

Modernity and its consequences for wellbeing

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Cultural influences on health and wellbeing in Scotland: scanning the literature(s)

Discussion paper 6

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Introduction

Those already familiar with this research project will know that it originates in a hypothesis developed by Australian public health researcher, Richard Eckersley. Eckersley suggests that we experience static or declining levels of wellbeing in 'modern' societies because such societies focus primarily on economic and materialist concerns, to the exclusion of other values, and are characterised by rampant individualism and consumerism. From a public health perspective, this may lead to a range of contemporary mental and physical health problems, including addictions of various sorts and other forms of 'dis-ease'. We received funding from the National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Wellbeing to investigate the relationship between 'modern' culture and wellbeing, in the Scottish context.

During the first year of the study we produced, as part of our work, a set of papers which tried to draw together just some of the many insights, findings and forms of knowledge, available from many different disciplines. Written originally for internal debate within our research discussion and advisory group, these papers were made more widely available through publication on the websites of our main research partner, the Glasgow Centre for Population Health, and our funder, the National Programme, as well as the website of the Centre for Confidence and Wellbeing. The five 2006 papers provoked considerable interest, in part because they make plain the daunting complexity of the whole subject of wellbeing. Much of 2007 was then spent in making this information more accessible, particularly to a public health audience, through the usual means of formal publication in academic journals.

We also took our developing insights and findings to a variety of groups and individuals across Scotland, to engage others more directly in debates about the issues which were exercising us. That work is ongoing, and our experience here suggests that people across Scotland are both interested in, and concerned about, the relationship between the way we live in 'modern' societies, and our mental health and overall wellbeing. In presenting our work, both within and outside Scotland, we have found similar levels of interest and enthusiasm.

The task of scanning the literature remains a work in progress, as our coverage of some massive bodies of literature has inevitably been somewhat limited and partial. In realistic terms it is probably impossible to ever 'finish' such work, partly because of the breadth of existing work in the field but also because new papers, books, etc. on relevant topics emerge with increasing regularity. Yet we need to maintain this element of our work, in conjunction with fieldwork, as one of our fundamental research aims is to promote a greater understanding of wellbeing (which includes emotional and mental wellbeing) and its relationship to culture, within the Scottish context. The discussion papers have been one mechanism for achieving this.

This paper differs from the others, however, in that it focuses solely on the contributions of a single writer from within a single discipline, rather than providing the kind of breadth we have striven for in earlier papers. As those papers demonstrate, the steadily expanding evidence base on wellbeing now available from disciplines such as psychology, economics, neuroscience, etc. tells us much that is valuable, in terms of the biological bases of human wellbeing, how it may be measured and, hopefully, improved. However, disciplines that have

a theoretical and empirical focus on *the individual* cannot tell us about the ways in which the unprecedented social and cultural changes which stem from modernity now affect both our individual lives and the society in which we live. In order to look beyond ‘what’s in our heads’ and understand the processes which have shaped the society and culture in which we live today we need to turn to the social sciences.

We choose to focus here on just a fraction of the work of **Zygmunt Bauman**, a sociologist regarded by many both within and outside his own discipline as one of the most significant, original and perceptive social commentators alive today, yet one who is still little known to wider audiences. An additional justification for our singular focus is that Bauman’s work by itself spans many of the topics we have come to understand as relevant to our wellbeing, such as the impact of increasing globalisation on both individuals and society and, crucially, the emergence of an individualised and consumerist society in which the ‘new poor’ are particularly demonised and stigmatised, whilst the more affluent also suffer. Bauman insists that the history of Western modernity has been, and continues to be, a continuous, continuing, obsessive and compulsive modernisation in every sphere of life, with profound consequences for how we live, act and think.

