

# Happiness in a society of individuals

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Zygmunt Bauman looks at the ways in which ideologies of privatisation shape our desires, and at the reasons they are unlikely to be fulfilled.

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**N**icolas Sarkozy, the newly elected president of France, declared in a June 2007 television interview: 'I am not a theoretician. I am not an ideologue. Oh, I am not an intellectual! I am someone concrete!'<sup>1</sup> What possibly could he mean by saying that?

Most certainly, he did not mean that he does not hold to certain beliefs unswervingly, while equally resolutely rejecting others. He is, after all, on the record as a man with strong views - firmly believing 'in doing rather than musing', and campaigning for the French people 'to work more and earn more'. In his presidential campaign he told the electors repeatedly that it is good to work harder and longer hours in order to get rich. (The electorate seem to have found this call attractive while not necessarily believing it to be pragmatically sound: according to a TBS-Sofres poll, while 40 per cent of the French believe one can get rich through working, 39 per cent believe it to be possible through winning the lottery.) These declarations by Sarkozy, as long as they are sincere, meet all the conditions of an ideology, and perform the major function which ideologies are expected to perform: they instruct people about what to do and reassure them that doing it will bring beneficial results. They also manifest an agonistic, partisan stance towards alternative

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convictions: a feature normally taken as a trade mark of ideologies.

Perhaps there is one feature of ideology as we currently understand it missing from Nicolas Sarkozy's life philosophy: a vision of a 'social totality' that, as Emile Durkheim suggested, is 'greater than the sum of its parts'; that (unlike, say, a sack of potatoes) is *not* reducible to the sum total of the separate units it contains; a *social* totality, that cannot be reduced to an aggregate of *individuals* pursuing their own private aims, guided by their own private desires and rules. On the contrary, the repeated public statements of the French president suggest just such a reduction.

The predictions of the 'end of ideology' that were rife and widely accepted twenty to thirty years ago do not seem to have come true. What we are witnessing, rather, is a curious twist in the idea of 'ideology': in defiance of a long tradition, there is now a widespread ideological belief that thinking about the 'totality', and composing visions of a 'good society', is a waste of time, since it is irrelevant to individual happiness and a successful life.

## An ideology of privatisation

This new-type ideology is not a *privatised ideology*. Such a notion would be an oxymoron, since the supply of security and self-confidence that is the *tour de force* of ideologies - and the prime condition of their seductiveness - would be unattainable without massive *public* endorsement. This is, rather, an *ideology of privatisation*. The call to 'work more and earn more', a call addressed to individuals, and fit only for individual use, is chasing away and replacing past calls to 'think of society' and 'care for society' (for a community, a nation, a church, a cause). Sarkozy is not the first to try to trigger or accelerate this shift; priority here belongs to Margaret Thatcher's memorable announcement that 'there is no such thing as "society". There is only the government and the families'.

This is a new ideology for a new *individualised society*: as Ulrich Beck has written, individual men and women are now expected, pushed and pulled to seek and find individual solutions to socially created problems, and to implement such solutions individually, with the help of individual skills and resources. This ideology proclaims the futility (indeed, counter-productivity) of solidarity: of joining forces and subordinating individual actions to a 'common cause'. It derides the principle of communal responsibility for the wellbeing of its members, decrying it as a recipe for

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a debilitating 'nanny state', and warning against care-for-the-other on the grounds that it leads to abhorrent and detestable 'dependency'.

This is also an ideology made to the measure of the new *society of consumers*. It re-presents the world as a warehouse of potential objects of consumption, and individual life as a perpetual search for bargains; its purpose is presented as maximal consumer satisfaction, and life success as an increase in each individual's own market value. Widely accepted and firmly embraced, it dismisses competing life philosophies with a curt 'TINA' ('There Is No Alternative'). Having degraded and silenced its competitors, it becomes, in Pierre Bourdieu's memorable expression, a veritable '*pensée unique*'.

## Privatised society's exclusions

Not for nothing are the remarkably popular *Big Brother* shows presented as 'reality TV'. That denomination suggests that off-screen life, 'the real thing', is just like the on-screen saga of the *Big Brother* competitors. Here, as there, no one playing the game of survival is guaranteed to survive, permission to stay in the game is but a temporary reprieve, and team loyalty is only 'until further notice' - that is, it won't outlive its usefulness for the promotion of individual interest. That *someone* will be excluded is beyond dispute; the only question is *who* it will be; and hence what is at issue is not *abolishing* exclusions (a task that would favour joining forces and solidarity of action) but *shifting* the threat of exclusion away from oneself and *towards the others* (a task that prompts self-concern, while rendering solidarity unreasonable if not suicidal). In *Big Brother*, someone *must* be excluded each week: not because, by some curious coincidence, regularly, every week, one person shows themselves as being inadequate, but because it has been written into the rules of 'reality' as seen on TV. Exclusion is in the nature of things, an un-detachable aspect of being-in-in-the-world, a 'law of nature' - and so to rebel against it makes no sense. The only issue worthy of being thought about - and intensely - is staving off the prospect of *myself* being excluded in the next round of exclusions.

