



**Zygmunt Bauman**

collateral  
damage

**SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN A GLOBAL AGE**



# Collateral Damage



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## Social Inequalities in a Global Age

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polity

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# Contents

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|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Introduction: Collateral damage of social inequality  | 1   |
| 1 From the agora to the marketplace   | 10  |
| 2 Requiem for communism   | 27  |
| 3 The fate of social inequality in liquid modern times  | 40  |
| 4 Strangers are dangers . . . Are they indeed?  | 52  |
| 5 Consumerism and morality  | 72  |
| 6 Privacy, secrecy, intimacy, human bonds – and other collateral casualties of liquid modernity | 83  |
| 7 Luck and the individualization of remedies  | 94  |
| 8 Seeking in modern Athens an answer to the ancient Jerusalem question                          | 104 |
| 9 A natural history of evil   | 128 |
| 10 <i>Wir arme Leut'</i> . . .  | 150 |
| 11 Sociology: whence and whither?   | 160 |
| <i>Notes</i>  | 173 |
| <i>Index</i>  | 180 |



# Introduction: Collateral damage of social inequality

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The moment an electrical power circuit becomes overloaded, the first part to go bust is the fuse. The fuse, an element unable to sustain as much voltage as the rest of the wiring (in fact the *least resistant* part of the circuit), was inserted in the network deliberately; it will melt before any other segment of the wiring does, at the very moment when the electric current increases beyond a safe tension, and so before it manages to put the whole circuit out of operation, along with the peripherals it feeds. That means that the fuse is a safety device that protects other parts of the network from burning out and falling permanently out of use and beyond repair. But it also means that the workability and endurance of the whole circuit – and therefore the power it can absorb and the amount of work it can do – cannot be greater than the power of resistance of its fuse. Once the fuse goes, the whole circuit stops working.

A bridge does not break down and collapse once the load it carries transcends the average strength of its spans; it collapses much earlier, the moment the weight of the load goes over the carrying capacity of *one* of its spans – its *weakest*. The ‘average carrying power’ of pillars is a statistical fiction of little if any practical impact on the bridge’s usability, just as the ‘average strength’ of its chain links is of no use in calculating how much pull the chain can survive. Calculating, counting on and going by the averages is in fact the surest recipe for losing both the

load and the chain on which it was hung. It does not matter how strong the rest of the spans and their supporting pillars are – it is the weakest of the spans that decides the fate of the whole bridge.

These simple and obvious truths are taken into account whenever a structure of any sort is designed and tested by properly schooled and experienced engineers. They are also well remembered by the operators responsible for servicing structures already installed: in a structure correctly monitored and well looked after, repair works would normally start the moment the endurance of *just one* of the parts falls below the minimal standard of required endurance. I said ‘normally’ – since alas this rule does not apply to all structures. About the structures that for one reason or another have been exempted from that rule, like poorly attended dams, neglected bridges, shoddily repaired aircraft or hastily and perfunctorily inspected public or residential buildings, we learn *after* the disaster has struck: when it comes to counting the human victims of neglect and the exorbitant financial costs of restoration. One structure, however, stands out far above the rest in the degree to which all the simple, indeed commonsense, truths spelled out above are forgotten or suppressed, ignored, played down or even openly denied: the structure in question is *society*.

In the case of society, it is widely, though wrongly, assumed that the quality of the whole can and ought to be measured by the average quality of its parts – and that if any of its parts falls below the average it might badly affect that particular part, but hardly the quality, viability and operational capacity of the whole. When the state of society is checked and evaluated, it is ‘averaged up’ indices of income, living standards, health, etc., that tend to be calculated; the extent to which such indices vary from one segment of society to another, and the width of the gap separating the top segments from the lowest, are seldom viewed as relevant indicators. The rise in inequality is hardly ever considered as a signal of other than a financial problem; and in the relatively rare cases when there is a debate about the dangers that inequality portends to the society as a whole, it is more often than not about threats to ‘law and order’, and not about the perils to such paramount ingredients of society’s overall well-being as, for instance, the bodily and mental health of the whole population, the quality of its daily life, the tenor of its political engagement and the

strength of the bonds that integrate it into society. In fact, the sole index treated routinely as a measure of well-being, and the criterion of the success or failure of the authorities charged with monitoring and protecting the nation's capacity to stand up to challenges, as well as the nation's ability to resolve the problems it collectively confronts, is the average income or average wealth of its members, not the extent of inequality in income or wealth distribution. The message conveyed by such a choice is that inequality, in itself, is neither a danger to society as a whole, nor a source of the problems that affect society as a whole.

