zygmunt BAUMAN
consuming LIFE
Consuming Life
To Ann Bone,
editor supreme
Consuming Life

Zygmunt Bauman

polity
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Introduction

Or, the most closely guarded secret of the society of consumers

There is no worse deprivation, no worse privation, perhaps, than that of the losers in the symbolic struggle for recognition, for access to a socially recognized social being, in a word, to humanity.

Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*

Consider three cases, picked up at random, of the fast changing habits of our increasingly ‘wired up’, or more correctly increasingly *wireless*, society.

**Case One** On 2 March 2006, the *Guardian* announced that ‘in the past 12 months, “social networking” has gone from being the next big thing to the thing itself.’

Visits to the website MySpace, a year earlier the unchallenged leader in the newly invented medium of ‘social networking’, grew sixfold, while its rival website Spaces.MSN scored eleven times more hits than the year before, and visits to Bebo.com multiplied sixty-one times.

Highly impressive growth indeed – even if the amazing success of Bebo, a newcomer to the internet at the time of reporting, might yet prove to be a flash in the pan: as an expert on internet fashions warns, ‘at least 40 per cent of this year’s top ten will be nowhere this time next year.’ ‘The launch of a new social networking site’, he explains, is ‘like opening of the latest uptown bar’ (just because it is *the* latest, a brand new or freshly overhauled and relaunched
outfit, such an uptown bar would attract huge traffic ‘before receding as certainly as the onset of the next day’s hangover’, passing its magnetic powers over to the ‘next latest’ in the never relenting relay race of the ‘hottest’, the latest ‘talk of the town’, the place where ‘everybody who is somebody must be seen’).

Once they get a foothold in a school or a physical or electronic neighbourhood, ‘social networking’ websites spread with the speed of an ‘extremely virulent infection’. In no time, they’ve stopped being just one option among many and turned into the default address for swelling numbers of young men and women. Obviously, the inventors and promoters of electronic networking have struck a responsive chord – or touched a raw and tense nerve which has long waited for the right kind of stimulus. They may rightly boast of having satisfied a real, widespread and urgent need. And what might that need be? ‘At the heart of social networking is an exchange of personal information.’ Users are happy to ‘reveal intimate details of their personal lives’, ‘to post accurate information’ and ‘to share photographs’. It is estimated that 61 per cent of UK teenagers aged thirteen to seventeen ‘have a personal profile on a networking site’ enabling ‘socializing online’.2

In Britain, a country where the popular use of cutting-edge electronic facilities lags cyberyears behind the Far East, the users can still trust ‘social networking’ to manifest their freedom of choice, and even believe it to be a means of youthful rebellion and self-assertion (a supposition made all the more credible by the panic alarms which their unprecedented, web-induced and web-addressed zeal for self-exposure triggers among their security-obsessed teachers and parents day in, day out, and by the nervous reactions of the headmasters who ban the likes of Bebo from the school servers). But in South Korea, for instance, where most social life is already routinely electronically mediated (or rather where social life has already turned into an electronic life or cyberlife, and where most ‘social life’ is conducted primarily in the company of a computer, iPod or mobile, and only secondarily with other fleshy beings), it is obvious to the young that they don’t have even so much as a sniff of choice; where they live, living social life electronically is no longer a choice, but a ‘take it or leave it’ necessity. ‘Social death’ awaits those few who have as yet failed to link up into Cyworld, South Korea’s cybermarket leader in the ‘show-and-tell culture’.
It would be a grave mistake, however, to suppose that the urge towards a public display of the ‘inner self’ and the willingness to satisfy that urge are manifestations of a unique, purely generational, age-related urge/addiction of teenagers, keen as they naturally tend to be to get a foothold in the ‘network’ (a term rapidly replacing ‘society’ in both social-scientific discourse and popular speech) and to stay there, while not being quite sure how best to achieve that goal. The new penchant for public confession cannot be explained by ‘age-specific’ factors – not only by them at any rate. Eugène Enriquez recently summed up the message to be derived from the fast growing evidence gathered from all sectors of the liquid modern world of consumers:

