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**Education in the Liquid-Modern  
Setting**

**Keynote address**

**Discourse, Power Resistance: Power and the  
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## Education in the liquid-modern setting

We may say that culture is in its liquid-modern phase made to the measure of (willingly pursued, or endured as obligatory) *individual* freedom of choice. And that it is *meant* to service such freedom. And that it is meant to see to it that the choice remains *unavoidable*: a life necessity, and a *duty*. And that responsibility, the inalienable companion of free choice, stays where liquid-modern condition forced it: on the shoulders of the *individual*, now appointed the sole manager of 'life politics'.

Today's culture consists of *offerings*, not *norms*. As already noted by Pierre Bourdieu, culture lives by seduction, not normative regulation; PR, not policing; creating new needs/desires/wants, not coercion. This society of ours is a society of consumers, and just as the rest of the world as-seen-and-lived by consumers, culture turns into a warehouse of meant-for-consumption products – each vying for the shifting/drifted attention of prospective consumers in the hope to attract it and hold for a bit longer than a fleeting moment. Abandoning stiff standards, indulging indiscrimination, serving all tastes while privileging none, encouraging fitfulness and 'flexibility' (politically correct name of spinelessness) and romanticizing unsteadiness and inconsistency is therefore the 'right' (the only reasonable?) strategy to follow; fastidiousness, raising brows, stiffening upper lips are not recommended. The TV reviewer/critic of a pattern-and-style setting daily praised the New Year's Eve 2007/8 broadcast for promising 'to provide an array of musical entertainment guaranteed to sate everyone's appetite'. 'The good thing' about it, he explained, 'is that its universal appeal means you can dip in and out of the show depending on your preferences'.<sup>1</sup> A commendable and indeed a seemly quality in a society in which networks replace structures, whereas the attachment/ detachment game and an unending procession of connections and disconnections replace 'determining' and 'fixing'.

The current phase of the graduated transformation of the idea of 'culture' from its original Enlightenment-inspired form to its liquid-modern reincarnation is prompted and operated by the same forces that promote emancipation of the markets from the remaining constraints of non-economic nature – the social, political, and ethical constraints among them. In pursuing its own emancipation, liquid-modern consumer-focused economy relies on the excess of offers, their accelerated ageing, and quick dissipation of their seductive power - which, by the way, makes it an economy of profligacy and waste. Since there is no knowing in advance which of the offers may prove tempting enough to stimulate consuming desire, the only way to find out leads through trials and costly errors. Continuous supply of new offers, and a constantly growing volume of goods on offer, are also necessary to keep circulation of goods rapid and the desire to replace them with 'new and improved' goods constantly refreshed – as well as to prevent the consumer dissatisfaction with individual products from condensing into the general disaffection with consumerist mode of life as such.

Culture is turning now into one of the departments in the 'all you need and might dream of' department store into which the world inhabited by consumers has turned. Like in other departments of that store, the shelves are tightly packed with daily restocked commodities, while the counters are adorned with the commercials of latest offers destined to disappear soon together with the attractions they advertise. Commodities and commercials alike are calculated to arouse desires and trigger wishes (as George Steiner famously put it – 'for maximum impact and instant obsolescence'). Their merchants and copywriters count on the wedding of the seductive power of offers with the ingrained 'oneupmanship' and 'getting an edge' urges of their prospective customers.

Liquid-modern culture, unlike the culture of the nation-building era, has no 'people' to 'cultivate'. It has instead the clients to seduce. And unlike its 'solid modern' predecessor, it no longer wishes to work itself, eventually but the sooner the better, out of job. Its job is now to render its own survival permanent - through temporalizing all aspects of life of its former wards, now reborn as its clients.

The solid-modern policy of dealing with difference, the policy of assimilation to the dominant culture and stripping the strangers of other strangeness, is no longer feasible, even if considered by some as desirable. But neither the old strategies of resisting the interaction and merger of cultures is likely to be effective, even if considered preferable for people fond of strict separation and isolation of 'communities of belonging' (more precisely, communities-of-belonging-by-birth).

'Belonging', as Jean-Claude Kaufmann suggests<sup>2</sup>, is today 'used primarily as a resource of the ego'. He warns against thinking of 'collectivities of belonging' as necessarily 'integrating communities'. They are better conceived of, he suggests, as a necessary accompaniment of the progress of individualization; we may say – as a series of stations or road inns marking the trajectory of the self-forming and self-reforming ego.

