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ARTICLE

Consuming Life

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Abstract. This article posits a 'mutual fit' between consumer culture and the task posed to individuals under conditions of modernity: to produce for themselves the continuity no longer provided by society. It therefore explores the new forms of consumption formed from a shift from the functionality of needs to the diffuse plasticity and volatility of desire, arguing that this principle of instability has become functional to a modernity that seems to conjure stability out of an entire lack of solidity.

Key words

choice • consumer markets • desire • modernity • need • self

MONTAIGNE (1991: 298) RECALLS an ancient story of the wildly ambitious King Pyrrhus who would not rest before he fulfilled his dreams of new and ever new conquests, and Cyneas, Pyrrhus' factotum, who advised him to relax and enjoy a rest right away, skipping the pains and hazards of the war. Pascal (1966: 131–9) was sceptical about the practicality of the advice and derided Cyneas for his ignorance about human nature. Yes, it is true that 'all unhappiness comes from one thing – the inability of human beings to stay quietly in their rooms'; but it is also true that 'nothing is less endurable than staying at rest, without passions, adventures, diversions and efforts'. 'Seeking rest, people fight the obstacles which stand in their way: but once the obstacles have been overcome, repose becomes unendurable' (as Montaigne himself put it: 'Of all the pleasures we know of, their pursuit is the most pleasurable', 1991: 19). People tend to believe sincerely that what

they truly desire is tranquillity – but they delude themselves: what they are truly after is agitation. What they really crave is to chase the hare, not to catch it. The pleasure is in hunting, not in catching the prey.

Why must it be like this? Because of our human condition – ‘mortal and miserable’ – of the sheer impossibility of finding consolation in anything once we look at it closely. The sole comfort available is an absorbing venture that would divert our attention and prevent us from thinking about death and the brevity of life, the genuine reason for our misery. What we enjoy is ‘hubbub and bustle’, not their ostensible purposes and rewards. ‘The hare would not protect us from the sight of our death and misery, but the diversion of hunting a hare would do so.’ We seek and find the dénouement to the drama of mortality not in things we gain and the states we attain, but in desiring them and running after them.

Pascal (1966) entertained little hope: there is no escape from human fate except diversions, and our partners-in-mortality could hardly be blamed for wishing for them.

Their fault is not in seeking commotion, if what they do is for the wish to be entertained. What is wrong is to seek things in the hope that their possession will bring veritable happiness: only in such cases is one right to accuse them of vanity.
(pp. 68–9)

Were Pascal born a couple of centuries later, he would perhaps repeat after Robert Louis Stevenson in *Virginibus Puerisque*: ‘To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labour.’ In all probability, he would, however, sharpen up the Scottish writer’s point and observe bitterly that to arrive is no joy at all. To stop travelling is a recipe for despondency and despair, Pascal would have said. From human fate there is no salvation, he would conclude: one can only do one’s best to forget it.

To that last statement, though, another great explorer of the human (modern, as will become clear later) predicament, Søren Kierkegaard, would take exception. Seeking diversion instead of confronting human fate point blank is in Kierkegaard’s view a sign of a corrupt or perverse life, a pathology of character. And there is nothing inevitable about that perversion: the corruption is, fairly and simply, resistible.

Kierkegaard’s archetype of the pathology in question is the figure of Mozart’s Don Giovanni. Don Juan’s pleasure is not the *possession* of women, but their *seduction*: he has no interest in the women already conquered – his pleasure stops in the moment of triumph. Don Juan’s sexual appetites are not necessarily greater than the next man’s; the point is, though, that the

question of how great these appetites are is totally irrelevant to Don Juan's life formula, since his life is about keeping desire alive rather than about its satisfaction.

Only in this manner can Don Juan become epic, in that he constantly finishes, and constantly begins again from the beginning, for his life is the sum of repellent moments which have no coherence, his life as moment is the sum of the moments, as the sum of the moments is the moment . . .
(Norton and Kille, 1971: 43)

One cannot even call Don Juan a deceiver, Kierkegaard comments. Or, for that matter, a seducer:

To be a seducer requires a certain amount of reflection and consciousness, and as soon as this is present, then it is proper to speak of cunning and intrigues and crafty plans. This consciousness is lacking in Don Juan. Therefore, he does not seduce. He desires, and this desire acts seductively. To that extent he seduces. He enjoys the satisfaction of desire: as soon as he has enjoyed it, he seeks a new object, and so on endlessly . . .

He requires no preparation, no plan, no time: for he is always prepared. Energy is always in him and also desire, and only when he desires he is rightly in his element. (Norton and Kille, 1971: 45–8)

Don Juan's life is thinly sliced into separate and unconnected moments but it is Don Juan himself who has sliced it this way. He *made his choice*. It was his decision to float from one amorous adventure to another, to drift through life rather than sail. No fate obliged him to be like that. His life could be different: Don Juan *could* be different. Kierkegaard would not accept hands down the fatality to which Pascal melancholically surrendered.

Kierkegaard's Don Juan was a monster, an abominable and detestable exception, a cancerous growth on humanity as it could and should be. Pascal would not agree: Don Juan was rather what ordinary people would dearly wish to be were they given a chance. They all wish to 'constantly finish and to begin again from the beginning' and so to forget about that end which is bound to finish it all and beyond which there would be no more new beginnings. If Don Juan's seductive power was the way of living mortal life as if it was eternal, rather than poison it with worry about eternity beyond his grasp due to the finitude of the future (or, to deploy Max Scheler's

terms,¹ his choice of making the shared human fate into private destiny, rather than use his destiny as a weapon against fate) – then this is exactly what all of us tend to grope for, though very few of us reach Don Juan's exquisite skills and most are diverted from the life of diversion well before the condition they dream of has been attained.