Much of the nature of present-day politics can be explained by the desire of the political class, shared by a substantial part of its electorate, to force reality to obey the above position. A salient symptom of that desire, and of the policy aimed at its fulfilment, is the way the part of the population at the bottom end of the social distribution of wealth and income is encapsulated in the imagined category of the 'underclass': a congregation of individuals who, unlike the rest of the population, do not belong to any class – and so in fact do not belong to society. Society is a *class* society in the sense of being a totality in which individuals are included through their class membership, and are expected to join in performing the function which their class has been assigned to perform in and for the 'social system' as a whole. The idea of the 'underclass' suggests neither a function to be performed (as in the case of the 'working' or 'professional' classes), nor a position occupied in the social whole (as in the case of the 'lower', 'middle' or 'upper' classes). The only meaning carried by the term 'underclass' is that of *falling outside* any meaningful, that is function and position oriented, classification. The 'underclass' may be 'in', but it is clearly not 'of' the society: it does not contribute anything that society needs for its survival and well-being; in fact, society would do better without it. The status of the 'underclass', as the name given to it suggests, is one of 'internal émigrés', or 'illegal immigrants', 'aliens inside' – devoid of the rights owed to recognized and acknowledged members of society; in a nutshell, an alien body that does not count among the 'natural' and indispensable parts of the social organism. Something not unlike a cancerous growth, whose most sensible treatment is excision, and short of that an enforced, induced and contrived confinement and/or remission.

Another symptom of the same desire, tightly intertwined with the first, is an ever more evident tendency to reclassify poverty, that most extreme and troublesome sediment of social inequality, as a problem of law and order, calling therefore for measures habitually deployed in dealing with delinquency and criminal acts. It is true that poverty and chronic unemployment or 'jobless work' – casual, short-term, uninvolved and prospectless – correlates with above-average delinquency; in Bradford, for instance, six miles from where I live and where 40 per cent of youngsters live in families without a single person with a regular job, one in ten young people already have police records. Such a statistical correlation, however, does not in itself justify the reclassification of poverty as a criminal problem; If anything, it underlines the need to treat juvenile delinquency as a *social* problem: lowering the rate of youngsters who come into conflict with the law requires reaching to the roots of that phenomenon, and the roots *are* social. They lie in a combination of the consumerist life philosophy propagated and instilled under the pressure of a consumer-oriented economy and politics, the fast shrinking of life chances available to the poor, and the absence for a steadily widening segment of the population of realistic prospects of escaping poverty in a way that is socially approved and assured.

There are two points that need to be made about the case of Bradford, as about so many similar cases spattered all around the globe. First, to explain them adequately by reference to local, immediate and direct causes (let alone to relate them unambiguously to someone's malice aforethought) is by and large a vain effort. Second, there is little that local agencies, however resourceful and willing to act, can do to prevent or remedy them. The links to the Bradford phenomenon extend far beyond the confines of the city. The situation of youth in Bradford is a *collateral casualty* of profit-driven, uncoordinated and uncontrolled globalization.

The term 'collateral casualty' (or damage, or victim) has recently been coined in the vocabulary of military expeditionary forces, and popularized by journalists reporting their actions, to denote unintended, unplanned – and as some would say, incorrectly, 'unanticipated' – effects, which are all the same harmful, hurtful and damaging. Qualifying certain destructive effects of military action as 'collateral' suggests that those effects were not taken

into account at the time the operation was planned and the troops were commanded into action; or that the possibility of such effects was noted and pondered, but was nevertheless viewed as a risk worth taking, considering the importance of the military objective – such a view being so much easier (and so much more likely) for the fact that the people who decided about the worthiness of taking the risk were not the ones who would suffer the consequences of taking it. Many a command-giver would try to retrospectively exonerate their willingness to put other people's lives and livelihoods at risk by pointing out that one can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. What is glossed over in such a case is, of course, someone's legitimized or usurped power to decide which omelette is to be fried and savoured and which are the eggs to be broken, as well as the fact that it won't be the broken eggs who savour the omelette . . . Thinking in terms of collateral damage tacitly assumes an *already existing inequality* of rights and chances, while accepting a priori the unequal distribution of the costs of undertaking (or for that matter desisting from) action.

Apparently, risks are untargeted and neutral, their effects being random; in fact, however, the dice in the game of risks are loaded before they are cast. There is a selective affinity between social inequality and the likelihood of becoming a casualty of catastrophes, whether man-made or 'natural', though in both cases the damage is claimed to be unintended and unplanned. Occupying the bottom end of the inequality ladder, and becoming a 'collateral victim' of a human action or a natural disaster, interact the way the opposite poles of magnets do: they tend to gravitate towards each other.

