

The background of the cover is a blurred photograph of a brightly lit hallway. Several people are walking away from the camera, their figures stretched and blurred into vertical streaks. The lighting is warm, with a strong yellow and orange glow from the left, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall aesthetic is modern and evocative of a busy, transient urban environment.

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

THE INDIVIDUALIZED
Society

The Individualized Society

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Zygmunt Bauman

Polity

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Lives told and stories lived: an overture

‘Men are so necessarily mad’ – Blaise Pascal quipped – ‘that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness.’ From madness there is no escape but another madness, Ernest Becker insists, commenting on Pascal’s verdict, and explains: humans are ‘out of nature and hopelessly in it’; individually and collectively, we all rise above the finitude of our bodily life and yet we know – we cannot but know, though we do everything we can (and more) to forget it – that the flight of life would inevitably (and literally) run into the ground. And there is no good solution to the dilemma, because it is precisely the fact of having risen above nature that opens our finitude to scrutiny and makes it visible, unforgettable and painful. We do all we can to make our natural limits a most closely guarded secret; but were we ever to succeed in that effort we would have little reason to stretch ourselves ‘beyond’ and ‘above’ the limits we wished to transcend. It is the sheer impossibility of forgetting our natural condition that prompts us, and allows us, to rise above it. Since we are not allowed to forget our nature, we can (and must) go on challenging it.

Everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness – agreed madness, shared

madness, disguised and dignified madness, but madness all the same.¹

‘Agreed’, ‘shared’, ‘dignified’ – dignified by the act of sharing and by the outspoken or tacit agreement to respect what is shared. What we call ‘society’ is a huge contraption which does just that; ‘society’ is another name for agreeing and sharing, but also the power which makes what has been agreed and is shared dignified. Society is that power because, like nature itself, it was here long before any of us arrived and will stay here after every one of us has long gone. ‘Living in society’ – agreeing, sharing and respecting what we share – is the sole recipe for living *happily* (if not forever after). Custom, habit and routine take the poison of absurdity out of the sting of the finality of life. Society, Becker says, is ‘a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning’.² ‘Mad’ are only the unshared meanings. Madness is no madness when shared.

All societies are factories of meanings. They are more than that, in fact: nothing less than the nurseries of *meaningful life*. Their service is indispensable. Aristotle observed that a solitary being outside a *polis* can be only an angel or a beast; no wonder, we may say, since the first is immortal and the second unaware of its mortality. Submission to society, as Durkheim points out, is a ‘liberating experience’, the very condition of liberation ‘from blind, unthinking physical forces’. Could not one say, asks Durkheim rhetorically, that ‘it is only by a fortunate circumstance, because societies are infinitely more long-lived than individuals, that they permit us to taste satisfactions which are not merely ephemeral?’³ The first of the quoted sentences is, as it were, pleonastic: what the submission to society offers is not so much liberation from ‘unthinking physical forces’ as a liberation from thinking about them. Freedom comes in the form of exorcizing the spectre of mortality. And it is this tautology which renders the exorcism effective and makes certain types of satisfactions taste like the defeat of ruthlessly blind ‘physical forces’. When shared with those born earlier and those likely to live longer, satisfactions ‘are not merely ephemeral’; more exactly, they are cleansed (ephemerally) from the stigma of ephemerality. Inside a mortal life one can taste immortality, even if only metaphorically or metonymically – by shaping one’s life in the likeness of forms

which are agreed to be endowed with undying value, or by coming into touch and rubbing shoulders with things which by common agreement are destined for eternity. One way or another, something of the durability of nature may rub off on the transience of the individual life.

In the same way in which knowledge of good and evil begets the potent and staunch need for moral guidance, knowledge of mortality triggers the desire for transcendence, which takes one of two forms: either the urge to force the admittedly transient life to leave traces more lasting than are those who left them, or the wish to taste this side of the edge of transient life experiences 'stronger than death'. Society feeds on that desire in both its forms. There is an energy in that desire waiting to be channelled and directed. Society 'capitalizes' on that energy, draws its life-juices from that desire, in so far as it manages to do just what is wanted: to supply credible objects of satisfaction, alluring and trustworthy enough to prompt efforts which 'make sense' and 'give sense' to life; efforts which are sufficiently energy and labour consuming to fill the time span of life, and sufficiently varied to be realistically coveted and pursued by all ranks and stations however profuse or meagre their talents and resources.