It seems that history has settled the disagreement in favour of Pascal. But neither Pascal nor Kierkegaard – not even Max Scheler – could anticipate the advent of *consumer* society which would transform distraction, once an individually contrived hide-out from fate, into something socially constructed: a society in which 'constantly finishing and beginning again from the beginning' would no more be a sign of monstrosity, but the way of life available to all and the only way of life so commonly available.

Pascal's and Kierkegaard's contemporaries did, of course, consume, as all people at all times did and do. Like all living creatures, they had to consume to stay alive, even though being humans and not mere animals they had to consume more than sheer survival would require: being alive in the human way set demands which topped the necessities of 'merely *biological*' existence with more elaborate *social* standards of decency, propriety, 'good life'. Such standards might have been rising over time, but the point is that in the past the sum total of 'consumables' needed to gratify them was at each moment fixed: it had its lower as much as its upper limits. The limits were drawn by the tasks expected to be performed: before humans could perform them, they had to be fed, shod and sheltered first, and all that in the 'proper manner'. They had a fixed number of 'needs' which they had to 'satisfy' in order to survive. But consumption, being servant of needs, had to justify itself in terms of something other than itself. Survival (biological and social) was the *purpose* of consumption, and once that purpose was met (the 'needs' had been 'satisfied') there was no point in consuming more. Falling below the standards of consumption was an ethical reproach to all the rest of society, but climbing above them was equally an ethical, though this time personal, fault. Indulging in the pleasures of the flesh, gluttony and intemperance were long frowned upon if not condemned as mortal sins, while Thorstein Veblen, still at the threshold of the consumer age, bewailed 'conspicuous' or 'ostentatious' consumption serving nothing but vainglory and self-conceit.

The distinctive mark of the consumer society and its consumerist culture is not, however, consumption as such; not even the elevated and fast-rising volume of consumption. What sets the members of consumer society apart from their ancestors is the emancipation of consumption from its past instrumentality that used to draw its limits – the demise of 'norms' and the new plasticity of 'needs', setting consumption free from functional bonds

and absolving it from the need to justify itself by reference to anything but its own pleurability. In the consumer society, consumption is its own purpose and so is self-propelling. Orthodox psychology defined 'need' as a state of tension that would eventually disperse and wither away once the need has been gratified. The 'need' which sets the members of consumer society in motion is, on the contrary, the need to keep the tension alive and, if anything, stronger with every step. Our ancestors could recommend 'delay of gratification'. Consumer society proclaims the *impossibility* of gratification and measures its progress by ever-rising demand.

To avoid confusion, it would be better to follow that fateful change in the nature of consumption and get rid of the notion of 'need' altogether, accepting that consumer society and consumerism are *not about satisfying needs* – not even the more sublime needs of identification or self-assurance as to the degree of 'adequacy'. The *spiritus movens* of consumer activity is not a set of articulated, let alone fixed, needs, but *desire* – a much more volatile and ephemeral, evasive and capricious, and essentially non-referential phenomenon; a self-begotten and self-perpetuating motive that calls for no justification or apology either in terms of an objective or a cause. Despite its successive and always short-lived reifications, desire is 'narcissistic': it has itself for its paramount object, and for that reason is bound to stay insatiable, however tall the pile of other (physical or psychical) objects marking its past course may grow. The 'survival' at stake is not that of the consumer's body or social identity, but of the desire itself: that desire which makes the consumer – the *consuming desire* of consuming.

And yet, whatever its obvious advantages over much less pliable, inert or slow-moving needs, desire bound the consumer's readiness to shop with more constraints than the suppliers and merchandisers of consumer goods found palatable or indeed bearable. After all, it takes time, effort and considerable financial outlay to arouse desire, bring it to the required temperature and channel it in the right direction – but even that is not enough: as Geoff Williams (1999) reminds the would-be purveyors of consumables (in the August issue of the US journal *Entrepreneur*), consumers should not ever be allowed to 'awake' from their 'dreams', and so the promoters of commodities must 'work hard' to ensure a consistent 'message'. Consumers guided by desire must be 'produced', ever anew, and at high cost. Indeed, the production of consumers devours an intolerably large part of the total costs of production, distribution and trade, and a part which competition tends to stretch ever further, rather than cut down.

