needed then – a missile that can change its direction in full flight depending on changing circumstances, one that can spot immediately the target's movements, learn from them whatever needs and can be learned about the target's current direction and speed – and extrapolate from the gathered information the spot in which their trajectories may cross. Such smart missiles cannot suspend, let alone finish the gathering and processing of information as it travels – as its target never stops to move and to change its direction and speed, and plotting the place of encounter needs to be constantly updated and corrected.

We may say that smart missiles would follow the strategy of 'instrumental rationality' though so to speak in its liquidized, fluid version; that is,

dropping the assumption that the end is given, steady and immovable for the duration and so only the means are to be calculated and manipulated. Even smarter missiles won't be confined to a pre-selected target at all but will choose the targets as they go. They would rather be guided by the consideration of what is the most they can achieve given their technical capacities and of which potential targets around are such as they are best equipped to hit. This would be, we may say, the case of 'instrumental rationality' in reverse: targets are selected as the missile travels, and it is the available means that decide which 'end' will be eventually selected. In such case the 'smartness' of the flying missile and its effectiveness would benefit from its equipment being of a rather 'generalistic' or 'uncommitted' nature, un-focused on any specific category of ends, not overly adjusted to the hitting a particular kind of target.

Smart missiles, unlike their ballistic elder cousins, *learn as they go*. So what they need to be supplied with initially is the *ability* to learn, and learn fast. This is obvious. What is less visible, though no less crucial than the skill of quick learning, is however the ability to instantly *forget* what has been learned before. Smart missiles wouldn't be smart were they not

able to *change mind* or revoke their previous *decisions* with no second thought and regret. They should not overly cherish the information they acquired and on no account should they develop a habit of behaving in a way that information suggested. All information they acquire ages rapidly and instead of providing reliable guidance may lead astray, if not promptly dismissed. What the '*brains*' of smart missiles must never forget is that knowledge they acquire is eminently *disposable*, good only until further notice and of only temporary usefulness, and that the warrant of success is not to overlook the moment when acquired knowledge is of no more use and needs to be thrown away, forgotten and replaced.

Philosophers of education of the solid-modern era saw teachers as launchers of ballistic missiles and instructed them how to assure that their products will stay strictly on the pre-designed course determined by the initially triggered momentum. And no wonder; ballistic missiles were at the early stages of the modern era the topmost achievement of human technical invention. They served flawlessly whoever might have wished to conquer and master the world as it then was; as Hilaire Belloc confidently declared referring to the African

natives, "Whatever happens, we have got/ The Maxim Gun, and they have not" (*Maxim gun*, let's recall, was a machine to launch great numbers of ballistic bullets in a short time, and was effective only if there were very many such bullets at hand). As a matter of fact, though, that vision of the teacher's task and the pupil's destiny was much older than the idea of 'ballistic missile' and the modern era that invented it – as an ancient Chinese proverb, preceding the advent of modernity by two millennia but still quoted by the Commission of the European Communities in support of its programme for Lifelong Learning at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, testifies: 'When planning for a year, plant corn. When planning for a decade, plant trees. When planning for life, train and educate people'. It is only with the entry into the liquid-modern times that the ancient wisdom has lost its pragmatic value and people concerned with learning and the promotion of learning known under the name of 'education' had to shift their attention from the ballistic to the smart missiles.

Harvard Business School professor, John Kotter<sup>9</sup>, advised his readers to avoid being entangled in long-term employment of

<sup>9</sup> JOHN KOTTER, *The New Rules*, Dutton, New York 1995, p.159.

the 'tenure track' sort; indeed, developing institutional loyalty and becoming too deeply engrossed and emotionally engaged in any given job, swearing a long term, not to mention a life-long commitment, is ill advised when 'business concepts, product designs, competitor intelligence, capital equipment and *all kinds of knowledge* [italics added – Z.B.] have shorter credible life spans'.