François de Singly rightly suggests<sup>3</sup> that in theorizing the present-day identities the metaphors of 'roots' and 'uprooting' (or, let me add, the related trope of 'disembedding'), all implying one-off nature of the individual's emancipation from the tutelage of the community of birth as well as the finality and irrevocability of the act, are better abandoned and replaced by the tropes of casting and drawing of anchors.

Indeed, unlike in the case of 'uprooting' and 'disembedding', there is nothing irrevocable, let alone ultimate, in drawing the anchor. If having been torn out of the soil in which they grew, roots are likely to desiccate and die out so that their (very unlikely) reviving will be verging on miraculous – anchors are drawn hoping to be safely cast again elsewhere; and they can be cast with similar ease at many different and distant ports of calling. Besides, the roots design and determine in advance the shape which the plants growing out of them will assume, while excluding the possibility of any other shape; but anchors are only auxiliary facilities of the mobile vessel that do not define the ship's qualities and resourcefulness. The time-stretches separating the casting of anchor from drawing it again are but episodes in the ship's trajectory. The choice of haven in which the anchor will be cast next is most probably determined by the kind of load which the ship is currently carrying; a haven good for one kind of cargo may be entirely inappropriate for another.

All in all, the metaphor of anchors captures what the metaphor of 'uprooting' misses or keeps silent about: the intertwining of *continuity* and *discontinuity* in the history of all or at least a growing number of contemporary identities. Just like ships anchoring successively or intermittently in various ports of call, so the selves in the 'communities of reference' to which they seek admission during their life-long search for recognition and confirmation have their credentials checked and approved at every successive stop; each 'community of reference' sets its own requirements for the kind of papers to be submitted. The ship's record and/or the captain's log are more often than not among the documents on which the approval depends, and with every next stop, the past (constantly swelled by the records of preceding stops) is re-examined and re-valued.

### **New challenges to education**

The history of education has been full of critical periods in which it became evident that tested and seemingly reliable premises and strategies were losing their grip on reality and called for revision and reform. It seems, though, that the present crisis is unlike the crises of the past. The present-day challenges deliver heavy blows to the very essence of the idea of education as it was formed at the threshold of the long history of civilization: they put in question the invariants of the idea, the constitutive features of education that have thus far withstood all the past challenges and emerged unscathed from the past crises – the assumptions never before questioned, let alone suspected of having run their course and being in need of replacement.

In the liquid-modern world solidity of things, much as the solidity of human bonds, is resented as a threat: any oath of allegiance, any long-term (let alone timeless) commitment, portends a future

burdened with obligations that constrain freedom of movement and reduce the ability to take up new, as yet unknown, chances as they (inevitably) come by. The prospect of being saddled with one thing for the duration of life is downright repulsive and frightening. And no wonder, since even the most coveted things are known to age fast, to lose their lustre in no time and to turn from a badge of honour into a stigma of shame. The editors of glossy magazines feel the pulse of time well: alongside the information about the new 'you must dos' and new 'you must haves' they regularly supply their readers with advice on 'what is out' and needs to be dumped. Our world is ever more reminiscent of Italo Calvino's 'invisible city' of Leonia, where 'it is not so much by the things that each day are manufactured, sold, bought that you can measure opulence . . . but rather by the things that each day are thrown out to make room for the new'. The joy of 'getting rid of', discarding and dumping is our world's true passion.

The ability to last long no more speaks in things' favour. Things and bonds are expected to serve for a fixed term only and be shredded or otherwise disposed of once they outlive their usefulness – which they must do. And so possessions, and particularly the long-lasting possessions one cannot get rid of easily, are to be shunned. Today's consumerism is about not accumulation of things, but their 'one off' enjoyment. So why should the 'knowledge package' obtained during one's stay in school or college be exempted from that universal rule? In the whirlwind of change, knowledge fit for instant use and meant for 'one off' use, knowledge ready for instant use and instant-disposal knowledge of the kind promised by software programs coming onto and off shop shelves in an ever accelerating succession, looks much more attractive.

