Liquid Modernity[1]

by Zygmunt Bauman[2]

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Standing in front of you, I am humbled by your presence. You are the people who are actually making things happen, and I am the person who is talking about things happening. So I recognise your superiority as far as the ability to do things in practice is concerned, and I am not quite sure how much I can help you with my kind of expertise.

A nightmare

In fact I'd like to confess to you that another day I had a nightmare. I woke up covered with sweat. My nightmare was that I was a supervisor. And I was confronted with an incredible contradiction between intentions and the actual situation, an ambivalence which I couldn't easily resolve. A situation not very different from the one which I confronted several times when I was teaching students at Leeds University and before that at Warsaw University. I was facing a dilemma because, like you, I had a vision of an ideal personality, the ideal to which my students should correspond. I wanted them to be inspired, to be creative and to stand on their own feet rather than to follow the dead letter of instructions. On the other hand I knew very well that if they really became as I told them they should be, they would probably fail their doctorate's examination, because there would be someone sitting on the committee who would think that they were too original, too creative and too abnormal...

So it was a contradiction, quite a genuine contradiction. You have this idea of the ideal person. You would like to cultivate such an ideal person, but it might very well happen that the world in which these people will need to work and function is not hospitable for originality, boldness, courageousness, and irreverence with authorities.

You will probably still remember the name of Karl Marx. As he observed almost 200 years ago – and in this case, I think he was right – "people make history but not under conditions of their choice". This means that you haven't selected the world in which you work. And quite often there is actually a clash between what you want to achieve and what is possible.

So we are all in this situation which Ulrich Beck, the great contemporary working German sociologist, described very succinctly and very pointedly as follows: We are all expected to find "individual solutions to systemic contradictions". It's a difficult job, one would even say that it is an impossible job, but nevertheless, that is what we are forced to do.

A project is not a reality

So, what kind of world is it in which people who we try to teach will have to function in? It is a modern world. The modern way of life is living towards a project – that is the definition of modernity. You have a project. Having a project means that you make things different from what they are at the moment, you change them. And when you have a project, then there is always a problem. You need to co-ordinate, to gather together a number of people to direct their efforts towards the implementation of this project.

A project is not a reality. It is "under-determined", there is no certainty that your aims will be fulfilled. There is always a risk that a mistake could be made, that a wrong turn could be taken and then, instead of implementing the project, you will actually make its implementation more difficult. So there is a risk of many, many people whose work should be co-ordinated but might be not. And there is also the problem of trust. Could you actually trust them, that left to their own resources, without instruction, without attention paid to them, without correcting their false moves, they will actually work towards implementation of the project?

Now, when you have all three elements, a project, a problem of trust, and the danger of risk, well, then supervision results. The need of supervision, the necessity of interfering somehow in the flow of events and actively sponsoring certain solutions rather than the

others. This issue which I just mentioned accompanies modernity from the very beginning.

The age of "solid modernity"

Modern societies are very vulnerable entities. Modernity already exists about 300 years. There is no-one who is actually that old – including myself who is probably the oldest man in this room – but modernity is, and right from the beginning it struggled with this issue of being directed towards a project to make things different from what they are, to change the world and to modernise it, as it is said. And it was a burden to raise this issue of necessity to supervise things.

But, and here is a big but – which is the topic of my lecture – the strategies adopted when dealing with this common problem, a problem which goes through the whole history of modernity, changed very drastically, and this drastic change happened not that long ago, in the second half of the 20th century. Until then, we could speak of "solid modernity". "Solid modernity" considered accidents, contingencies, under-determination, sudden, unexpected, surprising, sometimes harrowing turns of events, as temporary irritants. "Solid modernity" believed that one can achieve a fully rational perfect world, rationally perfect, or perfectly rational.

And what is perfection? As Renaissance master builder Leo Battista Alberti put it, "perfection is a state in which every change could be only change to the worse". So a perfect state is the state in which all change should grind to a halt, because you can't improve on it. During the period of "solid modernity" the most powerful thinkers were convinced that it was a matter of acquiring enough information, enough knowledge, and enough technological skills in order to achieve such a perfect world. Change was seen as temporary until we construct a world which won't require further change.

That was the time when there was also a very deep belief that the good recipe for acting is going by precedent and by accumulating experience – the more experience you have, the better – following a tested routine, doing things which you learned to do yesterday and the year before, developing habits, behaving according to customs, and so on.

This kind of strategy could make sense in a world which was stiff, solid, very slowly changing or not changing at all, where the tested ways of behaving retained their values over a long period of time. In this world, structures were tough and unbreakable. The crown model, of properly running things in times of modernity, was constructed by the British utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham by the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. It was the model of the Panopticon.