At least in the affluent part of the planet, the stake in this cut-throat individual competition is no longer physical survival - or the satisfaction of the primary biological needs that the survival instinct demands. Neither is it the right to self-assert, to set one's own objectives and to decide what kind of life one would prefer to

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live; to exercise such rights is, on the contrary, assumed to be every individual's duty. Moreover, it is assumed that whatever happens to the individual is the consequence of exercising such rights, or of an abominable failure - or sinful refusal - to exercise them. Whatever happens to an individual can be retrospectively interpreted as a further confirmation of their sole and inalienable responsibility for their individual plight - and for adversities as much as successes. What is at stake, rather, is social recognition - exclusion or inclusion - based on the choices we have made.

Once cast as individuals, we are encouraged to actively seek social recognition for what has been pre-interpreted as our individual choices: namely the forms of life which we, the individual, (whether by choice or by default) are practising. Social recognition means acceptance that an individual, in practising a particular form of life, is leading a worthy and decent life, and, on this ground, deserves the respect that is owed and offered to other worthy and decent people.

The alternative to social recognition is denial of dignity: humiliation. As Dennis Smith has recently defined it, an act is humiliating 'if it forcefully overrides or contradicts the claim that particular individuals ... are making about who they are and where and how they fit in'.<sup>2</sup> An individual is humiliated when s/he, whether explicitly or implicitly, is denied the recognition s/he expected for the person s/he is, and/or the kind of life s/he lives; and when s/he is refused the entitlements that would have been made available following such recognition. 'A person feels humiliated when s/he is brutally shown, by words, actions or events, that they cannot be what they think they are ... Humiliation is the experience of being unfairly, unreasonably and unwillingly pushed down, held down, held back or pushed out' (Smith, p37).

This feeling of humiliation breeds resentment. And in a society of individuals such as ours, this is perhaps the most venomous and implacable variety of resentment a person may feel - and the most common cause of conflict, dissent, rebellion and thirst for revenge. Denial of recognition, refusal of respect and the threat of exclusion have replaced exploitation and discrimination as the reasons most commonly put forward to explain and justify the grudges individuals feel towards society - or towards the sections or aspects of society to which they are directly exposed (personally or through the media).

This does not mean that humiliation is a novel phenomenon, specific to the present stage in the history of modern society. On the contrary, it is as old as

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human sociability and togetherness. What has changed, however, is that, in the individualised society of consumers, the most common and ‘most telling’ definitions and explanations of pain and grievance are moving away from group- or category-related features, and towards *personal* referents. And rather than being ascribed to injustice or the malfunctioning of the social whole (and remedy thus being sought in the reform of *society*), individual suffering increasingly tends to be perceived as the outcome of a personal offence or as an assault on personal dignity and self-esteem, thus calling for a *personal* response or personal revenge.

Individuals are called upon to invent and deploy individual solutions to socially produced discomforts, and they tend to respond in kind. Thus any turn of events that plays havoc with the expectations suggested by a person-focused ideology is perceived and ‘made sense of’, in the same ideology of privatisation, as a *personal* snub, a personally aimed (even if randomly targeted) humiliation; self-respect, as well as feelings of security and self-confidence, are its first casualties. The affected individuals feel debased, and since the ideology of privatisation assumes the presence of a culprit behind every case of suffering or discomfort, there ensues a feverish search for the persons guilty of debasing them; the conflict and enmity that arises is deemed *personal*. The guilty ones must be located, exposed, publicly condemned and punished. ‘Them’ are as individualised as ‘us’ in the ideology of privatisation.

The kind of ideology we are discussing is wrapped around the issue of identity. Who am I? What is my place among the others - the ones I know, or know of, or perhaps have never heard of thus far? What are the threats that make this place of mine insecure? Who stands behind those threats? What kinds of countermeasures should I undertake in order to disable those people and so stave off such threats? This is how questions are being rephrased for members of the individualised society - and these are the kinds of questions to which ideologies were (and still are) believed to supply an answer, in a resolute and authoritative manner.