If the pre-modern life was a daily rehearsal of the infinite duration of everything except mortal life, the liquid-modern life is a daily rehearsal of universal transience. What the denizens of the liquid-modern world find out quickly is that nothing in that world is bound to last, let alone last forever. Objects recommended today as useful and indispensable are tend to *become history* well before settling for long enough to turn into a need and a habit. Nothing is believed to stay here forever, nothing seems to be irreplaceable. Everything is born with a brand of imminent death and emerges from the production line with a 'use-by date' label printed or presumed. Construction of new buildings does not start unless permissions have been issued to demolish them when the time do pull them apart comes as it surely will, and contracts are not signed unless their duration is

fixed or their termination on demand is made easy. Few if any commitments last long enough to reach the point of no return, and only by accidents decisions, all of which deemed to bind 'for the time being', stay in force. All things, born or made, human or not, are 'until-further-notice' and dispensable. A spectre hovers over the denizens of the liquid-modern world and all their labours and creations: the spectre of superfluity. Liquid modernity is a civilization of excess, redundancy, waste and waste-disposal. In a succinct and pithy formulation of Ricardo Petrella<sup>10</sup>, the current global trends direct 'economies towards the production of the ephemeral and volatile – through the massive reduction of the life-span of products and services – and of the precarious (temporary, flexible and part-time jobs)'.

The great Italian sociologist, Alberto Melucci, used to say<sup>11</sup> that 'we are plagued by the fragility of the presentness which calls for a firm foundation where none exists'. And so, 'when

<sup>10</sup> RICARDO PETRELLA, *Un machine infernale*, in «Le Monde diplomatique» June 1997, p.17.

<sup>11</sup> See ALBERTO MELUCCI, *The Playing Self: Person and Meaning in the Planetary Society*, Cambridge UP 1996, p.43. This is an extended version of the Italian original published in 1991 under the title *Il gioco dell'io*.

contemplating change, we are always torn between desire and fear, between anticipation and uncertainty'. Uncertainty means *risk*: un-detachable companion of all action and a sinister spectre haunting the compulsive decision-makers and choosers-by necessity that we are since, as Melucci pithily put it, 'choice became a destiny'.

As a matter of fact, to say 'became' is not entirely correct, as humans were choosers as long as they were humans. But it can be said that at no other time the necessity to make choices was so deeply felt and choosing has turned so poignantly self-conscious since conducted under conditions of painful yet incurable uncertainty, of a constant threat of 'being left behind' and of being excluded from the game and barred return for failing to rise up to the new demands. What separates the present-day agony of choice from discomforts that tormented the *homo eligens*, the *man choosing* at all times, is discovery or suspicion that there are no preordained rules and universally approved objectives that may be followed absolving thereby the choosers for the adverse consequences of their choices. Such reference points and guidelines as seem trustworthy today are likely to be debunked tomorrow as

misleading or corrupt. The allegedly rock- solid companies are unmasked as the figments of accountants' imagination. Whatever is 'good for you' today may be reclassified tomorrow as your poison. Apparently firm commitments and solemnly signed agreements may be overturned overnight. And promises, or most of them, seem to be made solely to be betrayed and broken. There seem to be no stable, secure island among the tides. To quote Melucci once more – 'we no longer possess a home; we are repeatedly called upon to build and then rebuild one, like the three little pigs of the fairy tale, or we have to carry it along with us on our backs like snails'.

In such a world, one is compelled therefore to take life bit by bit, as they come, expecting each bit to be different from the preceding ones and calling for different knowledge and skills. A friend of mine living in one of the UE countries, a highly intelligent, superbly educated, uniquely creative person with full command of several languages, a person who would pass most tests and job interviews with flying colours, complained in a private letter of the 'labour market being frail like gossamer and brittle like China'. For two years she worked as a free-lance translator and legal advisor,

exposed to a full measure of the usual ups and down of market fortunes. A single mother, she yearned however for a more regular income and so opted for steady employment with salary cheque every month. For one and a half years she worked for a company briefing the budding entrepreneurs on the intricacies of the EU law, but as new adventurous businesses were slow in coming the company went promptly bankrupt. Another year and a half she worked for the Ministry of Agriculture, running a section dedicated to the development of contacts with the newly independent Baltic countries. Come the next election, and the new government coalition chose to 'subsidiarize' that worry to private initiative and so decided to disband the department. The next job lasted only half a year: the State Board of Ethnic Equality has followed the pattern of governmental hands-washing exercise and declared redundant.

