Contemporary History (LT9002)

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**Changing conception of “work” in the transition from “solid” and “liquid” modernity according to Bauman**

1. Introduction

In the fourth chapter from *Liquid Modernity* by Zygmunt Bauman, the author illustrates how the conception of “work” changed during the passage from “solid” to “liquid” modernity.

Bauman was a Polish sociologist and philosopher who dedicated most of his works on themes such as globalization and the relation between modernity and postmodernity. His most relevant theory is that of the liquefaction of the previously solid society, characterised by the disappearance of certainties and stability in all aspects of every-day life.

Before approaching the text, I had expected a comparison between the different ways of viewing and experiencing “work” during the solid and liquid eras. However, what I learnt exceeded my expectations, since the author depicts also the complex relation existing between the idea of “work” and the whole structure of the society, and how the changings occurring in the former deeply influenced the latter.

2.1 About Solid and Liquid

Before delving into the topic of “work”, it is important to provide a further explanation of what Bauman means with the terms “liquid” and “solid” referred to modernity.

The solid era (1870-1970), according to Bauman, was characterised by order and security provided by a well-structured society, where each individual had a specific place and role. Economy was dominated by hard capitalism, main instance of which was the fordist factory.

By contrast, liquids differ from solids since they “do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it” (Bauman 2006: 2). Hence, liquid modernity, which began at the end of the nineteenth century and persists today, shares the characteristics of all fluids, as it is an ever-changing and unstable reality deprived of any kind of order or definite shape. Everything that was previously solid has now been melted, causing profound transformations in all aspects of society.

2.2 Changing conception of “progress”

Bauman begins the chapter about “work” with a discussion about the concept of “progress”. The two are indeed strictly linked to each other, although their relation inevitably changed in the transition from solid to liquid modernity.

During the solid era, progress was represented by the idea of “moving forward”, toward a future that “was the creation of work”, since work was considered “the source of all creation” (Bauman 2006:130-1). During that time, the main foundations of the trust in progress were “self-confidence”, “the reassuring feeling of ‘keeping hold on the present’” (Bauman 2006: 133) and the faith that people could actually work together to reach a prosperous future.

However, with the advent of liquid modernity the feelings of trust and confidence are now fading, mainly due to the “absence of an agency able to ‘move the world forward’”, as we cannot expect neither guidance nor salvation by society (Bauman 2006: 132-3). Today, the dream of progress has been “privatized”, and individuals must rely on their own labour to reach their future goals. But the fluid world is characterised by uncertainty and chance, and so is the future.

Meanwhile, “work has lost the centrality it was assigned in the galaxy of values dominant in the era of solid modernity” (Bauman 2006: 139), and therefore it has lost its reliability as a tool to reach true progress. Hence, the idea of building a steadier and better future appears as nothing but a dream, since work, the main instrument to achieve it, has lost its previous attributes and is now only “evaluated by its capacity to be entertaining and amusing, satisfying […] the aesthetical needs and desires of the consumer” (Bauman 2006: 139-40).

2.3 “Labour” from solid to liquid modernity

Bauman, quoting Karl Polany, explains that during solid modernity and with the advent of a “new industrial order” occurred for the first time the “separation of labourers from the sources of their livelihood”, which brought to the “separation of productive activities from the rest of life pursuits” (Bauman 2006: 141). Hence, labour was progressively reduced to a mere “source of wealth” and considered a material entity to exploit. Moreover, at the time of heavy capitalism work became strictly bound to capital, linked to it by a relation of mutual dependence. To exemplify the strong tie between the two, Bauman provides the instance of Henry Ford, who doubled his employees’ wages so that they could be able to buy the cars they contributed to produce. This manoeuvre allowed him to tie the workers to his factory by rendering them dependent on it, as he was dependent on their labour (Bauman 2006: 400). Overall, solid modernity was characterised by the “prospect of life-long employment”, “strong unions” and “relative stability”, since even conflicts between workers and employers ensured the confrontation and negotiation necessary for strengthening their bond (Bauman 2006: 146-7).

However, the present situation is utterly different. Bauman affirms that at the time of fluid modernity we deal with a new type of uncertainty dominating the workplace. Today, “employment of labour has become short-term and precarious”, as workers are hired on short-term contracts and have no guarantee of stability. Indeed, a main feature of the “liquefied society” is the “loosening of ties linking capital and labour”, since capital is now “extraterritorial”, whilst labour remains local and highly dependent on the presence of capital (Bauman 2006: 149). Therefore governments, to lure capital to “fly in”, are forced to provide it with even more freedom than it already has, guaranteeing “low taxes, fewer or no rules and above all a ‘flexible labour market’” (Bauman 2006: 150), weakening even further the frail bond between capital and labour.

Hence, the labour force has lost the relevance it once had, and “routine labourers” have fallen at the bottom of the pyramid. “They know they are disposable, and so they see little point in developing attachment or commitment to their jobs” (Bauman 2006: 150), and the instability that this causes renders them unable to form a stable identity or to make any plans about the future.

Thus, the changings in the conception of labour and in its relationship with capital have created a view of the world that, in Nigel Thrift’s words quoted by Bauman, is “plastic, uncertain, paradoxical, even chaotic” (Bauman 2006: 154), as all certainties have disappeared.

2.4 Precarization and Consumerism

Afterwards, Bauman argues that solid modernity was based on “work ethics” and on “procrastination” as “the principle of delayed gratification used to secure the durability of work effort” (Bauman 2006: 159), because people could feel certain that a long-lasting reward would follow their fatigue.

On the contrary, liquid modernity, whose main features are “uncertainty”, “unsafety” and “insecurity”, relies on the denial of procrastination and on constant and short-lived gratification which gives rise to never-ending desire (Bauman 2006: 159-60). Hence, adopting a consumeristic attitude based on “immediate gratification” seems the only “reasonable strategy” to cope with the lack of certainty and stability of our time (Bauman 2006: 162).

This means that the present-day consumeristic society is the direct product of the process of precarization characterising liquid modernity. To quote Bauman’s words, “Precariousness of social existence inspires a perception of the world around as an aggregate of products for immediate consumption” (Bauman 2006: 164). This commodification involves also one of the fundamental aspects of society, that is human relationships. These have indeed turned from bonds on which people willingly invested their time and efforts to mere “things to be consumed” as long as they bring superficial satisfaction (Bauman 2006: 163). Resulting from this is a society which has forgotten the value of co-operation and where individuals isolate themselves in the lonesome activity of consumption.

The concluding scene of the chapter is an unfortunately realistic picture of nowadays world, where people are unable or unwilling to fight for their rights through political engagement and appear to have lost confidence both in the present and in the future.

It seems almost impossible to reach solidity and certainty once again, and maybe the only solution is to accept that fluidity is the new state of modernity. If this is the case, then our future “seems to be a dystopia made to the measure of liquid modernity – one fit to replace the fears recorded in Orwellian and Huxleyan-style nightmares” (Bauman 2006: 15).

3. Conclusion

Overall, Bauman successfully proves that the transformation occurred in the definition of “work”, the loosening tie between capital and labour and the newly-formed bond between capital and consumerism has brought dramatic changes both to the structure of society and to individuals’ lives.

We seek satisfaction in the solitude of compulsive consumption to disguise the discomfort caused by an ever-changing present and by an uncertain future.

Hence, since we cannot find stability neither in the workplace nor in human relationships, we have lost the faith in our power of changing things.

Thus, we have made the condition of fluid modernity a permanent reality.

REFERENCES

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