This may be, as Becker suggests, madness, but one can also argue that it may rather be a rational response to the condition which human beings cannot change, while yet they have to cope with its effects. Whatever it is, society 'manipulates it', much as it manipulates that other knowledge, of good and evil – but its freedom of manoeuvre in this case is greater, and its responsibility more grave, since humans ate from the Tree of Good and Evil, but only heard of the Tree of Life and have no memory of tasting its fruit.

Where there is use, there is always a chance of abuse. And the line dividing use from abuse among the vehicles of transcendence on offer was and remains a most hotly (perhaps *the* most hotly) contested of the borders which human societies have drawn; it is also likely to remain so for a long time to come, since the fruits of the life-tree are not available on any duly licensed market stall. The object of all economies is the management of *scarce* resources, but the fate of the *economy of death transcendence* is to manage – supply and distribute – *substitutes* for notoriously *absent* resources: the *surrogates* which have to deputize for the 'real stuff' and render life liveable without it. Their main application

is to prevent (or, short of preventing, to put off) discoveries similar to Leonardo da Vinci's sad conclusion: 'While I thought that I was learning how to live, I have been learning how to die' – a wisdom which may sometimes prompt a blossoming of genius, but more often than not would result in a paralysis of will. It is for this reason that the life meanings on offer and in circulation cannot be sorted out as 'correct' and 'incorrect', true or fraudulent. They bring satisfactions which differ in emotional fullness, profundity and duration, but they all stop short of the genuine need-satisfaction.

Two consequences follow. One is the astounding inventiveness of cultures whose 'main business' is to supply ever new, as yet untried and undiscredited variants of transcendence strategies and resuscitate ever anew the trust in the ongoing search despite the way the explorers stumble from one disappointment to another frustration. The trade in life meanings is the most competitive of markets, but with the 'marginal utility' of the commodities on offer unlikely ever to shrink, the demand prompting competitive supply is unlikely to dry up. Second is the awesome opportunity to capitalize on the untapped and forever unexhausted volumes of energy generated by the continuous and never fully quenched thirst for life meaning. That energy, if properly seized and channelled, can be turned to many sorts of uses: thanks to its ubiquitousness and versatility, that energy constitutes fully and truly the culture's 'metacapital' – the stuff of which many and different bodies of 'cultural capital' can be and are moulded. Any kind of social order could be represented as a network of channels through which the search for life meanings is conducted and the life-meaning formulae conveyed. The energy of transcendence is what keeps the formidable activity called 'social order' going; it makes it both necessary and feasible.

It has been suggested before that separating 'right' and 'wrong' life meanings and formulae is a task that is not merely daunting but, if undertaken, is bound to fail. This does not mean, though, that all life meanings on offer are of equal value; from the fact that none is exactly on target, it does not follow that they all miss the targets by the same margin. Every culture lives by the invention and propagation of life meanings, and every order lives by manipulating the urge for transcendence; but once capitalized, the energy generated by the urge can be used and misused in

many different ways, though the profits from each allocation benefit clients unequally. We may say that the gist of 'social order' is the redistribution, the differential allocation of culturally produced resources and strategies of transcendence, and that the job of all social orders is to regulate their accessibility, turning it into the principal 'stratifying factor' and the paramount measure of socially conditioned inequality. Social hierarchy with all its privileges and deprivations is built out of the differential value measures of life formulae available to various categories of human beings.

It is in the field of such socially regulated redistributions of the capitalized 'energy of transcendence' that the issue of the truth and falsity of life meanings can be sensibly posited and a credible answer can be sought. The energy may be *misused*, and it is – when the possibilities of meaningful life are reduced, concealed or belied and the energy is directed away from their discovery. Social manipulation of the urge for transcendence is unavoidable if the individual life is to be lived and life in common is to continue – but it tends to include a *surplus manipulation* which diverts rather than brings closer the chances which life entails.

Surplus manipulation is at its most vicious when it turns the blame for the imperfections of the culturally produced life formulae and the socially produced inequality of their distribution on the self-same men and women for whose use the formulae are produced and resources needed to deploy them are supplied. It is then one of those cases when (to use Ulrich Beck's expression) institutions 'for *overcoming* problems' are transformed into 'institutions for *causing* problems';⁴ you are, on the one hand, made responsible for yourself, but on the other hand are 'dependent on conditions which completely elude your grasp'⁵ (and in most cases also your knowledge); under such conditions, 'how one lives becomes the *biographical solution of systemic contradictions*.'⁶ Turning the blame away from the institutions and onto the inadequacy of the self helps either to defuse the resulting potentially disruptive anger, or to recast it into the passions of self-censure and self-disparagement or even rechannel it into violence and torture aimed against one's own body.