And so the thought that education may be a 'product' that is meant to be appropriated and kept is off-putting and most certainly no longer speaks in institutionalized education's favour. To convince their children of the use of learning, fathers and mothers of yore used to tell them that 'what you've learned, no one will ever take away'; that might have been an encouraging promise to *their* children, but it would look a horrifying prospect to the contemporary young. Commitments tend to be resented unless they come with an 'until further notice' clause. In a growing number of American cities building permits are issued only with demolition permits, while recently American generals opposed the engagement of their troops on the ground until a convincing 'exit scenario' was worked out.

The second challenge to the basic premises of education comes from the erratic and essentially unpredictable nature of contemporary change and adds power to the first challenge. At all times knowledge was valued for its faithful representation of the world; but what if the world changes in a way that continuously defies the truth of extant knowledge, constantly taking even the 'best informed' people by surprise? Werner Jaeger, the author of the classic exploration of the ancient roots of the concept of pedagogy and learning, believed that the idea of education (*Bildung*, formation) was born of the twin assumptions of the immutable order of the world that underlies all the superficial variety of human experience, and of the similarly eternal nature of laws that govern human nature. The first assumption justified the necessity and the benefits of knowledge transmission from teachers to pupils. The second imbued teachers with the self-confidence needed to carve on pupils' personalities, as sculptors do in marble, the shape presumed to be, for all time, right, beautiful and good – and for those reasons virtuous and noble. If Jaeger's findings are correct (and they have not been refuted), then 'education as we know it' is in trouble, since it would nowadays take quite an effort to uphold any of these assumptions and even more effort to perceive them as self-evident.

Unlike the behaviourists' maze, the world as lived through these days feels more like a contraption for forgetting rather than a setting for learning. Partitions may be, as in that laboratory maze, impenetrable, but they are on castors and constantly on the move, carrying the tested, explored yesterday routes with them. Woe to people with retentive memory – yesterday's trusty tracks are found a short time later to end up in blank walls or quicksand, and the habitualized, once foolproof behavioural patterns begin to bring disaster instead of success. In such a world, learning is bound to endlessly chase the forever elusive objects that in addition begin to melt the

moment they are grasped, and since the rewards for proper action tend to be moved daily to different locations, reinforcements may mislead as much as they reassure: they are traps to beware of and avoid, since they may instil habits and impulses that in no time will prove to be useless, if not harmful.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, when skating on thin ice your salvation is in speed. Salvation-seekers would be well advised to move quickly enough not to risk over-testing any spot's endurance. In a volatile world of liquid modernity, in which hardly any form keeps its shape long enough to warrant trust and gel into a long-term reliability (at any rate, there is no telling when and whether it will gel and little likelihood that it ever will), walking is better than sitting, running is better than walking and surfing is better yet than running. Surfing benefits from the lightness and sprightliness of the surfer; it also helps if the surfer is not choosy about the waves coming his way and is always ready to cast his former preferences aside. All that goes against the grain of everything that learning, and education, stood for through most of their history. After all, they were made to the measure of a world that was durable, hoped to stay durable and intended to be made yet more durable than it had been to date. In such a world, memory was an asset, and the further back it reached and the longer it lasted the more valuable it was. Today such a solidly entrenched memory seems potentially incapacitating in many cases, misleading in many more, useless in most. One wonders to what extent the rapid and spectacular career of servers and electronic networks was due to the waste-storage, waste disposal and waste-recycling problems that servers promised to resolve; with the work of memorizing resulting in more waste than usable products and without any reliable way to decide in advance which is which (which of the apparently useful products will soon fall out of fashion and which of the apparently useless will enjoy a sudden upsurge of demand), the chance of storing all information in containers kept at a safe distance from brains (where the stored information could, surreptitiously, take over control over behaviour) was a timely, tempting proposition.

In our volatile world of instant and erratic change, settled habits, solid cognitive frames and stable value preferences, those ultimate objectives of the orthodox education become handicaps. At least they have been cast as such by the knowledge market, in which (as in all markets for all commodities) loyalty, unbreakable bonds and long-term commitments are anathema, so many hindrances to be forced out of the way. We have moved from the immutable maze modelled by behaviourists and the monotonous routine modelled by Pavlov into the open marketplace where anything may happen at any time yet nothing can be done once for all, and where successful steps are matters of luck and in no way guarantee another success if repeated. And the point to remember and appreciate in all its consequences is that in our times the market and the *mappa mundi et vitae* overlap. As Dany-Robert Dufour recently observed<sup>4</sup> capitalism dreams not only of pushing . . . the territory in which every object is a commodity (water rights, genome rights, living species, babies, human organs . . .) to the limits of the globe, but also of expanding it in depth to cover previously private affairs, once left to the individual charge (subjectivity, sexuality . . .) but now included in the merchandise.