But, as Harvie Ferguson (1996: 205) suggests, consumerism in its present-day form is not (fortunately for the producers and the merchandisers of

consumer commodities) 'founded upon the regulation (stimulation) of desire, but upon the liberation of wishful fantasies'. The abominably constrictive 'needs' have had their day as the principal motive of consumption, but even the desires which came to replace them would not muster enough power to keep the wheels of consumer society in motion. The notion of desire, Ferguson (1996) observes:

. . . links consumption to self-expression and to notions of taste and discrimination. The individual expresses himself or herself through their possessions. But for advanced capitalist society, committed to the continuing expansion of production, this is a very limiting psychological framework which ultimately gives way to a quite different psychic 'economy'. The wish replaces desire as the motivating force of consumption. (p. 205)

The history of consumerism is the story of breaking down and discarding the successive tough and 'solid' obstacles which limited the free flight of fantasy, and in Freud's vocabulary trimmed the 'pleasure principle' down to the size dictated by the 'reality principle'. 'Need', deemed by the 19th-century economists to be the very epitome of 'solidity' – inflexible, permanently circumscribed and finite – was discarded first and replaced for a time with desire, much more 'fluid' and therefore expandable than need because of its half-illicit liaisons with fickle and plastic dreams of authenticity and the 'inner self' waiting to be expressed. Now, though, desire's turn has come to be discarded. Desire has outlived its usefulness: having brought consumer addiction to its present state, it can no more keep pace. A more powerful, and above all more versatile stimulant is needed to keep the acceleration of consumer demand on a level with the rising volume of consumer offer. 'Wish' is the much-needed replacement: it completes the liberation of the pleasure principle, purging the last residues of reality-principle impediments: the naturally gaseous substance has been finally let off from the container. To quote Ferguson (1992) once more:

. . . where the facilitation of desire was founded upon comparison, vanity, envy and the 'need' for self-approbation, nothing underlies the immediacy of the wish. The purchase is casual, unexpected and spontaneous. It has a dream quality of both expressing and fulfilling a wish, and like all wishes, is insincere and childish. (p. 3)

Such wishing on-the-loose, unfastened and licentious, may confirm Pascal's adumbrations, yet it also seems to signal the defeat of modern

ambitions. If Pascal was right, then the modern attempt to lock human desires in the steel casing of set needs went against the grain of human nature, and modern order-building was a war against that nature.

Human aversion to the dull monotony of rest was one part of human nature which the modern builders of rational order wished to be tamed; Don Juan's fondness for 'finishing quickly and beginning from the beginning' was the main adversary the order-builders confronted. Rational order could not be erected on the moving sands of diffuse, unfocused desire – the voice of reason would be inaudible were the cacophony of passions unabated. Modern capitalism could 'melt the solids', but modern ambition was to replace the found solids with new, purpose-built solids more solid than anything the irrational meanderings of past history could have left in their wake.

Modernity was not an enemy of solids – far from it; but not any solid was good enough to pass the stern test of reason. The inherited solids, as de Tocqueville observed, were already in a state of advanced putrefaction: they had been assigned for melting furnaces not because of their solidity, but because they were not solid *enough*. As the frames of the old routines were falling apart, they had to be urgently replaced with new ones – this time more artfully designed and meticulously constructed, resistant to erosion, meant to stay and keep their shape for the long time to come. From Bentham's Panopticon to Frederick Taylor's scientific management and Henry Ford's assembly line, efforts never ceased to assemble and consolidate such frames for human conduct as would fully and truly leave the endemically whimsical and erratic passions strictly out of bounds and leave no room for any irrationality, that of human wishes included.

Desires and wishes, particularly of the 'unexpected and spontaneous' kind, used to be eyed by order-builders with suspicion. Just as the 'nature' portrayed by the popular science of the time suffered no void, the would-be modern routines suffered nothing that failed the test of reason: no dysfunctionality or functional indifference. There was no mileage in whims and caprices: unforced, unsought and unsolicited conduct spelled trouble for 'pattern maintenance'. Any freedom other than 'recognition of necessity' felt like a thorn in the body of rationality. In such a scheme of things, consumption – just like the rest of life pleasures – could only be a handmaid of rational routine (a ransom reluctantly paid by the rational order to the ineradicable irrationality of the human condition), or a pastime exiled to the margins of life's main track where it could not interfere with the proper business of life.

The 'reality principle', as Sigmund Freud famously declared, was the

limit set to the 'pleasure principle' – the boundary which the seekers of pleasure could trespass only at their own peril. The two principles were at cross purposes; it did not occur to either the managers of capitalist factories or the preachers of modern reason that the two enemies could strike a deal and become allies: that pleasure could be miraculously transmogrified into the mainstay of reality and that the search for pleasure could become the major (and sufficient) instrument of pattern-maintenance. That, in other words, fluidity could be the ultimate solidity – the most stable of conceivable conditions. And yet this is precisely what the consumer society is about: enlisting the 'pleasure principle' in the service of the 'reality principle', harnessing the volatile, fastidious and squeamish desires to the chariot of social order, using the friable stuff of spontaneity as the building material for the lasting and solid, tremor-proof foundations of the routine. Consumer society has achieved a previously unimaginable feat: it reconciled the reality and pleasure principles by putting, so to speak, the thief in charge of the treasure box. Instead of fighting vexing and recalcitrant but presumably invincible irrational human wishes, it made them into faithful and reliable (hired) guards of rational order.

How did this wondrous transformation come about?

First came the reclassification of human desires. Once the irritating though unavoidable costs of production, they have been transferred in the accountancy books to the side of profits. Capitalism discovered that the morbid urge of distraction, that major scourge of profit-making through the exploitation of productive labour, may become the largest and perhaps inexhaustible source of profit once it is the turn of the consumers, rather than producers, to be exploited. As George Ritzer (1998) points out:

... the focus in contemporary capitalism, at least in the United States, seems to have shifted from the valorization and control processes, indeed from production as a whole, to consumption. The essence of modern capitalism, at least as it is practiced by the core nations, may not be so much maximizing the exploitation of workers as the maximization of consumption. (p. 68)

Far from needing taming and incarceration, desires should be set free and made to feel free: better still, encouraged to run wild, to ignore all limits and go on the rampage. 'Acting on impulse', that epitome of irrationality in the world of producers, savings books and long-term investments, is

destined to become a major factor of rational calculations in the universe of consumers, credit cards and instant gratification.