Although Bauman is not necessarily an easy read (what sociologist ever is?), we hope to make some key elements in his work more widely known because these indicate that our wellbeing is profoundly influenced by the social, economic and cultural context in which we live. Bauman’s analysis tells us that context has been shaped, during the course of the past two centuries, by a shift from ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ forms of modernity and capitalism. These ideas are explored further below, where we quote extensively from some of his work, even if not directly referenced. We do not review his books individually, as similar themes wind their way through all, though with different emphases. Rather we seek to capture key aspects of his insightful critique of contemporary society by rehearsing those themes and the links between them in three major sections:

The usual caveats stand: we cannot hope to do justice here to Bauman’s subtlety of expression, nor to the complexity, scope and scale of the work so briefly introduced, compressed and oversimplified here. And as Bauman, like every academic writer, draws on the research findings of many others, we inevitably omit much.

The transition from ‘heavy’ to ‘light’ capitalism and from ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’ forms of modernity

That embodiment of a more aggressively confident age, Henry Ford, once declared that *‘history is bunk’*, and that *‘we want to live in the present — the only history that is worth a tinker’s damn is the history we make today’*. Historians, on the other hand (and common sense), tell us that if we want to understand the society in which we now live, and the nature of its problems, we also need to have some understanding of the forces which shaped it. Those of us with an interest in the topic are told that people now live in an era of ‘late’, ‘high’ or ‘post’-modernity, and that many of our contemporary troubles originate from earlier phases of this period. This suggests that it is worth briefly considering some of modernity’s founding features and the ways in which they have intertwined and changed, before considering some of the implications for both individual and social wellbeing.

The work ethic

Although it may seem an unlikely place to start, the origins of the ‘work ethic’ are worth revisiting as a rudimentary part of early modernity that has undergone some significant shifts over time. Today we often take the work ethic pretty much for granted: for many of us, living a ‘good life’ involves having (preferably meaningful) work. For those without inherited wealth, the alternatives to paid work are, in our society, scarcely enticing. Yet we may not be aware that the work ethic owes its birth to the emergence of the factory system – a system

which is usually understood as the very antithesis of meaningful work. In tracing the development of the work ethic, Bauman tells us that the true problem which faced the pioneers of modernisation, industrialisation and early capitalism was

'how to force people, who were used to putting meaning into their work through setting its goals and controlling its course, to expend their skills and work capacity in the implementation of tasks set and controlled by others.'

No small job, since such tasks were largely meaningless for their performers, former craftsmen and women who already possessed a work ethic of their own. Whilst viable alternatives existed, most people signally failed to flock to the factory gates in search of work that granted them the status of 'hands', i.e. part humans. Alternatives withered, however, in the face of rapid industrialisation of traditional occupations and the emergence of new, labour-hungry industries.

Capital required a drilled, obedient labour force and the energetic moral/economic crusade surrounding the work ethic in the early modern era helped ensure that work (any work, however dull, dehumanising or demoralising) had value in its own right. Work, the crusaders believed, would eradicate poverty and vice and (just as important in this period of violent upheaval in Europe) prevent revolution, thus benefiting both individuals and society. In Britain, destitution and dependence, in the form of the reformed Poor Law and the workhouse, faced those unable or unwilling to live their lives according to this ethic. Work or perish was the choice offered by the times: no-one but a true pauper would choose confinement to the workhouse, if conditions inside were made sufficiently horrifying. Abolition of outside assistance also 'encouraged' people towards drudgery on the factory floor, as preferable to the alternative. And keeping factory wages at a bare subsistence level made each day of hard work a necessity, not a choice.

To cut a long story short, we became, and remained for many decades, a society of producers. Bauman reminds us that those promoting the work ethic were neither indifferent to the moral consequences of their actions, nor immoral beings. Getting the poor and idle to work was believed to be a moral as much as an economic task, and formed the core of what some believed to be a necessary and civilizing process. From a different (and more sceptical) perspective, the work ethic was principally a way to persuade people to surrender their freedom. People out of employment were *'masterless... people out of control'*, free of the surveillance which formed the basis of the new, modern social order.