The Panopticon was an architectural solution to all issues of control and supervision, for example in hospitals, schools, military barracks prisons, factories – wherever you needed to supervise a great number of people. It was a very simple building with a central circular tower and the wings going towards all directions from the central tower. The inmates of the institutions were placed in the wings so that they could be seen by the supervisors in the central tower. The point was that the watching, the surveying, the supervising was asymmetrical, namely, the supervisors could see the inmates, but the inmates could not see the supervisors, so the inmates were never sure whether they were watched or not. The idea was thus to develop a behaviour among the inmates as if they were constantly watched.

As you probably already see quite clearly, the idea was based on the assumption that good supervision meant cutting down on the choices of the supervisees. The less choices the supervisees had, the more straightforward was their situation. The fewer options they had to think about, the fewer to select from, the better for the project. That was the guiding principle of running things well at the stage of "solid modernity".

The age of "liquid modernity"

What I would like to tell you, ladies and gentlemen, is that in the recent 40 to 50 years, we have moved from the solid stage of modernity to the liquid stage of modernity. Why this metaphor of liquidity? What does it mean? What does it suggest? Well, the answer is simple. Look into any encyclopaedia: You will find that a liquid is a substance which cannot keep its shape for long. And in terms of society, that is a revolutionary change. We are still about to

see the consequences of it. They still lie in the future. But it is a tremendous change in comparison with the dominant trend of the first 200 years in modern times. Because today we don't believe any more that the state of perfection may ever be reached – the change is here to stay. For the first time in our history, we are confronted with change as a permanent condition of human life. So we need to develop the ways of behaviour, the ways of contact which are fit for living in this state of constant change.

Following a precedent is not a good advice any more. Accumulating knowledge and relying on knowledge accumulated a long time ago, is not a good proposition today. Relying on unchanged routine which you can actually imbibe and follow blindly, is also not a good recipe. The same is true for acting according to habits and customs. All this is counterproductive in a rapidly changing world in which there is no longer one dominant authority but a competition of authorities, very often at cross-purposes, very often mutually contradictory. The responsibility for choosing between these authorities falls entirely upon the person involved.

Then you have a new phenomenon, the "fluid" labour market with a short-term kind of employment. The facility with which the employment could be terminated. Daniel Cohen, Professor of Economics at the University of Sorbonne in Paris, pointed out that when a worker took employment in a Renault or Ford car factory 100 years ago and even less than that, he could be pretty sure that in 40 years' time he'll retire from the same factory. He would probably even get a gold watch as the token for faithful 40 years long service.

Now, says Daniel Cohen, even the best remunerated, very lucky guys, people who are employed in the Mecca of all bright people today and who work for Microsoft, for Bill Gates, those people have no inkling what will happen to them in half a year's time.

From one project to another

I recently gave an interview with the BBC, and on this occasion I made friends with a research assistant who worked for the programme for which I was interviewed. That was a 40-year-old man, and he told me that he had been working for the BBC for 16 years but he hadn't got a steady job and no pension rights. So how

does he work? He works from one project to another, jumping all over the globe without really acquiring expertise in any particular field. The only expertise which he did acquire was the expertise in switching quickly and as much as possible painlessly from one field to another and developing completely new skills for the next project. This was a vivid demonstration of what the sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, two formidable friends of mine, recently pointed out in their book: *"Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme"*. They pointed out that our world was a *"Cité par projets"*, as they called it in French. This French word *cité* means more than can be translated in one word in any other language – *cité* is a polity, is a city, is also a state, is social totality.

So our society is integrated by projects. We live from one project to another. Projects are normally short-term projects, and as today's experts in sociology of employment say, "you are as good as your last project". And remember also, ladies and gentlemen, that the memory in our "liquid" modern world is also short-term, so your success in the last project is not long remembered. So, the great problem is how to sensibly behave in such a world in a dignified, ethically correct way and yet be successful. Now, that's a contradiction which is extremely difficult to resolve. That's why I perceived dreaming of being supervisor as a sort of nightmare.

Contradictory principles

Together with the documents of the conference I received some cards with a number of principles[3], and I just went through them. Some of them are quite uncontroversial. They are perennial, they are eternal, in fact principles of decent ethically proper human life. But you might have noticed that some are clearly contradictory with respect to working for an organisation. OK, an organisation might employ you – if you are lucky, for a year, if you are very lucky, for two years, and if you are less lucky you might be fired at the next reorganisation or rationalisation of the institution. So if you really develop respect towards the organisation, then you'll be badly hurt when this happens. Richard Sennet, one of today's greatest living sociologists, pointed out that developing long-term loyalty and dedication to an organisation becomes a very dangerous trap today.

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[3] During the ANSE-conference 2004 a schedule of keywords was handed out to the participants. This schedule is refered on by the author.

