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Introduction

Beliefs do not need to be coherent in order to be believed. Beliefs that tend to be believed these days – our beliefs – are no exception. Indeed, we consider the case of human freedom, at least in 'our part' of the world, to be open and shut, and (barring minor corrections here and there) resolved to the fullest conceivable satisfaction; at any rate, we do not feel the need (again barring occasional minor irritations) to take to the streets to claim and exact more freedom or better freedom than we feel we already have. But, on the other hand, we tend to believe equally firmly that there is little we can change – singly, severally, or all together – in the way the affairs of the world are running or are being run; and we believe too that, were we able to make a change, it would be futile, even unreasonable, to put our heads together to think of a different world from the one there is and to flex our muscles to bring it about if we consider it better than the one we are in. How these two beliefs can be held at the same time would be a mystery to any person trained in logical thinking. If freedom has been won, how does it come about that human ability to imagine a better world and to do something to make it better was not among the trophies of victory? And what sort of freedom is it that discourages imagination and tolerates the impotence of free people in matters which concern them all?

The two beliefs fit each other ill – but holding both of them is not a sign of our logical ineptitude. The two beliefs are by no

means fanciful. There is more than enough in our shared experience to support each of the two. We are quite realistic and rational when believing what we do. And so it is important to know why the world we live in keeps sending us such evidently contradictory signals. And it is also important to know how we can live with that contradiction; and, moreover, why most of the time we do not notice it and are not particularly worried when we do.

Why is it important to know that? Would anything change for the better once we obtained this kind of knowledge? This, to be sure, is by no means certain. An insight into what makes things to be as they are may prompt us to throw in the towel just as much as it may spur us into action. The knowledge of how the complex and not readily visible social mechanisms which shape our condition work cuts notoriously both ways. Time and again, it prompts two quite distinct uses, which Pierre Bourdieu aptly called 'cynical' and 'clinical'. Knowledge may be used 'cynically': the world being what it is, let me think of a strategy which will allow me to exploit its rules to my best advantage; whether the world is fair or unjust, likeable or not, is neither here nor there. When it is used 'clinically', the same knowledge of how society works may help you and me to fight more effectively what we see as improper, harmful or offending our moral sense. By itself, knowledge does not determine which of the two uses we resort to. This is, ultimately, a matter of our own choice. But without that knowledge there would be no choice to start with. With knowledge, free men and women have at least some chance to exercise their freedom.

But what is there to know? It is with this question that this book tries to come to grips. The answer it comes up with is, roughly, that the growth of individual freedom may coincide with the growth of collective impotence in as far as the bridges between private and public life are dismantled or were never built to start with; or, to put it differently, in as far as there is no easy and obvious way to translate private worries into public issues and, conversely, to discern and pinpoint public issues in private troubles. And that in our kind of society the bridges are by and large absent and the art of translation seldom practised in public. In the absence of bridges, the sporadic communication between the private and public shores is maintained with the help of balloons

which have the vexing habit of collapsing or exploding the moment they land – and, more often than not, before reaching their targets. While the art of translation is in its present sorry state, the sole grievances aired in public are sackfuls of private agonies and anxieties which, however, do not turn into public issues just for being on public display.

In the absence of strong and permanent bridges and with translating skills unpractised or altogether forgotten, private troubles and pains do not add up and can hardly condense into common causes. What, under the cicumstances, can bring us together? Sociality, so to speak, is free-floating, seeking in vain solid ground in which to anchor, a visible-to-all target on which to converge, companions with which to close ranks. There is a lot of it around – wandering, blundering, unfocused. Lacking in regular outlets, our sociality tends to be released in spectacular one-off explosions – short lived, as all explosions are.

Occasion for release is sometimes given by carnivals of compassion and charity; sometimes by outbursts of beefed-up aggression against a freshly discovered public enemy (that is, against someone whom most members of the public may recognize as their private enemy); at other times by an event most people feel strongly about at the same time and so synchronize their joy, as in the case of the national team winning the World Cup, or their sorrow, as in the case of the tragic death of Princess Diana. The trouble with all these occasions is, though, that they run out of steam quickly: once we return to our daily business things by and large come back, unscathed, to where they started. And when the dazzling flash of togetherness goes out, the loners wake up just as lonely as before, while the shared world, so brightly illuminated just a moment ago, seems if anything still darker than before. And after the explosive discharge there is little energy left for the limelights to be lit again.