Although we may think of North America, at least in the early stages of its colonisation by European nations, as a puritan country, Bauman suggests that the 'virtuous' form of the work ethic underwent a marked shift in the American cultural context. In America, he argues, the spirit of enterprise and a desire for upward mobility was the lubrication for the wheels of industry. This meant that work did not need to be loved for its self or seen as a sign of moral virtue: it was simply the means to become richer and thus more independent. Material incentives worked for that society, where economic gains became the key expression of ambitions to autonomy and self-assertion. This, says Bauman, exerted a profound influence over the development of all modern, industrial societies, not least because it eventually shifted human motivation and the desire for freedom irretrievably into the sphere of consumption.

'Heavy modernity'

This period of history, which is now drawing to a close, has been dubbed by many social commentators as the era of 'heavy' or 'hardware' capitalism. As Bauman says, this was an epoch of weighty machines, massive factories, ponderous railway engines and gigantic ocean liners. Heavy modernity was also the era of territorial conquest, not least because wealth and

power was deeply rooted or deposited inside the land in the form of bulky deposits of iron ore, or coal. For decades, in the era of heavy capitalism, large meant more efficient, in all areas of industry. The Fordist factory was an avidly pursued model of engineered rationality, with manufacturing materials and stringently surveilled workforce gathered under one enormous roof. Bauman makes the critical point that this was the era when capital and labour shared much of the same physical space: in fact, neither could survive without the other in this marriage of convenience.

The routinisation of time and task under the factory system effectively tied the workforce to a particular place, whilst the immobility of factories, natural deposits and machinery bonded the owners of capital to those workers. Relentless and persistent trench war between the two was the order of the day, rather than divorce, but also ingenuity on both sides in devising reasonable rules for cohabitation. Any man who began his working life in one industry could be reasonably confident of ending that life in the same industry: sons followed fathers and whole communities were based around manufacturing plants, coalmines, iron foundries and shipyards. 'Solid' modernity was thus an era of mutual engagement between employers and employees.

There were, of course, implications for an individual's identity. As we have noted in earlier papers, pre-modern society had traditional mechanisms of social place. Who you were was ascribed rather than achieved: firm rules defined in no uncertain terms what it meant to be a nobleman or woman, a soldier, a tradesman, a craftsman, a tenant farmer or an indentured farm hand. Modernity, however, charges the individual with the task of building an identity, and that involves choice. The sought-after and diligently built social identity was determined by working skills, site of employment and career scheme. This was a choice for life, a vocation and a life work, for the labourer no less than for the professional. Consumer goods, as with capital assets, reflected the 'solid' values of the era, in that they were sought and cherished for qualities such as permanence and durability: accumulation and preservation was the goal of possession.

'Light' modernity

This situation changed dramatically with the stark decline of heavy industry and the advent of 'light', 'software' capitalism and new forms of business organisation. Capital is now able to flow across national borders: this is the era of globalised multi-nationalism. Capital's new freedom and form may set labour free from the factory-style drill and surveillance of earlier years, but this also enables capital to shed (or export to newly industrialised countries) the burdens and costs associated with being tied to the ground and to 'heavy' industries. Under conditions of 'liquid modernity', capital that has succeeded in shedding the bulky ballast of machinery and massive factory workforce can travel fast and travel light. This now dominant form of capital has become *'ex-territorial, disencumbered and disembedded'* from local context. It is this, suggests Bauman and other social commentators, which has turned into the paramount uncertainty of life for those living in the 'developed' world.

Labour is valued now for its qualities of mobility and, above all, flexibility: the ideal worker has no ties that bind him or her to a particular place, nor single skills. Endlessly willing (i.e. forced) to re-invent him or herself and relocate as often as necessary, the ideal worker makes as few claims as possible on the employer. We discuss further the impact on individual workers in the next section. The point for employers/organisations is that capital and labour no longer needed to share the same physical space: employers now, as never before, can operate as 'absentee landlords'. Though there are some suggestions that the practice of exporting low-paid jobs to other parts of the world has not proven as profitable as expected, there can be little doubt that the holding power of the local labour force on capital, and on the conditions of employment and availability of jobs, has dwindled. Short term contracts dominate the marketplace: jobs for life are rare and, increasingly, the prerogative of the privileged few.