Then, the fragility and precariousness endemic to the pleasure-and-distraction-seeking life has been reclassified from major threats to the stability of social order into its chief support. Modernity discovered that the volatility of condition which results in the perpetual insecurity of actors may be made into the most reliable of pattern-maintaining factors. The politics of normative regulation has been replaced by the 'policy of precarization'; the flexibility of human conditions pregnant with the insecurity of the present and uncertainty of the future has been found to be the best raw material for the construction of tough and resilient order: life sliced into episodes with no past strings and no bind on the future eliminates the challenge to order more radically than the most elaborate (and exorbitantly costly) institutions of panoptical surveillance and day-in, day-out management. As Pierre Bourdieu (1998) points out: 'they who deplore the cynicism which in their opinion marks men and women of our time should not omit to mention the economic and social conditions which favour it or demand, as well as reward [it] . . .' (pp. 97–9)

Bourdieu coined the term 'flexploitation' for the strategy deployed (whether deliberately or matter-of-factly) by that novel policy of social integration and conflict-prevention. Flexploitation no longer promotes rationality of behaviour, nor is it meant to: after all, while the ability to make future projections is the condition *sine qua non* of all rational behaviour, making all but the most short-term projections virtually impossible is the principal objective, and most conspicuous effect, of the 'policy of precarization'. Whatever the rationality of consumer society may mean, it does not aim to rest, in stark opposition to the society of producers of the 'solid' stage of modernity, on the universalization of rational thought and action, but on a free rein of irrational passions (just like routine rests on catering for the desire for diversion, uniformity on recognition of diversity, and conformity on the agents' liberation). The rationality of consumer society is built on the irrationality of its individualized actors.

Speaking of 'policy', we tacitly assume the presence of 'policy makers': there must be someone (or something) for whom the happy reunion of reality- and pleasure-principles was an objective to be systematically pursued or a strategem consistently deployed because it was calculated to best suit their interest. Many studies of consumer facilities and habits bear uncanny resemblance to detective novels: in the stories told of the birth and ascendancy of consumer society, the plots tend to grind relentlessly towards the unmasking of the scheming culprit(s). There is hardly a piece without

some singly or severally acting villains – be it a conspiracy of merchandisers, the sly intrigues of their advertising henchmen or brainwashing orchestrated by media moguls. Explicitly or implicitly, the shoppers/consumers emerge from the story as victims of collective brain-damage: gullible and duped victims of crowd hypnosis.

The stories in question are misleading without necessarily being false. They carry a lot of truth (none of the appointed villains is without guilt: being if not an accomplice, then at least an accessory-after-the-fact) – and yet vital chunks of the truth remain untold and unaccounted for. What is missing in the argument and left out of consideration is the possibility that far from being deceived and falling into a skilfully laid-out trap, the members of consumer society try hard, just as all human beings do, to respond sensibly to conditions of life which may be, but may not be, rational and suitable for rational conduct and render rational strategies effective; that, in other words, under certain conditions irrational behaviour may carry many a trapping of rational strategy and even offer the most immediately obvious rational option among those available.

As we know from Karl Marx, one thing which is not for choosing is the condition under which the choices are made and which sorts out the few realistic and effective choices from the many nebulous and abortive ones. People do make history – but seldom if ever is the history they make ‘made to order’ and resembles the end-state they divined and pursued in their labours. That disparity between rationally conceived ends and the kind of realities that emerge in the course of pursuing them sociologists have chosen to call the ‘unanticipated consequences’ of human action, pointing out that whatever is there in the world people inhabit is a consequence of their deeds, yet not the kind of consequence they expected or desired. The conditions which made the consumer society feasible and the actions of its major protagonists effective are unanticipated consequences of the more than two-centuries-long history of modern capitalism. The sellers of goods and of their images may earnestly and vigorously cultivate the conditions under which their own and their addressees’ actions make sense and bring results, but no one planned these conditions in advance ‘in order to’ create the setting in which present-day practices would become viable. If anything, the conditions in question belied the projections and dashed the hopes of the most insightful thinkers and actors of the ‘solid modernity’ era.

In her eye-opening study of the way in which social scientists compose and share their stories, Barbara Czarniawska (1999) considers the reasons for which writing a novel of the classic ‘realist’ type, until recently identified with the novel as such, has nowadays become all but impossible:

The realist novel celebrated holism as the only proper perspective on both society and the individual . . . This kind of narrative presupposed, as a scene on which public action by moral agents could unfold, a stable social order, a clear-cut political economy, and a collective psychology in which personal character and public conduct were assumed to be inseparable. When such assumptions became untenable, some proclaimed 'the end of the novel'. (p. 53)