Provided one does not forget that what was previously invisible – everybody’s share of the intimate, everybody’s inner life – is now called on to be exposed on the public stage (principally on TV screens but also on the literary stage), one will comprehend that those who care for their invisibility are bound to be rejected, pushed aside, or suspected of a crime. Physical, social and psychological nudity is the order of the day.3

The teenagers equipped with portable electronic confessionals are simply apprentices training and trained in the art of living in a confessional society – a society notorious for effacing the boundary which once separated the private from the public, for making it a public virtue and obligation to publicly expose the private, and for wiping away from public communication anything that resists being reduced to private confidences, together with those who refuse to confide them. As Jim Gamble, the head of a watchdog agency, admitted to the Guardian, ‘it represents everything you see in the school playground – the only difference is that in this playground, there are no teachers or police or moderators to keep an eye on what’s going on.’

Case Two On the same day, though on quite a different and thematically unconnected page presided over by another editor, the Guardian informed its readers that ‘computer systems are being used to snub you more effectively, depending on your value to the company you’re calling.’4 Computer systems mean that records can be kept of customers, marking them from ‘1’, meaning
first-class clients who are answered immediately the moment they call and are promptly put through to a senior agent, down to ‘3’ (the ‘pond life’, as they have been summarily branded in the company lingo), who are put at the back of the queue – and when they are finally put through, they are connected to an agent at the bottom of the heap.

Just as in Case One, so in Case Two technology can hardly be blamed for the new practice. The new and refined software comes to the rescue of managers who already had a dire need to classify the growing army of the telephone callers in order to expedite the divisive and exclusionist practices which were already in operation but were until now performed with the help of primitive tools – DIY, home-made, or cottage-industry products which were more time-consuming and evidently less effective. As a spokesman for one of the companies supplying and servicing such systems pointed out, ‘technology only really takes the processes we have in place and makes them more efficient’ – which means instant and automatic, sparing the company’s employees the cumbersome duty of collating information, studying records, passing judgements and taking separate decisions for every call, together with responsibility for their consequences. What, in the absence of the right technical gear, they would have to evaluate by straining their own brains and using up a lot of precious company time is the prospective profitability of the caller for the company: the volume of cash or credit at the caller’s disposal, and the caller’s willingness to part with it. ‘Companies need to screen out the least valuable customers,’ explains another executive. In other words, companies need a sort of ‘negative surveillance’, the Orwellian Big Brother style or a Panopticon-style surveillance in reverse, a sieve-like contraption which primarily serves the task of flushing the undesirables away and keeping the regulars in: recast as the ultimate effect of a cleaning job well done. They need a way to feed into the data bank the kind of information capable first and foremost of cutting out ‘flawed consumers’ – those weeds of the consumerist garden, people short of cash, credit cards and/or shopping enthusiasm, and otherwise immune to the blandishments of marketing. Only resourceful and eager players would be then allowed, as a result of negative selection, to stay in the consumerist game.
Case Three A few days later yet another editor, on yet another page, informed readers that Charles Clarke, the British Home Secretary, had announced a new ‘points-based’ immigration system ‘to attract the brightest and the best’ and, of course, to repel and keep away all the others, even if that part of Clarke’s declaration was difficult to detect in the press release version: either left out altogether or relegated to the small print. Who is the new system aimed to attract? Those with the most money to invest and the most skills to earn it. ‘It will allow us to ensure’, said the Home Secretary, that ‘only those people with the skills that the UK needs come to this country while preventing those without these skills applying’. And how will that system work? For example Kay, a young woman from New Zealand, with a master’s degree but a rather lowly and miserly paid job, failed to reach the seventy-five points that would entitle her to apply for immigration. She would need first to obtain a job offer from a British company, which would then be recorded in her favour, as a proof that her kind of skills are ones ‘the UK needs’.

Charles Clarke, to be sure, would not claim originality for transferring to the selection of human beings the market rule of selecting the best commodity on the shelf. As Nicolas Sarkozy, his French equivalent and a hot contender for the next term of French presidency, has pointed out, ‘selective immigration is practised by almost all the world’s democracies’, and he went on to demand that ‘France ought to be able to choose its immigrants according to its needs’.