In 2005 Hurricane Katrina hit the shores of Louisiana. In New Orleans and its surroundings, everybody knew that Katrina was coming, and they all had quite enough time to run for shelter. Not all, though, could act on their knowledge and make good use of the time available for escape. Some – quite a few – could not scrape together enough money for flight tickets. They could pack their families into trucks, but where could they drive them? Motels also cost money, and money they most certainly did not have. And – paradoxically – it was easier for their well-off neighbours to obey the appeals to leave their homes, to abandon their property to salvage their lives; the belongings of the well-off

were insured, and so Katrina might be a mortal threat to their lives, but not to their wealth. What is more, the possessions of the poor without the money to pay for air tickets or motels might be meagre by comparison with the opulence of the rich, and so less worthy of regret, but they were their *only* effects; no one was going to compensate them for their loss, and once lost they would be lost forever, and all people's life savings would go down with them.

Katrina might not be choosy or class-biased, it might have struck the rich and the poor with the same cool and dull equanimity – and yet that admittedly natural catastrophe did not feel similarly 'natural' to all its victims. Whereas the hurricane itself was not a human product, its *consequences for humans* obviously were. As the Rev. Calvin O. Butts III, pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, summed it up (and not he alone), 'The people affected were largely poor people. Poor, black people.'<sup>1</sup> At the same time, David Gonzalez, *New York Times* special correspondent, wrote:

In the days since neighbourhoods and towns along the Gulf Coast were wiped out by the winds and water, there has been a growing sense that race and class are the unspoken markers of who got out and who got stuck. Just as in developing countries where the failures of rural development policies become glaringly clear at times of natural disasters like floods and drought, many national leaders said, some of the United States' poorest cities have been left vulnerable by federal policies.

'No one would have checked on a lot of the black people in these parishes while the sun shined,' said Mayor Milton D. Tutwiler of Winstonville, Miss. 'So am I surprised that no one has come to help us now? No.'

Martin Espada, an English professor at the University of Massachusetts, observed: 'We tend to think of natural disasters as somehow even-handed, as somehow random. Yet it has always been thus: poor people are in danger. That is what it means to be poor. It's dangerous to be poor. It's dangerous to be black. It's dangerous to be Latino.' And as it happens, the categories listed as particularly exposed to danger tend largely to overlap. There are many of the poor among blacks and among Latinos. Two-

thirds of New Orleans residents were black and more than a quarter lived in poverty, while in the Lower Ninth Ward of the city, swept off the face of the earth by flood waters, more than 98 per cent of residents were black and more than a third lived in poverty.

The most badly injured among the victims of that natural catastrophe were the people who had already been the rejects of order and the refuse of modernization well before Katrina struck; victims of order maintenance and economic progress, two eminently human, and blatantly unnatural, enterprises.<sup>2</sup> Long before they found themselves at the very bottom of the list of priority concerns of the authorities responsible for the security of citizens, they had been exiled to the margins of the attention (and the political agenda) of the authorities who were declaring the pursuit of happiness to be a universal human right, and the survival of the fittest to be the prime means to implement it.

A blood-curdling thought: did not Katrina help, even if inadvertently, the desperate efforts of the ailing disposal industry of wasted humans, struggling to cope with the social consequences of the globalization of the production of a 'redundant population' on a crowded (and from the waste-disposal industry's viewpoint, *overcrowded*) planet? Was not that help one of the reasons why the need to despatch troops to the afflicted area was not strongly felt until *social* order was broken and the prospect of *social* unrest came close? Which of the 'early warning systems' signalled that need to deploy the National Guard? A demeaning, blood-curdling thought indeed; one would dearly wish to dismiss it as unwarranted or downright fanciful, if only the sequence of events had made it less credible than it was . . .

The likelihood of becoming a 'collateral victim' of any human undertaking, however noble its declared purpose, and of any 'natural' catastrophe, however class-blind, is currently one of the most salient and striking dimensions of social inequality – and this fact speaks volumes about the already low yet still falling status of social inequality inside the contemporary political agenda. While to those who remember the fate of bridges whose strength has been measured by the average strength of its pillars, it also speaks yet more volumes about the troubles that rising inequality within and between societies holds in store for our shared future.