The holistic assumption of the intimate link between personal conduct and society at large has, however, become untenable, and writing a 'realist' novel, which drew a line between the solid world out there and the fickle and error-prone humans desperately trying to find their way through the labyrinth by choosing all the right turns and omitting all the wrong ones, has become a daunting, perhaps an impossible task. The holistic assumptions were not a private property of the 'realist' novelists. They shared them with the enlightened opinion of their time (as well as with the common human experience of the 'solid modernity' era), notably with the most reputable psychologists, who in order to learn more about human behaviour used to send hungry rats through the corridors of a maze and recorded the time the rodents needed to learn the quickest way leading through fixed and inflexible passages to the pellet of food permanently placed in one, and always the same one, of the many cells of the labyrinthine edifice. The conduct of the laboratory rats, much as that of the characters of *Bildungsromane*, was all about learning, and learning fast, and being rewarded by learning well and punished for neglect or sloth in learning. But to conceive of conduct in such a fashion, the walls of the twisted corridors of the maze had to retain their shape, if not forever, then at least long enough for the learning to reach completion; and the norms and the institutions (those equivalents of the maze passages) of the society which the heroes of the realist novels had to learn to follow and obey had to be resistant to change and steady enough to be projected into the undefinable future.

Indeed, for Émile Durkheim (see Giddens, 1972: 93–4), it was an 'undoubted fact' that we need to believe that our actions have consequences which go beyond the immediate moment, that they are not completely limited to the point in time and space at which they are produced, but that their results are, to some degree, of lasting duration and broad in scope. Otherwise they would be too insignificant: scarcely more than a thread would separate them from the void, and they would not have any interest

for us. Only actions which have a lasting quality are worthy of our volition, only pleasures which endure are worthy of our desires.

All people, Durkheim insisted, 'aspire to detach themselves from the present'. That applies to the child and the 'savage' and the 'civilized man' (whether 'of average culture' or 'more developed') alike: they differ only in how far ahead they look and think – in the length of that 'future' which stretches beyond the fleeting present that makes the present worthy of their attention and effort. 'The perspective of nothingness', Durkheim seems to repeat after Pascal, 'is an intolerable burden to us'. But unlike Pascal, Durkheim believed, in tune with the hopes and intentions of 'solid modernity', that rather than trying to divert and distract ourselves and drown our fears in fleeting pleasures, we would tend to escape the dread by 'living in the future'. Diversion is not a solution – 'what value are our individual pleasures, which are so empty and short?' But, fortunately, individual pleasures are not the only option: it is our good luck that 'societies are infinitely more long-lived than individuals' and thus 'they permit us to taste satisfactions which are not merely ephemeral.'

We all may be 'mortal and miserable', but societies are 'infinitely more long-lived' than any mortals: to our transient individual life, they represent eternity. To the mortals, they are bridges into immortality. We may trust societies as a secure shelter for our life accomplishments. Investing in the perpetuation of society, we may participate in things eternal; through society, we can recast our transience into duration, and so stop our mortality making us miserable. Those who can say in good conscience, 'in thee, my Society, have I put my trust', may also hope that the verdict 'unto dust shalt thou return' can be averted or quashed.

Contemplation of society's immortality may be a highly gratifying pastime for philosophers. When embraced from the philosophical perspective, itself defiant to the eroding powers of time, it looks today (and will tomorrow and the day after tomorrow) 'infinitely more long-lived' (immortal when measured by brief individual existence), as it did in Durkheim's time. But at the dawn of the twentieth century, philosophers could pride themselves on striking a chord in 'human, all too human' experience. They spoke in the name of a society busily composing solid frames in which transient human deeds could be inscribed to last forever and promised to make such frames rock-hard. Durkheim's words had been recorded at the time when, in Alain Peyrefitte's (1998) words, 'self-reliance, confidence in the others around one and trust in the longevity of social institutions combined and gelled into the courage to act and the long-term resolve to see the action through' (pp. 574). To the ears of his contemporaries, Durkheim's

words sounded therefore anything but abstract or far-fetched: they restated the beliefs daily corroborated by everyone's experience.

The triune trust documented by Peyrefitte has by now been broken, and it has become clear to anyone (except perhaps those living in philosophy, the art of conjuring continuity out of discontinuity – that 'epistemological premise' of 'continuous time') that none of the three trusts can survive, let alone thrive, on their own. Self-confidence, the audacity to see one's life as a project, and the determination to see that project through to completion through thick and thin, are unlikely to appear unless prompted and bolstered by trust in the long-term stability of the world around, of its demands and of the rules that tell, and tell authoritatively, how to go about meeting them. 'The conditions of time in the new capitalism', Richard Sennett (1998) observes, 'have created a conflict between character and experience, the experience of disjointed time threatening the ability of people to form their characters into sustained narratives' (p. 31). Such conflict is only to be expected, given that uncertainty, though always an ubiquitous accompaniment of human existence, has nowadays acquired novel, previously unexperienced features: it is now 'woven into the everyday practices of a vigorous capitalism. Instability is meant to be normal . . .'

Were there a long-term logic behind the rent and mangled experience of a world changing with little or no warning, humans would hardly glean it from their daily experience: unlike birds and philosophers, they seldom rise above the ground high enough to spy it out. 'Society', firm and whole as it may appear in social-scientific studies, makes itself present to most of us mediated by occasions which do not necessarily connect into continuous and coherent experience. For most of us, most of the time (except when we fall into a philosophical mood) 'society' is a summary name for the people whom we meet in the place where we earn our living, the partners we live with under one roof, the neighbours with whom we share the street, and the ways and means of dealing with all of them which we think will meet with approval and bring proper effects. And the snag is that none of those constituents of the idea of 'society' we can see now, judging from our experience, is 'infinitely more long-lived' than ourselves and therefore offers us 'satisfactions that are not merely ephemeral'. *Pace* Durkheim, it is now each of us, individually, that is the 'longest living' of all the bonds and institutions we have met: and the only entity whose life-expectation is steadily rising rather than shrinking.