The chance of changing this condition hangs on the *agora* – the space neither private nor public, but more exactly private and public at the same time. The space where private problems meet in a meaningful way – that is, not just to draw narcissistic pleasures or in search of some therapy through public display, but to seek collectively managed levers powerful enough to lift individuals from their privately suffered misery; the space where such ideas may be born and take shape as the 'public good', the

'just society' or 'shared values'. The trouble is, though, that little has been left today of the old-style private/public spaces, whereas new ones able to replace them are nowhere in sight. The old *agoras* have been taken over by enterprising developers and recycled into theme parks, while powerful forces conspire with political apathy to refuse building permits for new ones.

The most conspicuous feature of contemporary politics, Cornelius Castoriadis told Daniel Mermet in November 1996, is its *insignificance*, 'Politicians are impotent . . . They no more have a programme. Their purpose is to stay in office.' Change of governments – of 'political camps' even – is no watershed; a ripple at most on the surface of a stream flowing unstoppably, monotonously, with dull determination, in its own direction, pulled by its own momentum. A century ago the ruling political formula of liberalism was a defiant and impudent ideology of the 'great leap forward'. Nowadays, it is no more than a self-apology for surrender: 'This is not the best of imaginable worlds, but the only real one. Besides, all alternatives are worse, must be worse and would be shown to be worse if tried in practice.' Liberalism today boils down to the simple 'no alternative' credo. If you wish to find out what the roots of the growing political apathy are, you may as well look no further. This politics lauds conformity and promotes conformity. And conformity could as well be a do-it-yourself job; does one need politics to conform? Why bother with politicians who, whatever their hue, can promise nothing but more of the same?

The art of politics, if it happens to be *democratic* politics, is about dismantling the limits to citizens' freedom; but it is also about self-limitation: about making citizens free in order to enable them to set, individually and collectively, their own, individual and collective, limits. That second point has been all but lost. All limits are off-limits. Any attempt at self-limitation is taken to be the first step on the road leading straight to the gulag, as if there was nothing but the choice between the market's and the government's dictatorship over needs – as if there was no room for the citizenship in other form than the consumerist one. It is this form (and only this form) which financial and commodity markets would tolerate. And it is this form which is promoted and cultivated by the governments of the day. The sole grand narrative left in the field is that of (to quote Castoriadis again) the accu-

mulation of junk and more junk. To that accumulation, there must be no limits (that is, all limits are seen as anathema and no limits would be tolerated). But it is that accumulation from which the self-limitation has to start, if it is to start at all.

But the aversion to self-limitation, generalized conformity and the resulting insignificance of politics have their price – a steep price, as it happens. The price is paid in the currency in which the price of wrong politics is usually paid – that of human sufferings. The sufferings come in many shapes and colours, but they may be traced to the same root. And these sufferings have a self-perpetuating quality. They are the kind of sufferings which stem from the malfeasance of politics, but also the kind which are the paramount obstacle to its sanity.

The most sinister and painful of contemporary troubles can be best collected under the rubric of *Unsicherheit* – the German term which blends together experiences which need three English terms – uncertainty, insecurity and unsafety – to be conveyed. The curious thing is that the nature of these troubles is itself a most powerful impediment to collective remedies: people feeling insecure, people wary of what the future might hold in store and fearing for their safety, are not truly free to take the risks which collective action demands. They lack the courage to dare and the time to imagine alternative ways of living together; and they are too preoccupied with tasks they cannot share to think of, let alone to devote their energy to, such tasks as can be undertaken only in common.

The extant political institutions, meant to assist them in the fight against insecurity, offer little help. In a fast globalizing world, where a large part of power, and the most seminal part, is taken out of politics, these institutions cannot do much to offer security or certainty. What they can do and what they more often than not are doing is to shift the scattered and diffuse anxiety to one ingredient of *Unsicherheit* alone – that of safety, the only field in which something can be done and seen to be done. The snag is, though, that while doing something effectively to cure or at least to mitigate insecurity and uncertainty calls for united action, most measures undertaken under the banner of safety are divisive; they sow mutual suspicion, set people apart, prompt them to sniff enemies and conspirators behind every contention or dissent, and in the end make the loners yet more lonely than

before. Worst of all: while such measures come nowhere near hitting at the genuine source of anxiety, they use up all the energy these sources generate – energy which could be put to much more effective use if channelled into the effort of bringing power back into the politically managed public space.