Hammering home the 'no more salvation by society' commandment and turning it into a precept of commonsensical wisdom, a phenomenon easy to spot on the surface of contemporary life,

pushes things down to a 'second bottom': the denial of collective, public vehicles of transcendence and the abandonment of the individual to the lonely struggle with a task which most individuals lack the resources to perform alone. Rising political apathy and the colonization of public space with the intimacies of private life, Richard Sennett's 'fall of the public man', the rapid fading of the old art of fastening social bonds and making them last, the schizophrenic fear/desire of separation and being left alone (the perpetual vacillation between 'I need more space' and Ally McBeal's 'I am so tired of on my own'), the white-hot passions which accompany the desperate search for communities and the fissiparousness of the ones that are found, the undying demand for new and improved punitive regimes with which to torment one's scapegoated body, coupled paradoxically with the cult of the body as, simultaneously, 'the last line of trenches' to be tooth-and-nail defended, and a source of an endless series of pleasurable and ever more pleasurable sensations to absorb and process the excitements on offer, the continuously growing popularity of chemically, electronically or socially produced drugs hoped at different moments to sharpen sensations of life and to tone them down or silence them – all may have common roots firmly anchored in that 'second bottom'.

On both levels, the tendency is the same: the *conditions* under which human individuals construct their individual existence and which decide the range and the *consequences* of their choices retreat (or are removed) beyond the limits of their conscious influence, while references to them are blotted out or deported to the misty and rarely explored background of the stories which the individuals tell of their lives in their efforts to invent or discover their logic and recast them into convertible tokens of interpersonal communication. The conditions and the narratives alike undergo a process of relentless *individualization*, though the substance of the process is different in each case: 'conditions', whatever else they may be, are things that happened to one, came uninvited and would not leave if one wished them to go, while 'life narratives' stand for the stories people spin out of their own doings and neglects. If projected into discourse, the difference is between something one takes for granted and something about which one asks the questions 'why' and 'how'. These are, as it were, *semantic* distinctions between *terms*. The point of the utmost sociological

relevance, though, is how the terms are deployed in the shaping up of the story – that is, where the boundary between one's doings and the conditions under which one acted (and, by definition, could not have acted otherwise) is drawn in the course of the narrative.

Marx said, famously, that people make history but not under conditions of their choice. We may update that thesis as the times of 'life politics' demand, and say that people make their lives but not under conditions of their choice. In the original as well as in its updated version, however, the thesis may be thought to imply that the realm of the conditions beyond choice and the field of action hospitable to purpose, calculation and decision are separate and stay so; that though their interaction presents a problem, the boundary which sets them apart is unproblematic – objective, and so not negotiable.

The assumption of the 'givenness' of the boundary is, however, itself a major, perhaps the decisive factor which makes the 'conditions' what they are: a no-choice matter. 'Conditions' limit people's choices by exempting themselves from the ends-and-means game of life actions on the ground of their declared and accepted immunity from human choices. As W. I. Thomas put it – something that people assume to be true tends to become true as a consequence (more precisely, as a cumulative consequence of their actions). When people say 'there is no alternative to X', X moves from the territory of action to that of the action's 'conditions'. When people say 'there is nothing to be done', there is nothing indeed that they can do. The process of individualization which affects the 'conditions' and the life narratives alike needs two legs to progress: the powers setting the range of choices and separating realistic choices from pipe-dreams must be firmly set in the universe of 'conditions', while life stories must confine themselves to toing and froing among the options on offer.

Lives lived and lives told are for that reason closely interconnected and interdependent. One can say, paradoxically, that the stories told of lives interfere with the lives lived before the lives have been lived to be told... As Stuart Hall put it using another vocabulary, 'while not wanting to expand the territorial claim of the discursive infinitely, how things are represented and the "machineries" and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role.'⁷ Life stories are ostensibly guided by the modest ambition to instil

(‘in retrospect’, ‘with the benefit of hindsight’) an ‘inner logic’ and meaning into the lives they retell. In fact, the code they knowingly or unknowingly observe shapes the lives they tell about as much as it shapes their narratives and the choice of villains and heroes. One lives one’s life as a story yet to be told, but the way the story hoping to be told is to be woven decides the technique by which the yarn of life is spun.