Indeed, there are few if any reference points left that we could reasonably hope might lend a deeper and longer-lasting significance to the moments we live. If trust is the hinge attaching the mobile (and transient)

to the steady (and durable), it would seek the frame in vain. It is me, my living body or that living body which is me, which seems to be the sole constant ingredient of the admittedly unstable, always 'until-further-notice' composition of the world around me. My life may be too short for comfort, but the life-span of anything else seems disconcertingly brief by comparison. Few if any partnerships are entered into with a belief that they will last 'until death us do part'. Fewer and fewer families can be vouched to outlive its members. Few if any painstakingly acquired skills may be hoped to last for the life-time of their proud owner. No places of work can be anticipated to sustain the job currently performed, or for that matter to offer any kind of job, until the retirement of its current holder. Few if any neighbourhoods are likely to withstand for long the irrepressible vigour of developers, and if they do they would hardly resist the virus of slow yet relentless dilapidation and demise. Few if any hard-won possessions are likely to retain their allure for long, surpassed as they tend to be by new, more seductive attractions. Few if any hard-learned styles and habits will go on bringing satisfaction and esteem for long. In this world, putting all one's eggs in one basket is no more the ultimate imprudence. Baskets as such, however many, should be looked at with suspicion: few people of sane mind would entrust any of the eggs to any of them.

Whoever chains themselves to an unseaworthy vessel risks going down with it at the next tide. By comparison, surfing seems a safer option. 'Eternity' acquires a sinister flavour, unless it means an uninterrupted string of episodes: the perpetual ability to 'finish quickly and begin from the beginning'. If the assets of long-term security are not available, long-term commitments are liabilities. The future – the realistic future and the desirable future – can be grasped only as a succession of 'nows'. And the only stable, hopefully unbreakable continuity on which the beads of episodes could be conceivably strung together so that they won't scatter and disperse, is that of one's own body in its successive avatars.

Niklas Luhmann (1998) wrote of modern society that it is 'modern' in so far as it 'marks its newness by relegating the old':

Whether we like it or not, we are no longer what we were, and we will not be what we are now . . . [T]he characteristics of today's modernity are not those of yesterday and not those of tomorrow, and in this lies modernity. The problems of contemporary society are not problems in maintaining a heritage, whether in education or elsewhere. Much more important is the constant creation of otherness. (p. 3)

In the *Lebenswelt* that surrounds us as much as in its only epicentre, the self, continuous discontinuity is the only form continuity may take – the only one to be found and the only one to be sensibly – realistically – coveted. In the game of life, ‘society’ has moved from the role of the caring, albeit exacting, warden/keeper into the position of one of the players (not even *primus inter pares*). Once the mainstay of stability and the warrant of assurance, it has become now the prime source of surprise and of a diffuse danger, frightening for its un-knowability. It is erratic as all players are: it keeps its cards close to the chest and likes to make its moves unawares, time and again catching the partners napping. In the game of life, its constantly changing rules are themselves the major stake. There is next to nothing that the individual players can do to escape surprising moves and their consequences: the only thing the individual can do is to practice one-upmanship, struggle to outsmart the prankster, try his or her best to stay alert and be ready to change tack when the wind shifts: never to be left behind or caught napping.

To stay seaworthy seems the only realistic purpose: the one task which the individual may – just may – take responsibility for and responsibly carry on. History, says Ulrich Beck (1992):

. . . shrinks to *the (eternal) present* and everything evolves around the axis of one’s personal ego and personal life . . . The proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision-making is decreasing and the proportion of biography which is open and must be constructed biographically is increasing. (pp. 135–7)

The overall result of all this is the ‘subjectivization and individualization of risks and contradictions produced by institutions and society’. In short, individuals are doomed to seek ‘biographical solution of systemic contradictions’. An impossible task, to be sure, one that defies logic and one that cannot be undertaken in anything remotely reminiscent of a coherent and systematic way. Since there is no personal strategy which can arrest (let alone prevent) the vagaries of ‘life opportunities’ (or short of arresting them, defuse or outweigh their impact), the only reasonable way to proceed is by fragmentation of the big task which one cannot tackle into a plethora of small tasks which one can handle. Let’s take one thing at a time, and let’s worry about crossing that other bridge, out there in the foggy future, when it emerges from the fog and we know for sure that there is indeed a bridge to cross.

It is here, in this predicament of individuals doomed to compensate for

the irrationality of their *Lebenswelt* by resorting to their own wits and acumen, that, to quote Beck (1992: 15–16) once more: ‘experts dump their contradictions and conflicts at the feet of the individual and leave him or her with the well-intentioned invitation to judge all of this critically on the basis of his or her own notions’ that ‘consumer society’ comes into its own: life turns into a shopping spree and is no more nor less consuming than the excitement, adventure and challenge of the shopper’s activity are able in principle, and manage in practice, to be.