Microsoft, rather than General Motors, is now the model for business to pursue. Labour is outsourced, slimmed down, hived off, downsized, re-engineered, and '*exposed to the inscrutable whims of mysterious investors, shareholders and market forces*'. The main source of profit becomes ideas, rather than material objects. We may observe that even the largest and most ponderous public sector bureaucracies seem to be shedding some of their 'heavier' qualities, where possible: we now have distance learning in education; access to local authority services on-line; telemedicine in the NHS. In a world which demands 'light' and 'lean' employees, contractitis has entered the public sector and is now an endemic disease which afflicts many below the most senior levels of management.

We should not be surprised that consumer goods also reflect the epochal shift: transience is now the order of the day. Goods are meant to be used up, replaced and disposed of, in cycles of consumption which apparently gain pace with each passing year or, in some cases, month. The point is that consumers must be guided by aesthetic interests, not ethical norms. In many spheres of life, 'durability' changes from an asset to a liability. There are also implications for how we go about building a socially recognisable and acceptable identity (a non-optional requirement of life). As far as our working lives are concerned, Bauman suggests that:

'The prospect of constructing a lifelong identity on the foundation of work is, for the great majority of people except (for the time being, at least) the practitioners of a few highly skilled and highly privileged professions, dead and buried.'

And in the political sphere, Bauman observes a tug-of-war between the speed with which international, liquid, globalised capital can now 'flow', and the 'slowing down' powers of local institutions, which remain tied to the ground. Governments concerned with the wellbeing of the population have little choice but to adjust the political game to the rules of free enterprise, or capital will swiftly relocate to more hospitable climes. Commitment to a place and engagement with its inhabitants is a liability rather than an asset for the contemporary barons of capitalism, so few multinationals are prepared to make such investments without heavy inducements by locally elected authorities. Not only is the economy being progressively exempted from any meaningful local or even national political control, but political agency (the capacity to make and carry out collectively binding choices) has also become problematic. For Bauman, that is why '*the most haunting of political mysteries today is not so much what to do, but who would do it, if we knew*'.

The passage from 'heavy/solid' to 'light/liquid' forms of modern society thus provides a framework for understanding some of the more dramatic social changes which have taken place in the 'developed' world over the course of the last three centuries. The remaining two sections draw out additional implications for individuals living in that world.

The individualised society and its human consequences

'We have arrived at a territory no humans have ever inhabited — a territory which human culture in the past considered uninhabitable.' (Bauman, 'The individualized society')

Freedom and security: the devil and deep blue sea

Freud believed that civilisation suppresses individual freedom of desire and the resulting frustration causes the neuroses afflicting modern people: the malady of the civilised person therefore resides inside the human psyche. Yet the same civilisation which imposes those constraints is also the sole source of our security. Bauman stresses that we need both freedom and security – ideals which are incompatible with each other whilst also complementary. Late modernity brings us other problems, however, and Bauman draws on alternative psychological theories which suggest that contemporary men and women are not tormented

by the pressure of ideals they cannot live up to, but by the absence of any such ideals, the dearth of recipes for a decent life and the lack of a predictable destination for our life itinerary. The result, for individuals, is mental depression, by which Bauman means feelings of impotence, of inadequacy to the tasks of life. He goes further, by arguing that this combination of depression, powerlessness and the sense of inadequacy are in fact the emblematic malaise of our time. This is a truly striking suggestion from a sociologist as the findings of psychology are rarely echoed across by this particular discipline.

Bauman explains that whilst we are, in many ways, free as our ancestors could only dream of, that freedom comes with a heavy price tag. The price most of us have to pay for living in this formerly uninhabitable cultural territory, carved out through the massive power and expenditure of both labour and capital over the past three centuries, is endemic insecurity at both individual and social levels. There are implications here not just for employment or the purchase of consumer goods, as outlined in earlier sections, but for the most intimate of personal relationships. The hidden truth of the consumer society in which we now live is not just the blatantly obvious transformation of individuals into consumers, but their more subtle transformation into sellable commodities with market value in the sphere of jobs and personal relationships. And if better prospects are always just over the horizon (and a fundamental assumption of consumer society is that they are), and if being a 'mature individual' means not depending on any other human being, then it's wise not to commit oneself too firmly to either a present or future 'life' partner.