Three cases, reported in three separate sections of the dailies and presumed to belong to quite separate realms of life, each governed by its own set of rules while supervised and run by mutually independent agencies. Cases seemingly so dissimilar, concerning people of widely different provenience, age and interests, people confronted with sharply distinct challenges and struggling to resolve quite distinct problems . . . Is there any reason for putting them next to each other and considering them as specimens of the same category, you may ask? The answer is yes, there is a reason to connect them; and it is as powerful as reasons come.

The schoolgirls and schoolboys avidly and enthusiastically putting on display their qualities in the hope of capturing attention
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and possibly also gaining the recognition and approval required to stay in the game of socializing; the prospective clients needing to amplify their spending records and credit limits to earn a better service; the would-be immigrants struggling to gather and supply brownie points as evidence of demand for their services in order to have their applications considered – all three categories of people, apparently so distinct, are enticed, nudged or forced to promote an attractive and desirable commodity, and so to try as hard as they can, and using the best means at their disposal, to enhance the market value of the goods they sell. And the commodity they are prompted to put on the market, promote and sell are themselves.

They are, simultaneously, promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote. They are, at the same time, the merchandise and their marketing agents, the goods and their traveling salespeople (and let me add that any academic who has ever applied for a teaching job or research funds will easily recognize her or his own predicament in their experience). Into whatever bracket they may be slotted by the composers of statistical tables, they all inhabit the same social space known under the name of the market. Under whatever rubric their preoccupations would be classified by governmental archivists or investigative journalists, the activity in which all of them are engaged (whether by choice, necessity, or most commonly both) is marketing. The test they need to pass in order to be admitted to the social prizes they covet demands them to recast themselves as commodities: that is, as products capable of catching the attention and attracting demand and customers.

Siegfried Kracauer was a thinker endowed with an uncanny capacity for gleaning the barely visible and still inchoate contours of future-prefiguring trends still lost in a formless mass of fleeting fads and foibles. Already in the late 1920s, when the imminent transformation of the society of producers into a society of consumers was in an embryonic or at best incipient stage and so was overlooked by less attentive and farsighted observers, he had noted:

The rush to the numerous beauty salons springs partly from existential concerns, and the use of cosmetic products is not always a
luxury. For fear of being taken out of use as obsolete, ladies and gentlemen dye their hair, while forty-year-olds take up sports to keep slim. ‘How can I become beautiful?’ runs the title of a booklet recently launched on to the market; the newspaper advertisements for it say that it shows ways ‘to stay young and beautiful both now and for ever’.7

The emergent habits which Kracauer recorded in the early 1920s as a noteworthy Berlin curiosity went on to spread like a forest fire, until they turned into a daily routine (or at least into a dream) all around the globe. Eighty years later Germaine Greer was already observing that ‘even in the furthest reaches of north-western China, women laid aside their pyjama suits for padded bras and flirty skirts, curled and coloured their straight hair and saved up to buy cosmetics. This was called liberalization.’8

Half a century after Kracauer noted and described the new passions of Berlin women, another notable German thinker, Jürgen Habermas, writing at the time when the society of producers was nearing the end of its days and so benefiting from the added advantage of hindsight, presented the ‘commoditization of capital and labour’ as the major function, indeed the raison d’être, of the capitalist state. He pointed out that if the reproduction of capitalist society is accomplished through the endlessly repeated transactional encounters between capital in the role of the buyer and labour in the role of commodity, then the capitalist state must see to it that the encounters take place regularly and succeed in their purpose: that is, culminate in buying and selling transactions.

For this culmination to be reached in all or at least a decent number of the encounters, capital must be capable however of paying the current price of the commodity, be willing to pay it, and encouraged to act on that will – reassured by state-endorsed policy insurance against the risks caused by the notorious vagaries of commodity markets. Labour, on the other hand, must be kept in a spick-and-span condition, likely to attract the eye of potential buyers, meet with their approval and entice them to buy what they see. Just as in encouraging capitalists to spend their money on labour, making labour attractive to capitalist buyers was unlikely to be achieved, let alone assured, without the active cooperation of the state. Job-seekers had to be properly nourished and healthy,
used to disciplined behaviour, and in possession of the skills required by the working routines of the jobs they seek.