And so we all are, most of the time and whatever our momentary preoccupations, sticklebacks exposed to conflicting and confusing signals. The bizarre behaviour of the male stickleback unsure where the boundaries separating contradictory behavioural patterns run is turning fast into the most common conduct of male and female humans. Responses tend to be as confused as the confusing signals are. In the absence of reliable precedents and tested patterns of behaviour, responses proceed as a rule in a trial-and-error fashion. Having pulled ourselves (mostly, like Baron Munchausen, by our bootstraps) from one confusion, we immediately land in another. We do not learn much in the process, except the need to brace ourselves for more dubious, precarious situations and bear the consequences of new false steps. 'You are as good as your last success' – this is the life-wisdom in a world in which the rules change in the course of the game and few if any rules retain their value longer than it takes to learn and memorize them. Rates of success brought about by learned, drilled and routine responses fall rapidly; nowadays; the catchword is 'flexibility'. The ability to abandon present habits quickly becomes more important than the learning of new ones. We are all pressed to practise, as a norm, the life-style

which Søren Kierkegaard, two centuries ago, found pathological in Don Giovanni: 'to finish quickly and start from the beginning'.

The trouble is that little, if anything, can be done about all that by the reform, however ingenious and thorough, of educational strategies alone. Neither the commonality of the stickleback's plight nor the sudden attraction of Don Giovanni's life-strategy can be laid at the door of educators and blamed on their faults or neglects. It is the world outside the school that has grown quite different from the kind of world for which schools, as described by Myers or Jaeger, used to prepare their graduates. In this new world, humans are expected to seek private solutions to socially generated troubles, not socially generated solutions to private troubles. During the 'solid' phase of modern history, the setting for human actions was made to emulate, as far as possible, the pattern of the behaviourists' maze, in which the distinction between right and wrong itineraries was clear-cut and permanent, so that those who missed or rejected the right tracks were invariably punished on the spot, while those who followed them obediently and swiftly were rewarded. Massive Fordist factories and mass conscription armies, the two longest arms of panoptical power, were the fullest embodiments of that tendency to routinization of stimuli and responses. 'Domination' consisted of the right to set unbreakable rules, supervise their implementation, put those bound to follow the rules under continuous surveillance, bring the deviants back in line or expel them if the effort to reform failed. That pattern of domination required a constant mutual engagement of managers and the managed. In every panoptical structure there was a Pavlov who determined the sequence of moves and saw to it that it repeated itself monotonously, immune to any counter-pressures present or future. With the designers and supervisors of the panopticons guaranteeing the durability of settings and repetitiveness of situations and choices, it paid to learn the rules by heart and incorporate them in deeply ingrained and automatically followed habits. And 'solid' modernity was indeed the era approximating closely such closely managed and supervised, durable settings.

In the 'liquid' stage of modernity the demand is fast drying up for the orthodox managerial functions. Domination can be gained and assured with much less expenditure of effort, time and money, through the threat of disengagement or refusal to engage, rather than by obtrusive control and surveillance. The threat of disengagement shifts the *onus probandi* onto the other, dominated side. It is now up to the subordinates to behave in a way likely to find favour in the bosses' eyes and entice them to 'buy' their services and their individually designed 'products' – just as the other producers and traders seduce the prospective customers to desire the commodities put on sale. 'Following the routine' would not suffice to achieve that purpose. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello found out,<sup>5</sup> anyone who wants to succeed in the arrangement that has replaced the 'rat maze' kind of employment setting needs to demonstrate conviviality and communicative skills, openness and curiosity – offering for sale one's own person, the whole person, as a unique and irreplaceable value that would enhance the quality of the team. It is now up to the current or would-be employee to 'monitor oneself' in order to make sure that the performance is convincing and likely to be approved, and stay being approved in case the taste of the viewers change; it is not up to their bosses to smother the idiosyncrasies of their employees, homogenize their conduct and lock their actions within the stiff frame of routine.