The boundary between ‘background’ and ‘action’ (‘structure’ and ‘agency’, *πασχεῖν* and *ποιεῖν*) is, arguably, the most hotly contested of the boundaries which give shape to the *Lebenswelt* map and so, obliquely, to the trajectories of life courses. At this boundary the most frenzied of ideological battles are fought; along this boundary armed vehicles and mobile cannons belonging to embattled ideologies are anchored to the ground to form the ‘imaginary’, the ‘doxa’, the ‘good sense’ – the ‘no trespassing line’ fortified against assaults by thought and mined against wandering imagination. Despite the most earnest of efforts, this is a notoriously mobile boundary; and a curious boundary too, in so far as the act of questioning it tends to be the most effective form of contest. ‘Things are *not* as they seem to be’, ‘things are not what you insist they are’, ‘the devil is not as black as it is painted’ are the war cries which the defenders of this particular boundary have every reason to fear the most, as so many spokesmen for divine verdicts, laws of history, state reason and Reason’s commandments have learned the hard way.

Elaborating on the research-and-theory strategy of Cultural Studies, the formidable British contribution to the cognitive frame of contemporary social science, Lawrence Grossberg suggested that the concept of ‘articulation’ grasped best the strategic logic of the battles conducted on the boundary under discussion (‘the process of forging connections between practices and effects, as well as of enabling practices to have different, often unpredicted effects’):

Articulation is the construction of one set of relations out of another; it often involves delinking or disarticulating connections in order to link or rearticulate others. Articulation is a continuous struggle to reposition practices within a shifting field of forces, to redefine the possibilities of life by redefining the field of relations – the context – within which a practice is located.⁸

Articulation is an activity in which we all, willy-nilly, are continually engaged; no experience would be made into a story without it. At no time, though, does articulation carry stakes as huge as when it comes to the telling of the 'whole life' story. What is at stake then is the acquittal (or not, as the case may be) of the awesome responsibility placed on one's shoulders – and on one's private shoulders alone – by irresistible 'individualization'. In our 'society of individuals' all the messes into which one can get are assumed to be self-made and all the hot water into which one can fall is proclaimed to have been boiled by the hapless failures who have fallen into it. For the good and the bad that fill one's life a person has only himself or herself to thank or to blame. And the way the 'whole-life story' is told raises this assumption to the rank of an axiom.

All articulations open up certain possibilities and close down some others. The distinctive feature of the stories told in our times is that they articulate individual lives in a way that excludes or suppresses (prevents from articulation) the possibility of tracking down the links connecting individual fate to the ways and means by which society as a whole operates; more to the point, it precludes the questioning of such ways and means by relegating them to the unexamined background of individual life pursuits and casting them as 'brute facts' which the story-tellers can neither challenge nor negotiate, whether singly, severally or collectively. With the supra-individual factors shaping the course of an individual life out of sight and out of thought, the added value of 'joining forces' and 'standing arm in arm' is difficult to spot, and the impulse to engage (let alone engage critically) with the way the human condition, or the shared human predicament, is shaped is weak or non-existent.

Much has been made recently of the so-called 'reflexivity' of contemporary life; indeed, we all – the 'individuals by decree' that we are, the 'life politicians' rather than members of a 'polity' – tend to be compulsive story-tellers and find few if any topics for our stories more interesting than ourselves – our emotions, sensations and intimate *Erlebnisse*. The point is, though, that the game of life we all play, with our self-reflexions and story-telling as its most prominent parts, is conducted in such a way that the rules of the game, the contents of the pack of cards and the fashion in which the cards are shuffled and dealt seldom come under scrutiny

and even less frequently become a matter of reflection, let alone of serious discussion.