One should live lightly in a sense, as if you were just travelling with your briefcase. It might be better not to take too much emotional luggage of loyalty with you.

But look, the second principle which you can read here is loyalty. Loyalty to what? To the organisation probably, which again may break all ties with you on the following day with next bout of modernisation. And persistence – another principle which needs great valour. But that is the point, I am not questioning that in themselves, these attitudes are not good. What I am suggesting is that the world outside there is not very hospitable to them and may actually make them counterproductive.

On the other hand you have very, very "liquid" modern recipes. First, emancipation. Well, emancipation goes directly against respectable organisations. Either you are respecting organisations or you emancipate. There is very little in between. Emancipation is the ability to reflect by thinking your own thoughts, being your own judge, not accepting anything for granted, and by not taking people on their word but trying to see deeper to make your own assessment.

Then comes a tremendously important thing: personal responsibility. Because if you are really emancipated, if you really reflect, then you need to take responsibility for the consequences of your reflection, of your choices. Being independent and self-determined means taking risks. You need to bear responsibility for the consequences of your risky decisions. And then come two tremendously important precepts: the readiness to negotiate and to go into discourse. The best and optimal solutions are always a matter of discourse, a matter of negotiating, a matter of confronting different opinions. Probably in every situation in which you will have to act, you will be faced with the same problem. You confront people with different opinions, guided by different kinds of preferences, sometimes even different kinds of values. Under these conditions you need to reflect, to emancipate, and to take personal responsibility.

Now, if you expect me, ladies and gentlemen, to tell you how to reconcile all these precepts here, I must frankly admit – and I apologise to you for this – that I am ignorant, I don't know. I suspect that full reconciliation between them is probably not on the cards. At

the same time I believe that one nevertheless has to try hard to reconcile them. Because these precepts are all needed. The only problem is that in this world in which we live they can't be fulfilled at the same time.

Well, to sum up what I have said so far, I would like to tell you simply that living in a "liquid" modern world breaks down into three conditions. We need to act under the condition of first: uncertainty; second: under the condition of continuous risk which we try to calculate but which in principle is not fully calculable, as there are always surprises; and third: we need to act under the condition of shifting trust. A common trend which was trustworthy today may become condemned and rejected tomorrow. This is not only true in the field of work but everywhere. The food which you are recommended by doctors as healthy today will be proclaimed as carcinogenic, as harmful tomorrow. If you look into glossy weeklies or glossy attachments of daily newspapers, you will see that virtually every week there is a column which informs you about the latest fashions, not only dressing fashions, but fashions of behave, of decorating your house, of the fashionable celebrities which you must be informed about, and so on, columns which inform you what is 'on'. But next to it is a column which informs you what is out and what you should be ashamed of yourself if you still follow it.

Learning and forgetting at the same time

So the question of learning comes under a big question mark. Our culture today, ladies and gentlemen, I suggest that to your consideration, is as much a culture of learning as it is a culture of forgetting by clearing sight for new things to replace the old ones. That's one of the major issues with which all the marketeers, merchandisers, the heads of the consumer industry are concerned with. I recently saw an advertisement of one of the giant mobile telephone companies which probably came to the conclusion that the potential market for mobile phones is already saturated. That means that everybody who could be converted to the cult of mobile telephones already got one. So how still go on selling mobile telephones? The advertisement was very interesting because it didn't appeal to the virtues of possessing a mobile telephone. It assumed that whoever reads the advertisement already has one. Instead, the advertisement said: "Do you have a mobile telephone

with which you feel ashamed to be seen by your friends? If you do, come to us, we have the latest high-tech gadgets, and you'll be proud of having one."

So the problem of forgetting is not just a problem of failure of our mental ability. There is a tremendous pressure in a highly competitive consumer market society to forget about the virtues of things long before these things run their natural course. People throw away perfectly well-working computers simply because there are other computers with some extra technical features, even though they only use their computer for word processing. But they heard that there is a special music which could be heard on this new kind of computer and the next time they invite their friends for dinner they'll be ashamed that they don't have it. This is learning and forgetting at the same time. Quick forgetting, quick change of track, moving from one kind of conduct to a very different kind of conduct. Our politicians have a name for it, and you know it all. It's flexibility. The new virtue, fortunately not named here among these cards but which nevertheless crops up again and again as the medicine of all possible social problems.

These features of the "liquid" modern society, ladies and gentlemen, put you, the supervisors, in quite a quandary. You have to do a favour to people who you help learning to live in this kind of society. At the same time, I think, if one is honest, one cannot forget that when doing this favour – helping, inspiring to be creative, to be able to learn new skills, and in fact to be flexible – it means at the same time exposing your supervisee to a life full of tensions. Because there is never a point when you can actually sit down quietly and say: "I have arrived, I have done it, now I can just gather the cream of profit from my previous efforts." There is no such moment of time. Learning is now a life-long process. And today learning consists, above all, in the ability of changing what you consider to be the true, the proper, the usable, the effective knowledge.