Never before Robert Louis Stevenson's memorable verdict – 'to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive' – sounded truer than it does now in our liquidized and fluid modern world. When destinations move places and those that don't lose their charm faster than legs can walk, cars drive or planes fly – keeping on the move matters more than the destination.

Not to make a habit of anything practiced at the moment, not to be tied up by the legacy of one's own past, wearing current identity as one wears shirts that may be promptly replaced when falling out of fashion, scorning past lessons and disdaining past skills with no inhibition or regret – are all becoming the hallmarks of the present-day, liquid-modern life politics and attributes of liquid-modern rationality. Liquid-modern culture feels no longer a culture of learning and accumulating like the cultures recorded in the historians' and ethnographers' reports. It looks instead a *culture of disengagement, discontinuity, and forgetting*.

In what George Steiner called 'casino culture', every cultural product is calculated for maximal impact (that is, for breaking up, pushing out and disposing of the cultural products of yesterday) and instant obsolescence (that is, shortening the distance between the novelty and the rubbish bin and so wary of outstaying its welcome and quickly vacating the stage to clear the site for the cultural products of tomorrow). The artists who once identified value of their work with their eternal duration and so struggled for perfection that would render all further change all but impossible, now put together installations meant to be pulled apart

when the exhibition closes or happenings that will end the moment the actors decide to turn the other way, wrap up bridges until traffic is restarted or unfinished buildings until the building work is resumed, and erect or carve 'space sculptures' that invite nature to take its toll and to supply another proof, if another proof is needed, of the ludicrous brevity of all human deeds and shallowness of their traces. No one except TV quiz competitors is expected, let alone encouraged, to remember yesterday's talk-of-the-town, though no one is expected, let alone allowed, to opt out from the talk-of-the-town of today.

Consumer market is adapted to the liquid-modern 'casino culture' which in turn is adapted to that market's pressures and seductions. The two chime well with each other and feed on each other. Not to waste their clients' time nor pre-empt their future and yet unpredictable joys, consumer markets offer products meant for immediate consumption, preferably a one-off use, rapid disposal and replacement, so that the living space won't stay cluttered once the currently admired and coveted objects fall out of fashion. The clients, confused by the mind-boggling variety of offers and vertiginous pace of their change, can no longer rely on the facility

to learn and memorize - and so they must (and do, gratefully) accept the reassurances that the product currently on offer is '*the thing*', the '*hot thing*', the '*must have*' and the '*must be seen (in or with) thing*'. The hundred-years-old Lewis Carroll's fantasy turned now reality: "it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" So where does this leave the learners and their teachers?

In my youth I kept being repeatedly warned: "quickly learned, quickly forgotten". But it was a different wisdom speaking: wisdom of the time that held long term in highest esteem whereas people at the top marked their high position by surrounding themselves with durables and leaving the transient to those lower down the ladder; that was a time when the capacity of keeping, guarding, preserving and caring-for counted for much more than the (regrettable, shaming and bewailed) facility of disposal.

This was not the kind of wisdom many of us would today approve. The once merit has turned nowadays into vice. The art of surfing has taken over form the art of fathoming the top position in the hierarchy of useful and desirable skills. If quick forgetting is the consequence of quick learning, long live quick (short,

momentary) learning! After all, if it is tomorrow commentary on tomorrow events that you need to compose, memory of the-day-before-yesterday events will be of little help. And since the capacity of memory, unlike the capacity of the servers, can't be stretched, that memory may, if anything, constrain your ability to absorb and speed up the assimilation.

## THE END OF MERITOCRACY?

Every generation has its measure of outcasts. There are people in each generation assigned to the outcast status because a "generation change" must mean some significant change in life conditions and life demands likely to force realities to depart from expectations implanted by the conditions-quo-ante and devalue the skills they trained and promoted, and therefore to render at least some among the new arrivals, those not flexible or prompt enough to adapt to the emergent standards, ill-prepared to cope with novel challenges – while unarmed to resist their pressures. It does not however happen often that the plight of being outcast may stretch to embrace a *generation as a whole*. This may, however, be happening now.