The other side of the 'freedom/autonomy' coin is the derision and contempt modern society now appears to feel for dependence of any form, and the consequent stigma attached to this.

Individualism as fate

The trademark of the modern society, says Bauman, is that it casts its members as individuals, to an extent and in a way unprecedented by previous cultural forms. Although the risks and contradictions of life go on being as socially produced as they ever were, the duty and necessity of coping with them has been firmly delegated to our individual selves. Thus, although we as individuals may resist such trends, the individualised culture within which we live does encourage us to believe that if we fall prey to certain illnesses, it is probably because we failed to follow an adequately healthy lifestyle. We may also experience pressure to believe that, if unable to find employment, it is because we didn't try hard enough to find a job or because we failed to learn the right interview skills. And if we are concerned about our career prospects in the future, it is because we also worry that we may not be good enough at winning friends and influencing people, or at self-expression, or impressing others. Individualisation is thus a fate, not a choice, Bauman argues, as we cannot refuse to participate in the individualising game of contemporary society.

Living under conditions of overwhelming, perpetual and self-perpetuating uncertainty is an unnerving experience. In common with many thoughtful contemporary psychologists (such as Oliver James or Barry Schwartz), sociologist Bauman points to the paralyzing capacity of individualised choice:

'one shivers in front of the endless possibilities as one hesitates when facing choice; one trembles at the thought that the sensible reasons of today may prove costly mistakes tomorrow; one does not know any more what the future may bring, and even less how to force it to deliver what one wishes it to offer...'

We have already mentioned the burdensome (and non-voluntary) nature of the contemporary obligation to choose and build an individual identity in an earlier discussion paper (March 2006). But Bauman reminds us that such individual problems do not sum up into a common cause. When we learn that our problems are indeed shared by others, it is in a social and

cultural context where we understand everyone's life to be full of risks which must be confronted and fought alone.

There is another problem associated with individual freedom: indifference to the plight of others. The 'individual' may be wary of concepts such as 'the just society' or 'the common good', not least because 'common interests' are all too likely to impinge on one's own interests. An obsession with the self (which is the real meaning of narcissism) has long been observed as another hallmark and inevitable consequence of modern society. For the self-obsessed, self-help may appear to at least some answers to our isolation. However, as Bauman observes, quoting sociologist Ulrich Beck:

'Someone who is poking around in the fog of his or her own self is no longer capable of noticing that this isolation, this solitary confinement of the ego, is a mass sentence.'

The powerless self

Bauman quotes social critic Christopher Lash on this issue:

'Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvements: getting in touch with their feelings; eating health food; taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing; immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East; jogging; learning how to "relate"...'

Whilst such 'substitute pastimes' are harmless (and may even be helpful in a number of ways), they are also symptomatic of a broad cultural shift from *'things that matter but about which nothing can be done'*, to *'things that matter less, if at all, but can be dealt with and handled'*. The point is that, for most people in society, none of the most important levers and safeguards of our situation actually come under our jurisdiction, let alone our control. We are subject to apparently mysterious forces such as 'recession', 'rationalisation', 'fall in market demand', etc. Many of us will know someone on whom such blows have fallen, says Bauman — people who at a stroke have been demoted, degraded and deprived of dignity and livelihood.

These blows reverberate beyond their direct targets: *'they carry messages to all who have, as yet, been spared'*. That message is that we are all potentially redundant and replaceable, all vulnerable, even those possessing considerable social status. The fear this generates is diffused and ambient: it provides the backdrop against which we all live our lives, without necessarily being conscious of this fact during every waking moment. Trust (in our selves, in others, and in institutions) is 'floating', unable to find safe anchorage. A rational response in such circumstances, says Bauman (though one much deplored by some) may be cynicism and short-sightedness, disinterest in long term life projects, and an inclination to slice life into episodes that must be squeezed for the last drop of pleasure with little regard for the consequences. In other words, we respond by treating the future as a threat, not a place of safety.