The recipe for success is 'to be oneself', not 'like all the rest'. It is the difference, not the sameness, that sells best. Having knowledge and skills 'ascribed to the job' and already shown by others who did the work before or are applying for it now would not suffice; most likely, it would be considered a disadvantage. One needs instead unusual ideas, exceptional projects no one before suggested, and above all the cat-like inclination to walk one's own solitary ways. Such virtues are unlikely to be gleaned and learned from textbooks (except for ever more numerous handbooks defying the received knowledge and wisdom and mustering courage to go it alone). By definition, such virtues ought to be developed 'from inside', through letting free and expanding the 'inner forces' presumably hidden in the personality and waiting to be awoken and set to work.

This is the kind of knowledge (*inspiration* rather) that men and women of liquid-modern times covet. They want counsellors who show them how to walk, rather than teachers who make sure that only one road, and that already crowded, is taken. The counsellors they want, and for whose

services they are ready to pay as much as it takes, should (and would) help them to dig into the depth of their character and personality, where the rich deposits of precious ore are presumed to lie clamouring for excavation. The counsellors would probably reproach the clients with sloth or negligence, rather than ignorance; they would proffer the 'how to' kind of knowledge, *savoir être* or *vivre*, rather than the 'know that' kind of knowledge, *savoir*, which orthodox educators wished to impart and were good at transmitting to their pupils. The current cult of 'lifelong education' is focused partly on the need to update the 'state of the art' professional information – but in an equal, perhaps greater, part it owes its popularity to the conviction that the mine of personality is never exhausted and that spiritual masters, who know how to reach the yet unexploited deposits other guides could not reach or overlooked, are yet to be found – and will be found with due effort and enough money to pay for their services.

The triumphant march of knowledge through the world inhabited by modern men and women proceeded on two fronts. On the first, new yet unexplored territories of the world were invaded, captured, domesticated and mapped. The empire built thanks to the first front's advances was that of information meant to represent the world: at the moment of representation, the represented part of the world was assumed conquered and claimed for humans. The second front was that of education: it progressed by expanding the canon of education and stretching the perceptive and retentive capacities of the educated. On both fronts, the 'finishing line' of advance – the end of war – was clearly visualized from the start: all blank spots will be eventually filled, a complete *mappa mundi* drawn, and all the information necessary to move freely through the mapped world will be made available to the members of human species through the provision of the needed number of educational transmission channels.

The further the war progressed and the longer the chronicle of victorious battles became, the more the 'finishing line' seemed to recede. By now we are inclined to believe that the war was and is unwinnable, and on both fronts. To start with, mapping of each freshly conquered territory seems to increase rather than diminish the size and number of blank spots, and so the moment of drawing a complete *mappa mundi* seems no more imminent. Besides, the world 'out there', once hoped to be incarcerated and immobilized in the act of representation, seems now to seep away from every recorded shape; a player (and a crafty and cunning player to be sure) in the game of truth, rather than the stake and the prize human players hoped to share. In Paul Virilio's vivid description, 'Today's world no longer has any kind of stability; it is shifting, straddling, gliding away all the time'.<sup>6</sup>

Even more seminal news comes however from the second, the distribution-of- knowledge, educational front. To quote Virilio once more<sup>7</sup> – 'The unknown has shifted position: from the world, which was far too vast, mysterious and savage' into 'the nebular galaxy of the image'. The explorers who are willing to examine that galaxy in its entirety are few and far between, and those able to do so are even fewer. 'Scientists, artists, philosophers . . . we find ourselves in a kind of 'new alliance' for the exploration [of that galaxy]' – a kind of alliance which ordinary people could as well abandon all hope of ever joining. The galaxy is, purely and simply, un-assimilable. Not so much the world of which the information tells, but the information itself has become the prime site of the 'unknown'. It is the information that feels 'far too vast, mysterious and savage'. It is the gigantic volumes of information vying for attention that ordinary men and women feel nowadays considerably more threatening than the few remaining 'mysteries of the universe', of interest solely to a small bunch of science addicts and an even smaller one of Nobel Prize contenders. All things unknown feel threatening, but they prompt different reactions. The blank spots on the map of the universe arouse curiosity, spur into action and add determination, courage and confidence to the adventurous. They promise an interesting life of discovery; they augur a better future freed gradually from the life-poisoning nuisances. It is different with the impenetrable mass of information: it is all here, available now and within reach, yet tauntingly, infuriatingly distant, obstinately alien, beyond hope of ever being grasped. The future is no more a time to look forward to: it will only magnify the present trouble, adding exponentially to the already stultifying and stifling mass of knowledge, barring the salvation it seductively offers. The sheer mass of knowledge on offer is the main obstacle to taking up the offer. It is also the main threat to