Deficits of power and resources nowadays afflict most nation-states struggling to acquit themselves in the task of commoditization – deficits caused by the exposure of native capital to the ever more intense competition resulting from the globalization of capital, labour and commodity markets and from the planet-wide spread of modern forms of production and trade, as well as deficits caused by the fast-rising costs of the ‘welfare state’, that paramount and perhaps indispensable instrument of the commoditization of labour.

As it happened, on the way from a society of producers to a society of consumers the tasks involved in the commoditization and recommoditization of capital and labour went through simultaneous processes of steady, thorough and apparently irreversible, even if as yet incomplete, *deregulation* and *privatization*.

The speed and the accelerating pace of these processes have been and continue to be anything but uniform. In most (though not all) countries they seem to be much more radical in the case of labour than they have been thus far in the case of capital, whose new ventures continue to have their pumps primed – almost as a rule – from governmental coffers on a rising rather than diminishing scale. In addition, capital’s ability and willingness to buy labour continue to be regularly boosted by the state, which tries hard to keep down the ‘cost of labour’ through dismantling the mechanisms of collective bargaining and job protection and by imposing legal brakes on the defensive actions of trade unions – and which all too often sustains the solvency of companies by taxing imports, offering tax relief on exports and subsidizing shareholders’ dividends through governmental commissions paid for from public funds. To prop up, for instance, the failed promise of the White House to keep at-the-pump prices of petrol down without endangering stockholders’ profits, the Bush administration confirmed as recently as February 2006 that the government will waive 7 billion dollars in royalties over the next five years (a sum estimated by some to quadruple) to encourage the American oil industry to drill for oil in the publicly owned waters of the Gulf of Mexico (‘It is like subsidizing a fish to swim’ was the reaction to the news of a member of the House of Representatives:
‘It is indefensible to be keeping those companies on the government dole when oil and gas prices are so high’).9

It is the task of the recommoditization of labour that has been thus far most affected by the twin processes of deregulation and privatization. This task is being by and large exempted from direct governmental responsibility through wholly or in part ‘contracting out’ to private businesses the essential institutional framework of service provision crucial for keeping labour sellable (as, for instance, in the case of schooling and housing, care in old age, and a growing number of medical services). So the overall task of sustaining the saleability of labour en masse is left to the private worries of individual men and women (for instance, by switching the costs of skill acquisition to private, and personal, funds), and they are now advised by politicians and cajoled by advertisers to use their own wits and resources to stay on the market, to increase their market value or not let it drop, and to earn the appreciation of prospective buyers.

Having spent several years observing at close quarters (almost as a participant) the changing patterns of employment in the most advanced sectors of the American economy, Arlie Russell Hochschild has discovered and documented trends which are strikingly similar to those found in Europe and described in great detail by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello as the ‘new spirit of capitalism’. The strong preference among employers for free-floating, unattached, flexible, ‘generalist’ and ultimately disposable employees (of a ‘Jack of all trades’ type, rather than being specialized and subjected to a narrowly focused training) has been the most seminal among the findings. In Hochschild’s own words:

Since 1997, a new term – ‘zero drag’ – has begun quietly circulating in Silicon Valley, the heartland of the computer revolution in America. Originally it meant the frictionless movement of a physical object like a skate or bicycle. Then it was applied to employees who, regardless of financial incentives, easily gave up one job for another. More recently, it has come to mean ‘unattached’ or ‘unobligated’. A dot.com employer might comment approvingly of an employee, ‘He’s zero drag’, meaning that he’s available to take on extra assignments, respond to emergency calls, or relocate any time. According to Po Bronson, a researcher of Silicon Valley culture, ‘Zero drag is optimal. For a while, new applicants would jokingly be asked about their ‘drag coefficient’.10