The individualised society is also one where citizenship slowly but surely corrodes and the public space is filled by the concerns and preoccupations of individuals. Matters of 'public interest' seem increasingly boiled down to curiosity about the lives of public figures. Much else is elbowed out of public discourse. Bauman suggests that we now watch helplessly whilst poverty rises, arable land is steadily eroded, forests and species disappear at an unprecedented rate, and our entire planet overheats. It seems that we are acutely aware of the absence of any agency powerful enough to effect a radical change in human affairs, so are no longer appear to believe that anything sensible can be done collectively.

Carpe diem

'Ours is the first culture in history to put no premium on duration and to manage to slice the lifespan into a series of episodes lived through with the intention of staving off their lasting consequences... eternity does not matter.'

To put it bluntly, for many people in contemporary society, only death can be assigned the status of the ultimate and final end: immortality often seems to refer more to embodied fame (or notoriety) than any future destination of the soul. Ironically, suggest Bauman, the bankruptcy of mortality lends a new attraction to mortal life: our individualised times are also marked by an obsessive preoccupation with the body unknown in human history and culture. Hardly ever has the human urge to fight or deny death placed such a central role in shaping our life strategy and purpose as it does today:

'A long and fit life — the kind of life which allows the consumption of all the pleasures life has to offer — is today the supreme value and principal of objective of life efforts.'

Amongst the multiple anxieties of modernity, bodily life is rendered precious and worthy of care. This body is an instrument of enjoyment, open to all the pleasures the physical world has to offer. Yet it appears under constant external threat: whatever we eat or drink or breathe in or let touch our skin today may be revealed tomorrow as a previously unrealised peril. Even those who believe Bauman is overstating the case here may agree that the kinds of actions called for, by the incompatible imperatives of joy and fear, are contradictory and therefore likely to be an inexhaustible source of anxiety and a source of neurosis.

Modernity's outcasts: the new poor

'The poor will always be with us, but what it means to be poor depends on the kind of 'us' they are 'with'. (Bauman, 'Work, consumerism and the new poor')

From a work ethic to a consumer aesthetic

Freedom to choose sets the stratification ladder of consumer society, Bauman tells us. It is by our capacity for freedom of choice, and not just by the choices we make, that we are valued in contemporary culture. This observation brings us to the point at which Bauman analyses the ways in which the work ethic has been transformed over the course of modernity. As earlier sections of this paper make plain, during the industrial phase of modernity it was beyond question that everyone had to recognise themselves as a producer within society. In 'Modernity Mark II', says Bauman, *'the brute unquestionable fact'* is that one needs to be a consumer first, before one can think of becoming anything in particular. Many domains of life are now characterised by 'a consumer aesthetic', and the impact of this on both our working lives and personal identities has been significant. Work, Bauman suggest, now comes first and foremost under aesthetic scrutiny: its value is judged by its capacity to generate pleasurable experience. Work that does not deliver intrinsic satisfaction is (for those who have a choice) devoid of value.

This is a dramatic transformation from the (Calvinist) conventions of the work ethic, which insisted that no work could be deprived of value or seen as demeaning, because all work added to human dignity. Ironically enough (given its factory origins), the work ethic conveyed a message of equality and played down otherwise obvious distinctions between jobs in terms of material reward and social status. The *aesthetic* scrutiny and evaluation of work, however, emphasises such distinctions, magnifies differences and elevates certain professions in particular, whilst profoundly devaluing many other forms of work. The distinction between interesting and boring jobs is critical, for us late moderns. Like

everything else which should be a target of desire and an object of free consumer choice, our jobs must be interesting — varied, exciting, allowing for adventure, (containable) risk, and sensation.

As Bauman say, no fully-fledged consumer would conceivably undertake a boring (repetitive, monotonous, devoid of challenge or initiative) job, unless she or he had no other choice. They have neither aesthetic value nor, in the widespread absence of beliefs in the ennobling capacity of otherwise humble work, any ethical value. They attract shame, rather than pride; stigma, rather than esteem. The only people such jobs can attract are those who have not been fully processed as consumers or converted to consumerism: first generation immigrants; guest workers from poorer countries; residents of poor countries drawn into factories by capital in search of cheap labour. Others need to be forced into accepting jobs that offer no aesthetic satisfaction.