confidence: surely there must be somewhere, in that awesome mass of information, an answer to the haunting problems, and so if the solutions fail to be found, self-deprecation and self-derision immediately and matter-of-factly follow.

It is the mass of accumulated knowledge that has become the contemporary epitome of disorder and chaos. In that mass all orthodox ordering devices – topics of relevance, assignment of importance, usefulness-determining needs and value-determining authorities – have been progressively sunk and dissolved. The mass makes its contents look uniformly colourless. In that mass, one may say, all bits of information flow with the same specific gravity, and for people who are denied the right to claim expertise for their own judgements but are buffeted by cross-currents of contradictory expert claims there is no way to sift the wheat from the chaff. In the mass, the parcel of knowledge cut out for consumption and personal use can be evaluated by its quantity only; there is no chance of comparing its quality with the rest of the mass. One bit of information equals another. TV quizzes faithfully reflect that new appearance of human knowledge: for every right answer the same number of points is awarded to the contestant, regardless of the topic of the questions.

Assigning importance to various bits of information, and even more assigning more importance to some than to others, is perhaps the most perplexing task and the most difficult decision to take. The sole rule of thumb one can be guided by is momentary topical relevance, but then the relevance shift from one moment to another and the assimilated bits lose their significance as soon as they have been used. Like other commodities in the market, they are for instant, on-the-spot and 'one off' use.

Education in the past took many forms and proved able to adjust itself to changing circumstances, setting itself new goals and designing new strategies. But let me repeat – the present change is not like the past changes. At no turning-points of human history did educators face a challenge strictly comparable to the one the contemporary watershed presents. Simply, we have not been in such a situation ever before. The art of living in a world over-saturated with information has still to be learned. And so has the even more difficult art of grooming humans for such a living.

### **Teacher-student relation in the liquid-modern setting**

On the origins of one of his remarkable short stories, 'Averroes' Search', the great Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges said that in it he has tried "to narrate the process of failure", of "defeat" – like those of a theologian seeking the final proof of God's existence, an alchemist seeking philosophical stone, a technology buff seeking a perpetuum mobile or a mathematicians seeking the way to square the circle... But then he decided that "a more poetic case" would be one "of a man who sets himself a goal that is not forbidden to others, but is to him". That was the case of Averroes, the great Muslim philosopher, who set to translate Aristotle's *Poetics*, but "bounded within the circle of Islam, could never know the meaning of the words *tragedy* and *comedy*". Indeed, "without ever having suspected what theatre is", Averroes would have to fail when trying "to imagine what a play is".

As a topic for a wonderful story told by great writer, the case finally selected by Borges proves indeed "more poetic". But looked from the less inspired, mundane and humdrum sociological perspective, it also looks more prosaic. Only few intrepid souls try to construct a perpetuum mobile or find a philosophical stone; but trying in vain to understand what others have no difficulty of understanding is an experience we all know only too well from autopsy, and learn daily anew. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, more than our ancestors did in the times past. Look at just one example: communicating with your children if you are a parent. Or with your parents, if you still can...

Mutual incomprehension between generations, "old" and "young", and the suspicion that follows it, have a long history. One can easily trace symptoms of suspicion in quite ancient times. But inter-generational suspicion has become much more salient in the *modern* era, marked by the

permanent, rapid and profound changes of life conditions. The radical acceleration of the pace of change characteristic of modern times allowed the fact of 'things changing' and 'being no longer as they used to be' to be noted in the course of a single human life: the fact that implied an association (or even a causal link) between the changes in human condition and the departure and arrival of generations.