Indeed, after several decades of rising expectations, the present-day newcomers to adult life confront expectations *falling* – and much too steeply and abruptly for any hope of a gentle and safe descent. There was bright,

dazzling light at the end of every one of the few tunnels which their predecessors might have been forced to pass through in the course of their lives; instead, there is now a long, dark tunnel stretching behind every one of the few blinking, flickering and fast fading lights trying in vain to pierce through the gloom.

This is the first after-war generation facing the prospect of downward mobility. Their elders were trained to expect, matter-of-factly, that children will aim higher and reach further than they themselves managed (or had been allowed by the now bygone state of affairs) to dare and achieve: they expected the inter-generational "reproduction of success" to go on beating their own records as easily as they themselves used to overtake the achievement of their parents. Generations of parents were used to expecting that their children will have yet wider range of choices (one more attractive than another), be yet better educated, climb yet higher in the hierarchy of learning and professional excellence, be richer and feel even more secure. The parents' point of arrival will be the children's starting point – and a point with yet more roads stretching ahead, all leading upwards.

The youngsters of the generation now entering or preparing to enter the so-called "labour market" have been groomed and honed to believe that their life task is to outshoot and leave behind the parental success stories, and that such a task (barring a blow of cruel fate or their own, eminently curable inadequacy) is fully within their capacity. However far their parents have reached, they will reach further. So they, at any rate, have been taught and indoctrinated to believe. Nothing has prepared them for the arrival of the hard, uninviting and inhospitable new world of downgrading of grades, devaluation of earned merits, doors shown and locked, volatility of jobs and stubbornness of joblessness, transience of prospects and durability of defeats; of a new world of stillborn projects and frustrated hopes and of chances ever more conspicuous by their absence.

Last decades were times of unbound expansion of all and any forms of higher education and of an unstoppable rise in the size of student cohorts. A university degree promised plum jobs, prosperity and glory: a volume of rewards steadily rising to match the steadily expanding ranks of degree holders. With the coordination between demand and

offer ostensibly preordained, assured and well-nigh automatic, the seductive power of the promise was all but impossible to resist. Now however the throngs of the seduced are turning wholesale, and almost overnight, into the crowds of the frustrated. For the first time in living memory, the *whole class of graduates* faces a high probability, almost the certainty, of ad-hoc, temporary, insecure and part-time jobs, unpaid "trainee" pseudo-jobs deceitfully re-branded "practices" – all considerably below their acquired skills and eons below the level of their expectations; or of a stretch of unemployment lasting longer than it'll take for the next class of graduates to add their names to the already uncannily long job-centres waiting lists.

In a capitalist society like ours, geared in the first place to the defence and preservation of extant privileges and only in distant (and much less respected or attended to) second to the lifting of the rest out of their deprivation, this high on goals while low on means class of graduates has no one to turn to for assistance and remedy. People at the helm, on the right or the left side of the political spectre alike, are all up in arms in the protection of their currently muscular constituencies – against the newcomers still slow in flexing their laughably immature muscles, and

in all probability deferring any earnest attempt to flex them in earnest until after the next general election. Just as we all, collectively, regardless the peculiarities of generations, tend to be all-too-eager to defend our comforts against the livelihood demands of yet unborn generations.

While noting "anger, even hate" that can be observed in the class of 2010 graduates, political scientist Louis Chavel, in his article published in the 4<sup>th</sup> January issue of *Le Monde* under the title *Les jeunes sont mal partis*, asks how much time will it take to combine the rancour of the French contingent of baby-boomers infuriated by the threats to their pension nests, with that of the class 2010 denied the exercise of their right to earning pensions. But combine into what, we may (and should) ask? Into a new war of generations? Into a new leap in the pugnacity of extremist fringes surrounding increasingly despondent and dejected middle? Or into a supra-generational consent that this world of ours, prominent as it is for using duplicity as its survival weapon and for burying hopes alive, is no longer sustainable and in (already criminally delayed) need of refurbishment?