Work as the route out of poverty is a mantra of governments on both the right and left of the political spectrum. Yet Bauman's analysis suggests sufficient reasons why some of the people currently out of work in modern society might resist the kinds of jobs on offer to them, reasons which simply add to that of the inadequate wage. Ironically, it is only politicians who is allowed to declare their satisfaction when, on losing their jobs, they prepare to spend more time with their family. Conversely, workaholics today are found not amongst the slaves but amongst the elite of the lucky and successful in society. Work as gratifying experience, source of self-fulfilment, pride, honour, self-esteem, social deference, etc. has become the privilege of the few. This is work as vocation. These privileged few largely live through their jobs, which are both a supreme achievement and lifelong commitment. The concept of the work/life balance is meaningless for them: work is life.

For the rest of us, suggests Bauman, becoming overly attached to one's job in the flexible labour market is a certain way to become a hostage to fate. It carries enormous risks and may be a recipe for psychological and emotional disaster. Today's elites naturally tend to view all work as mainly a matter of aesthetic satisfaction. But as far as the reality of life at the bottom of the social hierarchy is concerned, where choice is limited, this conception (just like the work ethic which preceded it) is a gross travesty.

Being poor in a consumer society

'It is one thing to be poor in a society of producers and universal employment; it is quite a different thing to be poor in a society of consumers, in which life-projects are built around consumer choice rather than work, professional skills or jobs. If "being poor" once derived its meaning from the condition of being unemployed, today it draws its meaning primarily from the plight of a flawed consumer. This is one difference which truly makes a difference to the way living in poverty is experienced and to the chances and prospects of redemption from its misery.' (Bauman, 1998)

Western societies are no longer societies of full employment based on the productive capability of labour. The new rules of the market game ('economism') may promise a rise in the total wealth of the nation, but they also make virtually inescapable the widening gap between those in that game, and those who are left out. Let us be clear about it, says Bauman: people traditionally called 'unemployed' are no longer the 'reserve army of labour' needed in earlier times, whether for the factory or the battlefield. We are fooling ourselves, he suggests, if we expect industry to recall the people it has made redundant. But that is not the worst of it. Those left out of the market game are those without a function which is useful, let alone indispensable, for the smooth and profitable running of the modern economy.

Bauman concludes grimly that, in a society where consumers, not producers, are seen as the driving force of economic prosperity, the poor are in danger of having little 'worth' or 'value'. They carry no credit cards; they cannot rely on bank overdrafts; and the commodities they need are in the basic rather than luxury category and thus carry little profit for their traders. From the perspective of purely economic rationality, keeping the local poor in decent, humane conditions (the principal objective of the welfare state) is therefore devoid of common sense. Because they are no longer seen in terms of their productive potential, says Bauman, the poor are excluded on the grounds of their status as 'flawed consumers'. This creates new sets of social relations with real consequences for society and for social policy – not least, the danger of an emerging indifference to the plight of the excluded by the relatively affluent.

A parallel (and not unrelated) development can be seen in the decline of the welfare state: Bauman points out that the rapid post-war emergence of public consensus in favour of collective responsibility for individual misfortune has been replaced by an equally rapid emergence of a consensus against that very principle. In particular, one way of categorising people as inferior and presenting a 'social problem' has emerged as fashionable in certain circles: 'the underclass' – a strangely diverse group when examined closely, incorporating unemployed people, single mothers, illegal immigrants, travellers, homeless people, drug users, etc. They suffer, says Bauman, because what they really share is the scarcity of chances and choices in a world which boasts of offering unprecedented opportunities to everyone else.