There is a ‘mutual fit’, an ‘elective affinity’, between the inanities of the consumer market and the incongruities of the task which individuals are presumed to perform on their own, their duty to compose individually the continuity which society can no longer assure or even promise. Indeed, one is tempted to say that the marriage between the two protagonists has been made in heaven and that no man or woman, certainly not when acting singly or severally as they do, can tear it apart. There is a nearly ‘perfect fit’ between the characteristics of commodities the consumer market offers, the fashion in which it offers them, and the kind of anxieties and expectations which prompt individuals to live their lives as a string of shopping expeditions. Two irrationalities meet, cooperate and jointly self-reproduce through the rationality of sellers’ calculations and the rationality of buyers’ life-strategies.

The consumer market has achieved an uncanny feat of reconciling and blending two mutually contradictory values which are both avidly sought by members of an individualized society: it offers, in one package deal, the badly missed assurance and the keenly desired yet elsewhere unavailable guarantee of goods-replacement, even a money-back guarantee, in case the presently sought assurance wears off and a new assurance needs to be put in its place. The consumer market promises, and delivers, the reassuring certainty of the present without the frightening prospect of mortgaging the future. It supplies durability through the transience of its offerings – a durability which no longer needs to be painstakingly built piece by piece through perpetual effort and occasional self-sacrifice. It proffers eternity in instalments, each bit coming ready for immediate use and meant to be disposed of without regret or remorse once it is used up.

The consumer market sets the finishing lines close enough to prevent desire from exhausting itself before the goal is reached, but densely enough for the runners never to worry about the durability of the spoils’ value and for the desire never to ponder frustration but always be eager to start afresh, never losing its vigour. As Pascal observed, it is the hunting, not the hare, that people call happiness. Admittedly, temporary identities can only be

conjured up through differentiation from the past: 'today' derives its meaning by cutting itself off from a 'yesterday'. The never-ending process of identification can go on, undisturbed by the vexing thought that identity is one thing it is conspicuously unable to purvey. And so, on one hand, the spectre of durability, and indeed of direction, rises out of the rapidity and swiftness with which diverse transient states succeed each other. On the other hand, there is no worry that the objects of desire will outstay their welcome and that their refusal to vacate the stage for yet-unscripted plays of the future will spoil the joy of the future chase.

The consumer market offers choice complete with the reassurance that the choice is right: the authority of experts and of the recondite knowledge they are trusted to possess, or the authority of great numbers of satisfied buyers, or the authority of huge demand exceeding supply, tend to be as a rule attached to the products on the department stores' shelves. At the same time, the sellers make no secret that the goods currently on offer will be, inevitably, superseded by some yet unknown 'new and improved' ones, and for their customers the awareness that this must happen sooner rather than later is not at all off-putting. On the contrary, that knowledge is a vital part of the reassurance they seek: it is comforting to know that no decision is final, that none has irreversible consequences, that each one can be safely taken since, like all other decisions, it will bind the decision-maker only 'until further notice'. Let us note that with such awareness shared by the sellers and the buyers, no disappointment is ultimate and conclusive enough to invalidate the rationality of the game and the wisdom of playing it. The game of 'finishing quickly and beginning from the beginning' is self-propelling and self-propagating, securely defended against adversary tests and the *experimentum crucis* of ultimate futility.

The game is self-perpetuating for one more reason. It is addictive: protracted participation in the consumerist game results in the trained incapacity to seek 'biographical solutions to systemic contradictions' in any other way. To become a consumer means to be dependent for one's survival, even for keeping up simple daily routines, on the consumer market. It means to forget or fail to learn the skills of coping with life challenges, except the skill of seeking (and, hopefully, finding) the right object, service or counsel among the marketed commodities. (In the year 2000 version of *Cinderella* staged by Channel 4, the Prince matter-of-factly assumes that the magic mountain where Cinderella acquired her ball dress must be a shopping mall.) Consumers may recompense the chronic deficit of certainty in one way only: by pursuing the avenues laid out and made passable by marketing and shopping. We all live in a society of spare (and disposable) parts, and in such

a society the art of repairing malfunctioning objects, characters or human bonds is all but uncalled-for and obsolete.

George Ritzer (1998) grasps perfectly the dual attraction of market-mediated consumerism when discussing the 'action holidays' pre-scripted and pre-packed by travel agencies. He observes that 'most inhabitants of a postmodern world might be willing to eat at the campfire, as long as it is a simulated one on the lawn of the hotel' (p. 146). Tourists of the consumer society want their holidays to be escapes from daily routine – but also to be escapes from the hazards, confusions and uncertainties endemic to their daily life: the holidays they would gladly pay for should be predictable, calculable, efficient and controlled. The holiday companies, just like McDonald's restaurants, are expected to provide, first of all, shelters of security and predictability. Adventures should be carefully planned to include a happy end, excitements sanitized and pollution-free, the 'far away from everywhere' must be located no more than a car-drive distance from shops and restaurants, wildernesses ought to have exits well mapped and signed. Wild beasts should be either tamed or locked in secure enclosures and snakes, if encountered, should have their poisonous venom removed.