This is one of the main reasons why there is such a meagre demand for private/public spaces; and why the few remaining ones are empty most of the time, and so the favourite target for downsizing, or better still phasing-out. Another reason for their shrinking and wilting is the blatant inconsequentiality of anything that may happen in them. Assuming for a moment that the extraordinary happened and private/public space was filled with citizens wishing to debate their values and discuss the laws which are there to guide them – where is the agency powerful enough to carry through their resolutions? The most powerful powers float or flow, and the most decisive decisions are taken in a space remote from the *agora* or even from the politically institutionalized public space; for the political institutions of the day, they are truly out of bounds and out of control. And so the self-propelling and self-reinforcing mechanism will go on self-propelling and self-reinforcing. The sources of *Unsicherheit* will not dry up, seeing to it that the daring and the resolve to challenge them would not be immaculately conceived; the real power will stay at a safe distance from politics and the politics will stay powerless to do what politics is expected to do: to demand from all and any form of human togetherness to justify itself in terms of human freedom to think and to act – and to ask them to leave the stage if they refuse or fail to do so.

A Gordian knot indeed – one that is too tangled and twisted to be neatly untied, and so can only be cut . . . The deregulation and privatization of insecurity, uncertainty and unsafety seem to hold the knot together and so to be the right spot to cut through, if one wants the rest of the loop to fall apart.

Easier said than done, to be frank. Attacking insecurity at its source is a daunting task, calling for nothing less than rethinking and renegotiating some of the most fundamental assumptions of the type of society currently in existence – assumptions holding all the faster for being tacit, invisible or unmentionable, beyond discussion or beyond dispute. As the late Cornelius Castoriadis put it – the trouble with our civilization is that it stopped

questioning itself. No society which forgets the art of asking questions or allows this art to fall into disuse can count on finding answers to the problems that beset it – certainly not before it is too late and the answers, however correct, have become irrelevant. Fortunately for all of us, this need not happen – and being aware that it might happen is the warrant that it won't. This is where sociology enters the stage; it has a responsible role to play, and it would have no right to make excuses if it shed that responsibility.

The frame in which the entire argument of the book is inscribed is the idea that *individual liberty can be only a product of collective work* (can be only *collectively* secured and guaranteed). We move today though towards *privatization of the means to assure/insure/guarantee individual liberty* – and if this is a therapy for present ills, it is such a treatment which is bound to produce iatrogenic diseases of most sinister and atrocious kinds (mass poverty, social redundancy and ambient fear being most prominent among them). To make the present plight and the prospect of its repair more complex yet, we live also through a period of the privatization of utopia and of the models of the good (with the models of the 'good life' elbowing out, and cut off from, the model of the good society). The art of reforging private troubles into public issues is in danger of falling into disuse and being forgotten; private troubles tend to be defined in a way that renders exceedingly difficult their 'agglomeration', and thus their condensation into a political force. The argument of this book is an (admittedly inconclusive) struggle to make the translation possible again.

The changing meaning of politics is the topic of the first chapter; the troubles which beset the existing agencies of political action and the reasons for their falling effectiveness are discussed in the second; and the broad outlines of a vision which may guide the much-needed reform are sketched in the third. The prospects of ideology in a post-ideological world, of tradition in the post-traditional world, and of shared values in a society tormented by 'value crisis' are broached in separate sections.

Much of this book is contentious and meant to be such. The most controversial, though, are probably the issues discussed in the last chapter, and this for a double reason.

Visions born and floated in an autonomous society or a society

aiming to become autonomous are and must be many and diverse, and so, were one to wish to avoid controversy, one would have to refrain from thinking of alternatives to the present – let alone alternatives arguably better than the present. (Evil, as we know, has its best friend in banality, while banality takes the routine for ultimate wisdom.) But what makes the chapter more controversial still, is that visions as such have nowadays fallen into disrepute. 'The end of history' is all the rage, and the most contentious issues that haunted our ancestors are commonly taken to have been settled, or treated as settled by not being noted (at any rate noticed *as problems*). We tend to be proud of what we perhaps should be ashamed of, of living in the 'post-ideological' or 'post-utopian' age, of not concerning ourselves with any coherent vision of the good society and of having traded off the worry about the public good for the freedom to pursue private satisfaction. And yet if we pause to think why that pursuit of happiness fails more often than not to bring about the results we hoped for, and why the bitter taste of insecurity makes the bliss less sweet than we had been told it would be – we won't get far without bringing back from exile ideas such as the public good, the good society, equity, justice and so on – such ideas that make no sense unless cared for and cultivated in company with others. Nor are we likely to get the fly of insecurity out of the ointment of individual freedom without resorting to politics, using the vehicle of political agency and charting the direction which that vehicle should follow.