The placid consent to go on playing the game in which the dice may be loaded (though there is no way to find out for sure), and the renunciation of all interest in whether (and how) the odds are being piled against the players, seem to many thoughtful minds so bizarre and contrary to reason that all sorts of sinister forces and unnatural circumstances have been enrolled one after another to account for its happening on such a large scale. The bizarre behaviour would seem less odd and easier to comprehend were the actors *forced* to surrender – by routine coercion or threat of violence. But the actors in question are ‘individuals by decree’, free choosers; besides, as we all know, one can take a horse to water, but one cannot make it drink. Alternative explanations have therefore been sought, and ostensibly found in ‘mass culture’; with the ‘media’ specializing in brainwashing and substituting cheap entertainment for serious reflection and the ‘consumer market’ specializing in deception and seduction being cast as the main villains. Sometimes the ‘masses’ were pitied as hapless victims of the market/media conspiracy, sometimes they were blamed for being all-too-willing accomplices of the plot – but always a sort of collective brain damage was implied; clearly, falling into the trap did not ‘stand to reason’.

A bit more flattering for human beings are explanations which admit reason on to the stage: yes, humans use their wits, skills and considerable know-how to get by, but the knowledge on offer is fraudulent and misleading and offers little chance to spy out the genuine causes of their troubles. Not that humans lack reason and good sense; it is, rather, that the realities they must cope with in the course of their lives are burdened with the original sin of falsifying true human potential and cutting off the possibility of emancipation. Humans are neither irrational nor duped, but however diligently they examine their life experience they will hardly come across a strategy which could help them to change the rules of the game in their favour. This is, in a nutshell, what the explanation through ‘ideological hegemony’ suggests. According to this explanation, ideology is not so much an articulated creed, a set of verbal statements to be learned and believed; it is, rather, incorporated in the way people live – ‘soaked in’ by the way people act and relate. Once the hegemony has been achieved, hints and clues pointing in

the wrong direction (wrong from the point of view of the actors' interests) are densely scattered all over the world within which the actors put their lives together; there is no more possibility of avoiding them or of unmasking their fraudulence so long as it is just their own life experiences that the actors must rely on in setting their 'life projects' and planning their actions. No brainwashing is required – the immersion in daily life shaped by the preset and prescribed rules will be quite enough to keep the actors on the set course.

The idea of 'ideology' is inseparable from that of power and domination. It is an undetachable part of the concept that any ideology is in somebody's interest; it is the rulers (the ruling class, the elites) who make their domination secure through ideological hegemony. But to achieve that effect they need an 'apparatus' which, sometimes openly but mostly surreptitiously, will conduct cultural crusades leading to the hegemony of the kind of culture which promises to defuse rebellion and keep the dominated obedient. Ideology without a 'cultural crusade', waged or planned, would be akin to a wind that does not blow or a river that does not flow.

But crusades and other wars, indeed all struggles, including the most ferocious among them, are (as Georg Simmel pointed out) forms of sociation. Struggle presumes encounter, a 'combat', and so it means mutual engagement and interaction between warring sides. 'Cultural crusades', proselytizing, converting presume such engagement. This makes one wonder if the use of 'ideological hegemony' as an explanation for the popularity of inadequate articulations has not lost its credibility by now, whether or not it had it under different but now bygone circumstances.

Times of direct engagement between the 'dominant' and the 'dominated', embodied in panoptical institutions of daily surveillance and indoctrination, seem to have been replaced (or to be in the course of being replaced) by neater, slimmer, more flexible and economical means. It is the falling apart of heavy structures and hard and fast rules, exposing men and women to the endemic insecurity of their position and uncertainty of their actions, which has made the clumsy and costly ways of 'direct control' redundant. When, as Pierre Bourdieu put it, *la précarité est partout*, panopticons with their large and unwieldy staff of surveillants and supervisors can be abandoned or dismantled. To be sure, one can do equally well without the preachers and their homilies. 'Précarité' is better off without them. 'Precariousness',

that new warrant of submission, is all the greater because people have been left to their own devices, lamentably inadequate when it comes to 'getting a hold' on their present condition, a hold strong enough to encourage thoughts of changing the future. Disengagement is nowadays the most attractive and widely played game in town. Speed of movement, and particularly the speed of escape before birds have time to come home to roost, is today the most popular technique of power.

The high and mighty of our times do not wish to be embroiled in the trials and tribulations of management, surveillance and policing; above all, in the responsibilities arising from long-term commitments and 'till death us do part' engagements. They have elevated to the rank of the highest merit the attributes of mobility and flexibility, travelling light, on-the-spot readjustment and continuous reincarnation. Having at their disposal a volume of resources on a par with the volume of choice, they find the new lightness nothing but a fertile and thoroughly enjoyable condition. When translated into no-choice, obligatory canons of universal behaviour, the self-same attributes generate a lot of human misery. But they also (and by the same token) make the game immune to challenge and so insure it against all competition. *Précarité* and TINA ('there is no alternative') enter life together. And only together can they leave.