The link between the heightened probability of a ‘collateral casualty’ fate and a degraded position on the inequality ladder is the result of a convergence between the endemic or contrived ‘invisibility’ of collateral victims, on the one hand, and the enforced ‘invisibility’ of the ‘aliens inside’ – the impoverished and the miserable – on the other. Both categories, even though for varying reasons, are taken out of consideration whenever the costs of a planned endeavour and the risks entailed by its enactment are calculated and evaluated. Casualties are dubbed ‘collateral’ in so far as they are dismissed as not important enough to justify the costs of their prevention, or simply ‘unexpected’ because the planners did not consider them worthy of inclusion among the objects of preparatory reconnoitring. For selection among the candidates for collateral damage, the progressively criminalized poor are therefore ‘naturals’ – branded permanently, as they tend to be, with the double stigma of non-importance and unworthiness. This rule works in police operations against drug pushers and smugglers of migrants, in military expeditions against terrorists, but also for governments seeking additional revenue by opting for increases in VAT and cancelling the extensions of children’s playgrounds, rather than through raising taxation on the rich. In all such cases and a growing multitude of others, causing ‘collateral damage’ comes easier in the rough districts and mean streets of the cities than in the gated shelters of the high and mighty. So distributed, the risks of creating collateral victims may even turn sometimes (and for some interests and purposes) from a liability into an asset . . .

It is that close affinity and interaction between inequality and collateral casualties, the two phenomena of our time that are both growing in volume and importance as well as in the toxicity of the dangers they portend, that are approached, each time from a somewhat different perspective, in the successive chapters of the present volume, based in most cases on lectures prepared and delivered in 2010–11. In some of the chapters the two issues appear in the foreground, in some others they serve as a backdrop. A general theory of their interconnected mechanisms remains yet to be written; this volume can be seen as at best a series of tributaries aiming at an as yet untrailed and uncharted riverbed. I am aware that the work of synthesis still lies ahead.

I am sure, however, that the explosive compound of growing social inequality and the rising volume of human suffering relegated to the status of ‘collaterality’ (marginality, externality, disposability, not a legitimate part of the political agenda) has all the markings of being potentially the most disastrous among the many problems humanity may be forced to confront, deal with and resolve in the current century.

# 1

## From the agora to the marketplace

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Democracy is the form of life of the *agora*: of that intermediate space which links/separates the two other sectors of the polis: *ecclesia* and *oikos*.

In Aristotle's terminology, *oikos* stood for the family household, the site within which private interests were formed and pursued; *ecclesia* stood for the 'public' – for the people's council composed of magistrates, elected, appointed or drawn by lot, whose function was to care for the common affairs affecting all the citizens of the *polis*, such as matters of war and peace, defence of the realm and the rules governing the cohabitation of citizens in the city-state. Having originated from the verb *kalein*, meaning to call, to summon, to gather, the concept of 'ecclesia' presumed from the beginning the presence of the agora, the place for coming to meet and talk, the site of encounter between people and the council: the site of democracy.

In a city-state, the agora was a physical space to which the *boule*, the council, summoned all the citizens (heads of households) once or several times each month to deliberate on and decide issues of joint and shared interests – and to elect, or draw by lot, its members. For obvious reasons, such a procedure could not be sustained once the realm of the polis or the body politic grew far beyond the borders of a city: the agora could no longer literally mean a public square where all the citizens of the state were expected to present themselves in order to participate in the

decision-making process. This does not mean, though, that the purpose underlying the establishment of the agora, and the function of the agora in pursuing that purpose, had lost their significance or needed to be abandoned forever. The history of democracy can be narrated as the story of successive efforts to keep alive both the purpose and its pursuit after the disappearance of its original material substratum.

Or one could say that the history of democracy was set in motion, guided and kept on track by the *memory of the agora*. One could, and should, say as well that the preservation and resuscitation of the memory of the agora was bound to proceed along varied paths and take different forms; there is not one exclusive way in which the job of mediation between oikos and ecclesia can be accomplished, and hardly any one model is free from its own hitches and stumbling blocks. Now, more than two millennia later, we need to be thinking in terms of *multiple democracies*.

The *purpose* of the agora (sometimes declared but mostly implicit) was and remains the perpetual coordination of 'private' (oikos based) and 'public' (ecclesia handled) interests. And the *function* of the agora was and still is to provide the essential and necessary condition of such coordination: namely, *the two-way translation between the language of individual/familial interests and the language of public interests*. What was essentially expected or hoped to be achieved in the agora was the reforging of private concerns and desires into public issues; and, conversely, the reforging of issues of public concern into individual rights and duties. The degree of democracy of a political regime may therefore be measured by the success and failure, the smoothness and roughness of that *translation*: to wit, by the degree to which its principal objective has been reached, rather than, as is often the case, by staunch obedience to one or another *procedure*, viewed wrongly as the simultaneously necessary and sufficient condition of democracy – of all democracy, of democracy *as such*.

As the city-state model of 'direct democracy', where an on-the-spot estimate could be made of its success and the smoothness of translation simply by the number of citizens partaking in flesh and voice in the decision-taking process, was clearly inapplicable to the modern, resurrected concept of democracy (and in particular to the 'great society', that admittedly *imagined*, abstract entity,