Certain orientation points seem to be crucial when planning the itinerary. The third chapter focuses on three of them: the republican model of the state and of citizenship, a basic income as universal entitlement, and stretching the institutions of an autonomous society far enough to restore its enabling capacity – by catching up with powers that are at the moment exterritorial. All three points are discussed in order to provoke and foment deliberation, not to offer solutions – which in an autonomous society anyway can come only at the far end of, not at the beginning of, political action.

I happen to believe that questions are hardly ever wrong; it is the answers that might be so. I also believe, though, that refraining from questioning is the worst answer of all.

August 1998

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In Search of Public Space

Commenting on the widely reported events triggered in three different towns of the West Country by the news that paedophile Sidney Cooke had been released from prison and returned home, Decca Aitkenhead,[1] a *Guardian* reporter blessed by a sociological sixth sense, of whose rich harvest we shall repeatedly avail ourselves here, observed:

> If there's one thing guaranteed to get people out on the streets today, it is the whispered arrival of a paedophile. The helpfulness of such protests is increasingly being questioned. What we haven't asked, however, is whether these protests actually have anything to do with paedophiles.

Aikenhead focused on one of these towns, Yeovil, where she found that the variegated crowd of grandmothers, teenagers, and businesswomen who had seldom, if ever, expressed any previous wish to engage in a public action had now laid protracted siege to the local police station, being not even sure that Cooke did indeed hide in the besieged building. Their ignorance concerning the facts of the matter took second place only to their determination to do something about them and to be seen to be doing it; and their determination gained enormously from the haziness of the facts. People who had all their lives steered clear of public protests now came, and stayed, and shouted 'Kill the bastard',

and were prepared to keep vigil for as long as it took. Why? Were they after something other than the secure confinement of one public enemy whom they never saw and of whose whereabouts they were far from confident? Aitkenhead has an answer to that baffling question, and it is a convincing one.

> What Cooke offers, wherever he is, is a rare opportunity to really hate someone, loudly, publicly, and with absolute impunity. It is a matter of good and evil . . . and so a gesture against Cooke defines you as decent. There are very few groups of people you can respectably hate any more. Paedophiles are the very thing.

'At last I've found my cause', said the chief organizer of the protest, herself a woman with no previous experience of any public role. 'What Debra had probably found', comments Aitkenhead, 'is not "her cause", but common cause – the sensation of communal motivation.'

> Their demonstrations have shades of political rallies, religious ceremonies, union meetings – all those group experiences which used to define people's sense of selves, and which are no longer available to them. And so now [they] organise against paedophiles. In a few years, the cause will be something else.

A prowler around the house

Aitkenhead is right again: a shortage of new causes is a most unlikely prospect, and there will always be enough empty plots at the graveyard of old causes. But for the time being – for days, rather than years, allowing for the mind-boggling speed of the wear-and-tear of public scares and moral panics – the cause is Sidney Cooke. Indeed, he is an excellent cause to bring together people who seek an outlet for long-accumulated anxiety.

First, Cooke has a name attached to him: this makes him into a tangible target, which fishes him out of the pap of ambient fears and gives him a bodily reality few other fears possess; even if unseen, he still can be construed as a solid object that can be handled, tied down, locked up, neutered, even destroyed – unlike most threats, which tend to be disconcertingly diffuse, oozy, evasive, spilt all over the place, unpinpointable. Second, by a

happy coincidence Cooke has been placed on a spot where private concerns and public issues meet; more precisely, his case is an alchemical crucible in which love for one's children – a daily experience, routine, yet private – can be miraculously transsubstantiated into a public spectacle of solidarity. Cooke has become a gangplank of sorts, however brittle and provisional, leading out of the prison of privacy. Last but not least, that gangplank is wide enough to allow a group, perhaps a massive one, escape; each lonely escapee is likely to be joined by other people escaping their own private prisons, and a community can be created just by using the same escape route and which will last as long as all feet are on the gangplank.

Politicians, people supposed to operate in the public space professionally (they have their offices there, or rather they call 'public' the space where their offices are), are hardly ever well prepared for the invasion by intruders; and inside the public space anyone without the right type of office, and who appears in the public space on anything other than an officially scripted, filed and stage-managed occasion and without invitation, is, by definition, an intruder. By these standards Sidney Cooke-bashers were, no doubt, intruders. Their presence inside the public space was from the start precarious. They therefore wished the legitimate inhabitants of the public space to acknowledge their presence and endorse its legitimacy.