Why do we, spurred into action by discomforts and risks endemic to the way we live, all too often shift our attention and aim our effort at the objects and objectives causally unconnected with the genuine sources of those discomforts and risks? How does it happen that – rational beings as we are – the energy generated by life anxieties keeps being diverted from its 'rational' targets and is used to protect, instead of removing, the causes of trouble? In particular: what are the reasons why the stories we tell nowadays and are willing to listen to rarely, if ever, reach beyond the narrow and painstakingly fenced-off enclosure of the private and the 'subjective self'? These and related questions have in recent years become (it is my turn to publicly confess) my obsession. This collection of lectures given and essays written during the last three years are documents of that obsession.

The questions listed above are the sole common element that unites the otherwise scattered and apparently unconnected topics

of this book. The search for an answer to these questions was the prime motive, and approaching the admittedly elusive answer from ever new sides was the main purpose. I do believe that close engagement with the ongoing effort to rearticulate the changing human condition under which the ‘increasingly individualized individuals’ find themselves as they struggle to invest sense and purpose in their lives is, under present circumstances (which I tried to sketch in *Liquid Modernity*), the paramount task of sociology.

This task does not consist (cannot consist) in ‘correcting common sense’ and legislating the true representation of human reality in place of the wrong ones endemic in lay knowledge. The essence of the task is not closure, but opening; not the selection of human possibilities worth pursuing, but preventing them from being foreclosed, forfeited or simply lost from view. The calling of sociology is nowadays to enlarge and to keep the width of that part of the human world which is subject to incessant discursive scrutiny and so keep it saved from ossification into the ‘no-choice’ condition.

Articulation of life stories is the activity through which meaning and purpose are inserted into life. In the kind of society we live in articulation is and needs to remain an individual task and individual right. This is, though, an excruciatingly difficult task and a right not easy to vindicate. To perform the task and to exercise the right in full, we all need all the assistance we can get – and sociologists can offer much help if they acquit themselves as well as they may and should in the job of recording and mapping the crucial parts of the web of interconnections and dependencies which are either kept hidden or stay invisible from the vantage point of individual experience. Sociology is itself a story – but the message of this particular story is that there are more ways of telling a story than are dreamt of in our daily story-telling; and that there are more ways of living than is suggested by each one of the stories we tell and believe in, seeming as it does to be the only one possible.

There is another common thread to the lectures and essays contained in this volume: that the crucial effect of the struggle to expand the boundaries of articulation by bringing back into view the areas banished to the background and left out by the life stories unexamined shall be the radical widening of the political agenda. In so far as the public sphere has been stealthily yet steadily colonized by private concerns trimmed, peeled and cleaned of

their public connections and ready for (private) consumption but hardly for the production of (social) bonds, this effect may also be described as a *decolonization* of the public sphere. As I tried to argue in *Liquid Modernity*, the road to a truly autonomous *ecclesia* leads through a populous and vibrant *agora*, where people meet daily to continue their joint effort of translating back and forth between the languages of private concerns and public good.

September 1999

The Way We Are

1

The rise and fall of labour

According to the *OED*, the first usage of the word ‘labour’ in the meaning of ‘physical exertion directed to the supply of the material wants of the community’ was recorded in 1776. A century later it came also to signify ‘the general body of labourers and operatives who take this part in production’ – and shortly afterwards also the unions and other bodies which made the link between the two meanings and in the end reformed that link into a political issue. The English usage is remarkable for bringing into sharp view the close connection – indeed, the convergence and an identity of fate – between the significance assigned to work (that ‘bodily and mental toil’), the self-constitution of those who work into a class, and the politics grounded in that self-constitution. In other words, the link between casting physical toil as the principal source of wealth and the well-being of society and the self-assertion of the labour movement. Together they rose, together they fell.

Most economic historians agree (see, for instance, a recent recapitulation of their findings by Paul Bairoch)¹ that so far as levels of income are concerned, there was little to distinguish between diverse civilizations at the peak of their powers: the riches of Rome in the first century, of China in the eleventh and India in the seventeenth were not much different from those of Europe at the threshold of the industrial revolution. By some estimates, the income per head in Western Europe in the eighteenth century was no more than 30 per cent higher than that of India, Africa or China