Since the beginning of modernity and through its duration, age cohorts entering the world at different stages of continuous transformation tend to *differ* sharply in the evaluation of life conditions they *share*. Children as a rule enter a world drastically different from the one which their parents were trained and learned to take as a standard of 'normality'; and they will never visit that other, now vanished world of their parents' youth. What by some age-cohorts may be seen as 'natural', as 'the way things *are*', 'the way things are *normally done*' or '*ought* be done', can be viewed by others as an aberration: as a departure from the norm, bizarre and perhaps also illegitimate and unreasonable state of affairs, unfair and abominable. What to some age cohorts may seem a comfortable and cozy condition, allowing to deploy the learned and mastered skills and routines, might appear odd and off-putting to some others; whereas some people might feel like fish in the water in situations which made others feel ill at ease, baffled and at a loss.

The differences of perception have by now become so multidimensional that unlike in the pre-modern times the younger people no longer are cast by the older generations as 'miniature adults' or 'would be adults' - not as the 'beings-not-yet-fully-mature-but-bound-to-mature' ('mature into being like us'). The youngsters are not hoped or supposed to be 'on the way to becoming adult *like us*', but viewed as a rather *different* kind of people, bound to *remain* different 'from us' throughout their lives. The differences between 'us' (the older) and 'them' (the younger) no longer feel as temporary irritants destined to dissolve and evaporate as the youngsters (inevitably) wise up to realities of life.

As a result, the older and the younger age cohorts tend to eye each other with a mixture of miscomprehension and misapprehension. The older would fear that the newcomers to the world are about to spoil and destroy that cozy, comfortable, decent 'normality' which they, their elders, have laboriously built and preserved with loving care; the younger, on the contrary, would feel an acute urge to put right what the ageing veterans have botched and made a mess of. Both would be unsatisfied (or at least not-fully-satisfied) with the current state of affairs and the direction in which their world seems to be moving - and blame the other side for their discomfort. In two consecutive issues of a widely respected British weekly two jarringly different charges were made public: a columnist accused 'the young people' to be 'bovine, lazy-arsed, chlamydia stuffed and good for nothing', to which a reader angrily responded that the allegedly slothful and uncaring youngsters are in fact 'academically high-achieving' and 'concerned about the mess that adults have created'<sup>4</sup>. Here, as in uncountable other similar disagreements, the difference was clearly between *evaluations* and subjectively-coloured *viewpoints*. In cases like this, the resulting controversy can hardly be 'objectively' resolved.

Ann-Sophie, a 20-years old student of the Copenhagen Business School, said in response to the questions set by Flemming Wisler<sup>5</sup>: 'I don't want my life to control me too much. I don't want to sacrifice everything to my career...The most important thing is to be comfortable...Nobody wants to be stuck in the same job for long'. In other words: keep your options wide open. Don't swear loyalty of a 'till death do us part' kind - to anything or anybody. The world is full of wondrous, seductive and promising chances; it would be a folly to miss any of them by tying your feet and hands with irrevocable commitments...

No wonder that on the list of basic life skills which the young are prompted and eager to master, *surfing* towers high above the increasingly old-fashioned 'sounding' and 'fathoming'. As Katie Baldo, guidance counsellor of the Cooperstown Middle School in the New York state<sup>6</sup> has noted, 'teens are missing some major social cues because they are too engrossed in their iPods, cell phones, or video games. I see it all the time in the halls when they can't voice a hello or make eye

contact'. Making an eye contact and acknowledging the physical proximity of another human spells waste: dedication of precious and scarce time to 'going in depth' – a decision that would interrupt or pre-empt surfing of so many other inviting surfaces. In the life of continuous emergency, *virtual* relations beat easily the '*real* stuff'. The off-line world prompts young men and women to be constantly on the move; such pressures would be however to no avail were it not for the electronically based capacity of multiplying inter-individual encounters by making them brief, shallow and disposable. Virtual relations are equipped with 'delete' and 'spam' keys that protect against cumbersome (above all, time-consuming) consequences of in-depth interactions. One can't help recalling Chance (a character played by Peter Sellers in 1979 Hal Ashby's film *Being there*), who having emerged into the busy town street from his protracted *tête à tête* with the world-as-seen-on-TV, tries in vain to remove a discomforting bevy of nuns from his vision with the help of his hand-held pilot.