This new ideology is as conservative as Mannheim believed all ideologies (as opposed to utopias) to be. It calls upon us to see the daily experiences of the world we currently inhabit as the indomitable laws of the universe; and the viewpoint of ‘individuals-by-decree’ as the only perspective from which to ascertain the state of the world. Those among us who, thanks to their resourcefulness and skills, feel in that world as a fish in the water, may not notice the yawning gap between the

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expectations aroused by the ideology of privatisation in *all* individuals-by-decree and the realistic chances of those 'individuals-de-jure' who lack the necessary resources and skills to rise to the status of the individuals-de-facto. *Failed* individuals are doomed to suffer the humiliation of inadequacy, of falling below the standards that others evidently have no difficulty in meeting, as well as the humiliation of being vilified for sloth and indolence, if not for an inborn inferiority; such individuals can hardly avoid noticing the gap when falling into it and fathoming its abysmal depth.

This ideology, like all other known ideologies, *divides* humanity. But it also divides its own believers, enabling some and disabling the rest, thus exacerbating the conflict-ridden character of individualised/privatised society. It constantly defuses the energies, and disables the forces, that have the potential to undercut its foundations, thereby conserving that society and dimming any prospects of its overhaul.

## The pursuit of happiness

So, if we work harder and get richer, what are the pleasures that the individualised society offers? What kind of recognition can we expect to receive?

The *Financial Times* - obligatory daily reading of the high and mighty, as well as the more numerous also-rans who dream of joining them - publishes once a month a glossy supplement called 'How to spend it'. 'It' means money. (Or, rather, the cash left over after all the investments promising yet more cash have been taken care of, and debts paid on enormous house-and-garden and household bills, bespoke tailors' invoices, ex-partners' alimony dues and the Bentley.) In other words, 'it' refers to that margin of free choice at the far end of all the necessities of the high and mighty lifestyle. 'It' is the hoped-for reward for all those days filled with nerve-wrecking and hazardous choices, and the sleepless nights haunted by the horror of bets going wrong. 'It' is that joy which makes the pain worth suffering. 'It' stands for *happiness*. Or, rather, for that hope for happiness that is happiness.

Ann Rippin made the effort to browse through successive issues of the 'How to spend it' magazine, to find out what 'a modern young man in the ascendant' is offered as the material source/token/evidence of happiness *achieved*.<sup>3</sup> As expected, all the suggested roads to happiness lead through shops, restaurants, massage parlours and other sites where money can be spent. And this is big money indeed: £30,000

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pounds for a bottle of brandy, or a wine room at £75,000, in which to store it, in the company of other bottles, for the enchantment of friends invited to visit it and admire. But on the top of the prices that are sure to keep out almost the entire human race, some shops and restaurants have something extra to offer, something that will prevent even more of the race from showing up anywhere near their doors: a secret address, excruciatingly difficult to obtain, and bestowing on the very, very few who are let in on it the heavenly feeling of 'having been chosen' - having been lifted to heights beyond the dreams of ordinary mortals. This is the kind of feeling once experienced by mystics as they listened to angelic messengers announcing divine grace, but in our down-to-earth, 'happiness-now!' era it is seldom available through shortcuts that bypass the shops.

One of the permanent contributors to 'How to spend it' explains that what makes some exorbitantly costly perfumes 'so beguiling' is the fact that they 'have been kept under wraps for loyal clients'. As well as an unusual fragrance, they offer an olfactory emblem of magnificence, and of belonging to the company of the magnificent. As Ann Rippin suggests, this and similar kinds of bliss offer the combination of belonging to an exclusive category and the badge of supreme taste and connoisseurship - the knowledge of being among the selected few. Delights of the palate, eye, ear, nose and fingers are multiplied by the knowledge that so few others savour them. Is it the sense of privilege that makes the high and mighty happy? Is progress towards happiness to be measured by thinning out the bevy of fellow travellers?

Rippin finds such ways of reaching the state of happiness to be at best only half successful: the momentary joys they bring dissolve, vanishing quickly into long-term anxiety. The fantasy world spun by the editors of 'How to spend it' is marked by fragility and impermanence: 'the struggle for legitimacy through magnificence and excess implies instability and vulnerability'. The occupants of the fantasy world are aware that they can never have enough, or be good enough, to be safe. 'Consumption leads not to surety and satiety but to escalating anxiety. Enough can never be enough'. As one of the 'How to spend it' contributors warns, in a world in which 'everyone' can afford a luxury car, those who really aim high 'have no option but to go one better'.

This is what strikes you on taking a closer look at this way of pursuing happiness. But not everyone takes such a look: the price of seats with good visibility

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is far beyond the means of most of us. And the occasional glimpses we have of it, courtesy of *Hello* and other celebrity-courting magazines, invite us to follow suit rather than warn us against trying it. The message seems straightforward: the way to happiness is through the shops, and the more exclusive the shops the greater the happiness reached. Happiness means acquisition of things other people have no hope of acquiring. Happiness needs *one-upmanship* ...