The most prestigious academic institutions issuing the most prestigious academic diplomas – institutions most generous in granting social

privileges or recompensing social deprivations – are year by year, one step at a time yet consistently and relentlessly, drifting out of the “social” market and distancing themselves ever further from the throngs of youngsters whose hopes for glittering prizes they kindled and inflamed. As William D. Cohan informs in the NYT of 16<sup>th</sup> March, annual price of tuition and fees at Harvard rose annually by 5 per cent for the last 20 years. This year, it has reached \$52.000. “Generally speaking, in order to pay just Harvard’s tuition, someone would have to earn more than \$100,000 in annual pre-tax compensation. And there are all the other family expenses – among them, the gasoline, the mortgage, food and medical expenses. Very quickly the numbers get astronomical”.

And yet, of the 30.000 applicants to Harvard last year, only 7.2 per cent were admitted. Demand for places was, and still is, high. There are still thousands of parental couples for whom the tuition fees, however exorbitant, are not an obstacle, and going to Harvard or another elite academic establishment is for their children just a routine matter: the exercise of inherited right and fulfilment of family duty - the last finishing touch before settling in one’s legitimate place inside the country’s elite of wealth. Though

there are still thousands or more of parental couples ready for whatever financial sacrifice is required to help their children in joining that elite, and making thereby their grandchildren's place in the elite a legitimate expectation. For the latter, whom the Universities turning away from their imputed/ claimed role of the social mobility promoters wounded most painfully in their parental ambitions and their trust in the American Dream, Cohan has words of consolation: he suggests that perhaps "the best and brightest among us will always find a way to achieve their inevitable level of excellence, *with or without the benefit of a traditional education*" (italics added). To make that promise sound plausible and believable, he adds an impressive and fast growing list of new billionaires, from Steve Jobs, founder of the Apple, down to the Twitter's inventor Jack Dorsey and the founder of Tumblr David Karp – all without exception education dropouts (with Karp beating the record by spending not a single day on the campus since dropping from a high school in its first year). Well, with secure industrial employment no longer on offer, the unemployed may always play lotto, don't they?

A high-class diploma from a high-class university was for many years the best investment

which loving parents could make into their children and children of their children future. Or at least it was believed to be such. That belief, like so many other beliefs combining into the American (and not just American) dream in the gates wide open to all hard working people determined to push them open and persisting in keeping them open, is now being shattered. The labour market for holders of high education credentials is currently shrinking – perhaps faster yet than the market for those lacking university certificates to enhance their market value. Nowadays, it is not just people failing to make the right kind of effort and the right kind of sacrifice who find the gates, *expectedly*, being shut in their face; those who did everything they believed to be necessary for success, are finding themselves, though in their case *unexpectedly*, in much the same predicament, having been turned away from the gate empty-handed. This, to be sure, is an entirely new ball game, as the Americans use to say.

Social-promotion-through-education served for many years as a fig leaf for naked/indecent inequality of human conditions and prospects: as long as academic achievements correlated with handsome social rewards, people who failed to climb up the social ladder had only

themselves to blame – and only themselves on whom to unload bitterness and wrath. After all (so the educational promise suggested), better places were reserved for people who worked better, and good fortune came to people who forced it to be good by diligent learning and a lot of sweat on the brow; if a bad fortune was your lot, your learning and your work were obviously not as good as they should have been. That apology for persistent and growing inequality is however sounding nowadays all but hollow: yet hollower it would sound than it does, were it not for the loud proclamations of the advent to “knowledge society”, a kind of society in which knowledge becomes the prime source of national and personal wealth and in which, accordingly, the possessors and users of knowledge are entitled to that wealth’s lion’s share.

The shock of the new and rapidly rising phenomenon of the graduate unemployment, or graduate employment much below graduate (proclaimed to be legitimate) expectations, hits painfully not just the minority of zealous climbers – but also the much wider category of people who suffered meekly their unappetizing lot, numbed by the shame of missing the chances waiting in abundance for those less work-shy

than themselves. It is difficult to say which of the two category-specific blows can and will cause more social damage, but together, appearing simultaneously, they make quite an explosive mixture. You can almost see quite a few people at the helm shuddering while reading Cohan's sombre warning/ premonition: "One lesson to be learned from the recent uprising in the Middle East, especially in Egypt, is that a long-suffering group of highly educated but underemployed people can be the catalyst for long overdue societal change".

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