However, the sight of the poor has the great 'virtue' of keeping the non-poor in step, argues Bauman. The fortunate amongst us are more easily reconciled to the hazards or anxieties of daily life because, if the life lived by the poor is the alternative, then the horrors of a flexible, individualised world and lifelong uncertainty seems less unendurable by comparison. A cynic might say we depend on the wretchedness and misery of modernity's outcasts, the new poor, to make our own lives a little less miserable. For those who persist in believing that this is a problem of 'the other' that will not afflict them, Bauman has some (more) bad news. He draws on evidence and expert opinion to predict that, in the Europe of ten years time, only one in two work-capable people will be in full-time regular employment, and they will have little security. The rest of us will gain a living through short term, occasional, casual work with no contractual guarantees, no pension rights, and every possibility of being terminated with little notice.

Endnote

In the words of Tim May, a sociologist, the social sciences '*provide mirrors upon which we gaze in order to understand not only what we have been and what we are now, but to inform ideas about what we might become*'. Social scientists argue that some of our contemporary anxieties need to be addressed collectively, true to their social and cultural nature, if they are to be tackled effectively. Individualised solutions may be attractive to some, but are likely to be inadequate sticking plasters when applied to our uglier social wounds. There are parallels here with 'upstream' forms of public health thinking on inequalities.

Bauman's analysis of how modernity has transformed over time and how it affects our lives now may seem bleak, generating only fear for the future (to add to the many fears of the present!). There are many who will defend modernity on the basis of its many benefits and enrichments of lives and reject the 'doom and gloom' prophecies of late-modern Cassandras. Nevertheless, if we are to think about how best to deal with the impact of modernity on the ways in which we live our lives (and the potential for alternatives) we need to admit analyses such as Bauman's to our thinking. Certain characteristics of modernity seem particularly adverse in terms of their present and future consequences for both individuals and society. It seems clear that, after centuries of the modern effort to tame the erratic forces of nature and replace them with rationally designed and predictable order, it is now the outcome of human activities which confront us as apparently uncontrollable and invincible 'natural' forces or laws.

This is not the case, and sociologists like Bauman remind us that we need to learn to recognise that which contemporary culture routinely teaches us to mis-recognise. Although many of the dis-eases which afflict people in contemporary society are experienced at the individual level, the sources and causes of some of our most significant problems can be located at the level of society and culture. This perspective counters those strands of psychological thinking which suggest that change lies principally within the capacity of individuals, who should just change the ways they think.

A balanced view, however, suggests that both macro (social) and micro (individual) perspectives are necessary. History teaches us that humankind is a resourceful and adaptable species, and that individuals are only fully deprived of any meaningful choice in the most terrible circumstances. The social and cultural location of some key problems is cause for hope rather than paralysis because the late modern world of individualised uncertainty, anxiety and fear is as human-made as any other human world. Because we know that humanity has already changed, many times over its long and varied history, we also know that alternatives to the way we live are possible and not just wishful thinking.

However, Bauman argues that a very sharp turn indeed is needed, if we are to change. This will involve not just questioning the way we live but giving up some of its most sacrosanct assumptions. One such assumption is that whatever passes for 'economic growth' (more today than yesterday, and more tomorrow than today) is an unqualified good, despite damage done to the human condition and the natural world. Bauman makes a couple of hopeful and related recommendations for change. The first is to decouple individual income entitlement from income-earning capacity: the taxation system should provide all with a means to a decent life. He rejects suggestions that this is idealist, revolutionary or politically and economically unrealistic. His argument is that this form action would preserve the ethical values and social arrangements constitutive of Western civilisation, under conditions where our institutions no longer guarantee their implementation. The second suggestion is to turn away from the consumerist values which currently seem to dominate our lives and towards 'voluntary simplicity'. In the context of overwhelming global problems, this may be the only positive alternative to '*collective immiseration*' and the growing ecological threat.

References

Zygmunt Bauman is Emeritus Professor of Sociology at the Universities of Leeds and Warsaw. The texts we have drawn on above include:

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An early inspiration for our work was *The Fifth Wave*, a report of the Scottish Council Foundation's Healthy Public Policy Network to which some of us contributed.

The Fifth Wave argues that some of our established ways of doing things may have largely run their course, and that we will therefore need to find new ways of doing things if health is to continue to improve.

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