Gregory Bateson was one of the greatest anthropologists of the 20th century. He divided the process of teaching and learning into three levels. The first was primitive, primary learning, and according to him it is just transmitting knowledge. The second, the higher level is a little more complicated. It is not so much about learning bits of information but rather about the rules of proceeding, the cognitive

frames in which the issues which we can affront, should be located, so that, once you learn, these rules are acquired as habits. With this framework in which you put the issues which you can affront, you can independently and creatively resolve the problems which you come across. Gregory Bateson considered these two levels of learning to be universally applied and he said that the first level, the lower level, is easily controllable and could be codified, could be actually made into a set of principles. The second, the higher level, already creates all sorts of ambiguities and it is not that easy to be guided by even the most skilful pedagogues.

But then Gregory Bateson reflected on what he had called the third level, which he considered to be pathological. The third level would be the ability to dismantle the cognitive frames, to reject the rules, to reassemble something completely different. Bateson said that such an ability – he used very, very crude words – could be a sign of a madness. Well, I don't bear responsibility for this verdict, I am only repeating after Gregory Bateson, but if he was right, then one could say that there is a touch of madness in contemporary culture. The secret of teaching and learning contains also the transfer of this ability to dismantle and rejection of the accepted, habitualised cognitive frames in which we plot the information about the world around us.

Already thirty years ago, Thomas Kuhn pointed out in his book about scientific revolutions that the real breakthroughs happened when the paradigm in science was broken. What is a paradigm? A paradigm is the set of axiomatic, unquestionably accepted assumptions. In physics, in biology, in chemistry, in any exact science you have a paradigm. And once a paradigm is generally accepted among the practitioners of the science, then you can go on endlessly multiplying detailed empirical research filling the gaps in this paradigm but you never question the paradigm itself. The use of a paradigm has consequences, namely, when you have completely assimilated it so that you simply don't notice phenomena which do not accord with this paradigm. You consider them to be anomalies which could be safely neglected. But, says Thomas Kuhn, the problem is that reality is much more complex than even the best paradigm, and therefore, if you proceed in that fashion, the amount of anomalies accumulates and multiplies, and finally there are so many of them that under this pressure the paradigms begin to fall apart and cannot be sustained

any more. These are the moments of scientific revolution, according to Thomas Kuhn, and then the old methods of thinking are torn apart and you replace them with something completely different. The problem which I'd like to suggest to you is that the time distance between successive revolutions, cognitive revolutions of this kind, is shortening very rapidly. And therefore, what Gregory Bates considered to be an "abnormal pathological situation" becomes today the norm of life.

Well, ladies and gentleman, by now you probably know very well why – from my personal subjective point of view at any rate – I consider it a nightmare to be a supervisor. I frankly told you at the beginning, you are practitioners, you are making things happen. I can only talk about things happening. And I didn't promise you to resolve your doubts. However, I will repeat what I mentioned at the beginning. Marx said that people are making history but not under conditions of their own choice. What I am suggesting to you is that the knowledge of these conditions is a tremendously important factor in making history. The way you are making history depends on what image you have of the conditions under which you are acting. I think it is better to have a proper knowledge of these conditions rather than a misleading and false one. Therefore, I think that whatever you decide on how you could perform the supervising role today, it is tremendously important to start by putting the prospect, the task, the labour which you undertake, in this total context of daily life in the kind of society in which we live. I think that will be the beginning of success.

A shift in responsibilities

As I mentioned before, in the solid stage of modernity, the basic strategic principle was to expropriate the subordinates from their responsibility. Managers wanted to monopolise responsibility. And the subordinates should only follow the rules, the commands, the orders set at the top of the organisation. The gist of my message today is that, in recent years, we are seeing a shift in responsibilities down from the heads of powerful, large organisations to the subordinates. I would even say that under the present circumstances the powerful heads of powerful organisations want to be ensured against responsibility falling on their shoulders. And if you want a proof, you will read in newspapers over and over again, that here is

a big company which failed but the director general of this company received a golden handshake, several millions of dollars, in spite of the fact that the organisation failed in its results.

Responsibilities are either accepted as personal or there is no responsibility at all. That is the truth which becomes ever more obvious, ever more evident, ever more clear thanks to living under conditions of "liquid modernity". Once upon a time, the task of those who co-ordinate collective efforts was to confine the subordinates to a very limited number of options and to take away responsibility from their shoulders. Now it is the other way around. They, the subordinates, must develop the feeling of responsibility together with the readiness to undertake quite enormous risks which are inextricably associated with self-determination and emancipation. Thank you!