Willie Horton had probably lost Michael Dukakis the American presidency. Before running for president, Dukakis served for ten years as governor of Massachusetts. He was one of the most vociferous opponents of the death penalty. He also thought prisons to be, predominantly, institutions of education and rehabilitation. He wished the penal system to restore to criminals their lost or forfeited humanity and prepare convicts for a 'return to the community': under his administration the inmates of state prisons were allowed home leaves. Willie Horton failed to return from one of those leaves. Instead, he raped a woman. This is what can be done to us all when the soft-hearted liberals are in charge, pointed out Dukakis's adversary, George Bush – a staunch advocate of capital punishment. The journalists pressed Dukakis: 'If Kitty, your wife, was raped, would you be in favour of capital punishment?' Dukakis insisted that he would not 'glorify violence'. He bade farewell to his presidency.

Victorious Bush went on to be defeated four years later by the governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton. As governor, Clinton authorized the execution of a retarded man, Ricky Ray Rector. Some commentators think that just as Horton lost Dukakis his election, Rector won Clinton's. This is probably an exaggeration: Clinton did other things that also endeared him to 'middle America'. He promised to be tough on crime, to hire more policemen and to put more policemen on the beat, to increase the number of crimes punishable with death, to build more prisons and more secure prisons. Rector's contribution to Bill Clinton's success was merely to serve as the living (sorry: dead) proof that the future president meant business; with such a feather in Clinton's cap, 'middle America' could not but trust his words.

The duels at the top were replicated further down. Three candidates for the governorship of Texas used their allocated speech time at the party convention trying to outbid each other in their dedication to the death penalty. Mark White posed in front of the TV cameras surrounded by photographs of all the convicts who had been sent to the electric chair while he was governor. Not to be outdone, his competitor Jim Mattox reminded the electors that he personally supervised thirty-three executions. As it happened, both candidates found themselves outsmarted by a woman, Ann Richards, the vigour of whose pro-death-penalty rhetoric they obviously could not match, however strong their other credentials. In Florida the outgoing governor, Bob Martinez, made a spectacular come-back after a long period of losing steadily in popularity polls, once he reminded the electors that he had signed ninety decrees of execution. In California, the state which used to pride itself that it had not executed a single prisoner for a quarter of a century, Dianne Feinstein made her bid for office by declaring herself to be 'the only Democrat in favour of the death penalty'. In response the other competitor, John Van de Kamp, hastened to let it be known that though 'philosophically' he is against execution, which he considers 'barbaric', he would put his philosophy aside once elected governor. To prove the point, he had himself photographed at the opening of a state-of-the-art gas-chamber for future executions and announced that when in charge of the state Department of Justice he put forty-two criminals on Death Row. In the end the promise to betray his convictions did not help him. The electors (three-quarters of

whom favoured the death penalty) preferred a believer – a convinced executioner.

For more than a decade now, promises to be tough on crime and to send more criminals to their death have figured matter-of-factly at the top of the electoral agenda, whatever the political denomination of the candidate. For current and aspiring politicians, the extension of the death penalty is the prize-winning ticket in the popularity lottery. Opposition to capital punishment means, on the contrary, a self-inflicted political death.

In Yeovil the vigilantes pressed for a meeting with their MP, Paddy Ashdown. He refused to give them the legitimation they sought. Being himself of an uncertain public-space position, and certainly not one of its appointed/elected managers, he could only embrace the protesters' cause at the expense of further jeopardizing his own public-space credentials. He chose to speak his mind, whatever he believed to be the word of truth, comparing the Cooke-bashers to 'lynch mobs' and resisting all pressures to endorse their actions and to put the stamp of a 'public issue' on their not quite clear private grievances.

Jack Straw, the Home Secretary, could not afford this sort of luxury. As one of the protest leaders declared, 'What we would like to do now is link up with other campaigns. There are lots of little voices in lots of areas around the country. If we can get a big voice things might move a bit quicker.' Such words portend an intention to settle in the public space for good; to claim a permanent voice in the way that space is administered. It must have sounded ominous to any politician currently in charge of the public space, though any seasoned politicians would know well that 'linking up campaigns' and 'connecting little voices' is neither easy to accomplish nor likely to happen; neither little (private) voices nor (local, one-issue) campaigns add up easily, and one could safely assume that this specific hope/intention to do so, like so many similar hopes and intentions before, would soon run its natural course, that is run aground, capsize, be abandoned and forgotten. Straw's problem boiled down to showing that the administrators of the public space do take the little voices seriously – that is, that they are willing to take measures which will make it unnecessary for the little voices to be voiced; and, hopefully, that they should be remembered for showing that willingness. And so Jack Straw, who in all probability shared