High-street stores would not thrive were it not for the secret mews boutiques. Exclusive boutiques sell different products, but send the same message/promise. What the boutiques have done for the chosen few will surely lend authority and credibility to the promises of their high-street copiers. And their promises are strikingly alike: a promise make you 'better *than* ...' - to enable you to overwhelm, humiliate, demean and diminish the others, who dream of doing what you've done but have failed. The promise of the universal one-upmanship rule working *for you* ...

Another high-end newspaper regularly reviews novelties from the computer games market: and many of these computer games owe their popularity to the fun they offer - *safe* and *freely* chosen rehearsals of the practice of one-upmanship, which in the real world is as risky and dangerous as it is obligatory and unavoidable. Those games allow you to do what you have been nudged towards or wished to do but haven't - because of your fear of getting wounded, or your conscientious objections to wounding others. One such game, recommended as 'ultimate carnage' and a 'last man standing' 'demolition derby', was enthusiastically reviewed as follows:

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

Your dexterity against your protagonist's 'haplessness' is what makes one-upmanship such fun and so 'hilarious'. Your ego-boosting has been obtained at the expense of the protagonist's humiliation. Your dexterity would be only half as gratifying, and much less fun, without the rag-doll protagonist being hurled through the windscreen while you stay safely in the driver seat.

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Max Scheler noted as early as 1912 that the average person only appreciates value 'in the course of, and through comparison with' the possessions, condition, plight or quality of other people.<sup>4</sup> The snag here is that a side effect of such comparison quite often involves a discovery of our non-possession of some value that we then come to appreciate. That discovery - and even more the awareness that acquisition and enjoyment of this value is *beyond our capacity* - arouses strong sentiments. It triggers two opposite but equally vigorous reactions: an overwhelming desire for the unattainable object; and *ressentiment* - rancour, and derision of the value in question, together with its possessors, as a means of warding off feelings of self-depreciation and self-contempt. We may note that the experience of humiliation, composed as it is of contradictory sentiments, begets a highly ambivalent attitude - a prototypical 'cognitive dissonance'. Experiencing these contradictory feelings fuels a hotbed of irrational behaviour, and helps construct an impenetrable fortress against the arguments of reason; they are also a source of perpetual anxiety and spiritual discomfort.

As Max Scheler anticipated, a great number of our contemporaries are afflicted in this way. The ailment is contagious, and few denizens of the liquid modern society of consumers are fully immune. Our vulnerability is unavoidable (and probably incurable) in a society in which relative equality of political and other rights and formally acknowledged social equality go hand in hand with enormous differentiations in genuine power, possessions and education - a society in which everyone 'has the right' to consider themselves equal to everybody else, but without in fact possessing the ability to be equal (see Scheler, p41). In such a society, vulnerability is (at least potentially) universal. And this universal vulnerability, together with the universal temptation of one-upmanship, with which it is intimately related, reflects the unresolvable inner contradiction of a society that sets a standard of happiness for *all* its members which *most* are unable to match.

Epictetus, a Roman slave self-transformed into a founder of the school of Stoical philosophy, put forward some advice that could had been addressed to individuals in our society of consumers (since it is couched in a language they would easily understand, and resorts to metaphors uniquely resonant with their own worldview, even if it is not particularly in tune with their inclinations and preferences):

Think of your life as if it were a banquet where you would behave graciously. When dishes are passed to you, extend your hand and help

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yourself to a moderate portion. If a dish should pass you by, enjoy what is already on your plate. Or if the dish hasn't been passed to you yet, patiently wait for your turn.

Carry over the same attitude of polite restraint and gratitude to your children, spouse, career and finances. There is no need to yearn, envy, and grab. You will get your rightful portion when it is your time.<sup>5</sup>

The trouble is that our society of consumers does everything imaginable to undermine any belief in Epictetus's reassuring *promise*, and for that reason his *advice* - to be reticent, abstemious and cautious - is very difficult to accept. And our society of consumers also does everything imaginable to make the *practising* of Epictetus's advice a daunting task.

It is not, however, impossible. Society can (and does) render certain choices less likely to be taken by humans than others. But no society can completely deprive humans of choice.

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## Notes

1. Quoted from Elaine Sciolino, 'New Leaders Say Pensive French Think too Much', *NYT*, 22.7.07.
2. Dennis Smith, *Globalization: the hidden agenda*, Polity 2006, p38.
3. Ann Rippin, 'The Economy of Magnificence: Organization, Excess and Legitimacy', *Culture and Organization* 2 2007.
4. Max Scheler, 'Das Ressentiment im Aufbau der Moralen', *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. III, Bern 1955. Here quoted after the Polish edition, *Resentyment i Moralno*, Czytelnik 1997, p49.
5. Epictetus, *The Art of Living*, translated by Sharon Lebell, Harper One 2007, p22.