What makes the dreamed-of holidays alluring to seekers of adventures and strong emotions is the certainty (included in the package and protected by travel insurance) that someone, somewhere is fully aware of what is going on and how it is going to end, and so no shock will be 'for real', being an 'experience of' rather than the thing itself. Nothing really disastrous, let alone irrevocable, will occur, and if (God forbid) it does occur due to someone's mistake or neglect, opting out is not just conceivable, but on the whole easy, while the dissatisfied customer can always sue for compensation even if the 'money back guarantee' was missing in the contract. The cinema-goers made *Blair Witch Project* such an astounding box-office success since they flocked to see their innermost fears vividly, and horrifyingly, portrayed: being cut off from the nearest socket for portable computers and from access to the internet, finding that mobile telephones are unusable or absent, suspecting that the game is 'for real', that the ending of the spectacle has not been fixed in advance and that there is no off button – these are the most awesome of the nightmares that haunt the 'incapacitated-by-training' consumers. The *Blair Witch Project* made the ineffable anxiety tangible, gave visible shape to misty apparitions – but, let us note, not just any shape, but one that sets consumer society firmly in the role of the exorcist-in-chief and the last shelter for the perplexed and ignorant.

As fears go, the consumer market may legitimately contest and refute its parenthood. As has been argued before, anxieties of uncertainty offer at

the utmost a potentially fertile soil for the marketers to cultivate. But the crops – the *names* of the fears on which the dispersed anxiety would eventually focus – are indeed a product of farming and depend on the techniques the farmers deploy and the materials they use. The choice of techniques and materials is in its turn dictated by the farmers' understanding of 'best gain'. In addition, no farmers worth their salt would rely on the natural fertility of the soil and even less would they allow fertility to be exhausted by drawing from the soil all its nutritional substances in one go. Good farmers (and marketers are better than most) would take care to make fertility continually recuperate and grow by skilful use of fertilizers, whether natural or artificial.

Uncertainty-generated anxiety is the very substance that makes the individualized society fertile for consumerist purposes: it needs therefore to be carefully and lovingly cared for and on no account allowed to dry up or evaporate. More often than not, production of consumers means the production of 'new and improved' fears. The recent affair of the millennium (hum)bug offers a pattern daily and ubiquitously repeated: no one could say for sure that the Y2K bug was a figment of the imagination, and even less could one call the bluff of those who insisted on being in the know even if the surmise of their bluffing was correct. Most reasonable people therefore followed Pascal's advice of the 'safe bet'. The multi-billion dollar industry of computer-system testing and re-programming was created in a truly Divine manner, *ab nihilo*, and the act of its creation was almost universally greeted with a sigh of relief. When the day of reckoning finally came, the failure of the prophesied catastrophe to materialize was taken, again almost universally, as proof that it was averted thanks to the purveyors of anti-bug services, and as another clinching test of the omnipotence of marketable expertise. The whole episode was anyway soon forgotten as other fears usurped the headlines, but the memory of that omnipotence stayed, making the ground yet more fertile for the next panic-production.

Let us note that – wisely – consumer markets seldom offer cures or preventive medicines against natural dangers like earthquakes, hurricanes, floods or avalanches; promises of protection and salvation focus as a rule on dangers artificially created. The latter have a clear advantage over the former, since they allow us to cut the fears to the measure of the available cures, rather than vice versa.

The trained incapacity of the consumers is by far the best of the consumer-goods suppliers' weapons. American genetic-engineering giants finance research which 'proves beyond reasonable doubt' that without genetically modified crops, feeding the world population will shortly

become impossible. What the research reports tend to be silent about is that their pronouncements bear all the marks of self-fulfilling prophecies; or, rather, that what they do is to provide a gloss on their sponsor's practices, while making such practices more palatable through reversing the order of causes and effects. The introduction of 'genetically improved' seeds casts great numbers of farmers out of business and makes the rest incapable of producing their own seeds for next year since the 'improved' grains are as a rule infertile. Once that happens, the assertion that, without a constant and rising supply of GM foodstuffs, feeding humankind won't be possible acquires the authority of 'empirically proven truth' and can no longer be questioned. The practices of the genetic-engineering industry may well serve as a paradigm of the function paramount to the consumer society – that is, the production of (willing or unwilling, yet cooperative) consumers. George Ritzer's 'McDonaldization' would not work unless complemented by 'Monsantization'.

To conclude: the powers and the weaknesses, the glory and the blight of the consumer society – a society in which life is consuming through the continuous success of discontinuous consumer concerns (and is itself consumed in its course) – are rooted in the same condition, the anxieties born of and perpetuated by institutional erosion coupled with enforced individualization. And they are shaped up and reproduced by the consumer market-led response to that condition: the strategy of rationalization or irrationality, standardization of difference, and achieving stability through the induced precariousness of the human condition.

Note

1. Max Scheler (1973: 105–8) would spell out later the creed in which Kierkegaard sought support for hope: there is fate, which no human being can freely choose; and there is destiny – which is that being's own, even if poorly controlled and seldom fully planned, product.

[T]he individual destiny of man is not his fate. Only the assumption that fate and destiny are the same deserves to be called fatalism . . .

Fatalism could gain currency only as long as men *reified* fate . . . However, environmental structure and fate ... have a natural and basically comprehensible origin . . . Fate, for sure, cannot be freely chosen . . . Nevertheless, fate *grows up* out of the life of a man or a people . . .

Fate shapes itself for the most part in the life of the individual

2. Environmental (social) pressures are not supernatural, and to withstand them is not a super-human task. The destiny of the individual has to be pursued against many odds which can be overwhelming, but it *can* be pursued, pursued steadfastly, even

seen through to the end; the dissolution of destiny in fate is in no way a foregone conclusion, even if all too often it looks as if it is. The possibility of destiny being set apart from fate makes life a moral choice. If Don Juan was, in Kierkegaard's opinion, 'outside morality', it was because he would not allow for that possibility.

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