For the young, the main attraction of the virtual world derives from the absence of contradictions and cross-purposes that haunt the off-line life. Unlike its off-line alternative, the on-line world renders the infinite multiplication of contacts conceivable – both plausible and feasible. It does it through the *weakening* of bonds – in a stark opposition to its off-line counterpart, known to find its bearings in the continuous effort to *strengthen* the bonds by severely limiting the number of contacts while deepening each one of them. This is a genuine advantage to men and women whom a thought that a step taken might (just might) have been a mistake, and that it might (just might) be too late to cut the losses it caused would never stop tormenting. Hence the resentment towards everything 'long term' – be it planning of one's life, or commitments to other living beings. Evidently appealing to the young generation's values, a recent commercial announced the arrival of a new mascara that 'vows to stay pretty for 24 hours', and commented: 'Talk about a committed relationship. One stroke and these pretty lashes last through rain, sweat, humidity, tears. Yet the formula removes easily with warm water': 24 hours feels as already a 'committed relationship', but even such 'commitment' won't be an attractive choice if not for its traces being easy to remove.

Whatever choice will eventually be made, shall be reminiscent of Max Weber's 'light cloak' which one could shake off one's shoulder at will and without notice, rather than of his 'steel casing', offering effective and lasting protection against turbulence but also cramping the movements of the protected and severely tapering the space of free will. What matters most for the young is the retention of the ability to *re-shape* 'identity' and the 'network' whenever a need to reshape arrives or is suspected to have arrived. The ancestors' worry about *identification* is increasingly elbowed out by the worry of *re-identification*. Identities must be *disposable*; an unsatisfying or not-sufficiently-satisfying identity, or an identity betraying its advanced age, needs to be *easy to abandon*; perhaps bio-degradability would be the ideal attribute of the identity most strongly desired.

Interactive capacity of the internet is made to the measure of this new need. It is the quantity of connections rather than their quality that makes the difference between chances of success or failure. It helps to stay *au courant* of the latest talk of the town – the hits currently most listened to, the latest T-shirt designs, the most recent and most hotly talked about parties, festivals, celebrity events. Simultaneously, it helps update the contents and redistribute the emphases in the portrayal of one's self; it also helps to efface promptly the traces of the past, now shamefully outdated contents and emphases. All in all, it greatly facilitates, prompts and even necessitates the perpetual labours of *re-invention* – to an extent unachievable in the off-line life. This is arguably one of the most important reason for the time spent by the 'electronic generation' in the virtual universe: time steadily growing at the expense of the time lived in the 'real world'.

The referents of main concepts known to frame and map the *Lebenswelt*, the lived and lived-through, the personally experienced world of the young, are gradually, yet steadily transplanted from the off-line to the online world. Concepts like 'contacts', 'dates', 'meeting', 'communicating', 'community' or 'friendship' – all referring to inter-personal relations and social bonds – are most prominent among them. One of the foremost effects of the new location of referents is the

perception of current social bonds and commitments as momentary snapshots in the on-going process of renegotiation, rather than as steady states bound to last indefinitely. But let me note that 'momentary snapshot' is not a wholly felicitous metaphor: though 'momentary', snapshots may still imply more durability than the electronically mediated bonds and commitments possess. The word 'snapshots' belongs to the vocabulary of photographic prints and photographic paper, which can accept but one image – whereas in the case of electronic ties *effacing* and *re-writing* or *over-writing*, inconceivable in the case of celluloid negatives and photographic papers, are most important and most resorted to options; indeed, they are the only indelible attribute of electronically-mediated ties.

But let's also remember that the bulk of the presently young generation never experienced real hardship, long and prospect-less economic depression and mass unemployment. They were born and grew in the world in which there could be shelter under the socially produced and serviced water- and wind-proof umbrella that seemed to be there forever to protect them against inclement weather, cold rains and freezing winds – and in a world in which every next morning promised a day sunnier than the last and more lavishly sprinkled with pleasant adventures. When I write these words, clouds gather however over that world. The happy, sanguine and full of promises condition, which the young came to believe to be the 'natural' state of the world, may not last much longer. An economic depression (threatening, as some observers insinuate, to be as deep if not deeper than the crises experienced in their own youth by the parents' generation) may linger just after the next corner. So it is too early to decide how the ingrained worldviews and attitudes of the present-day young will eventually fit the world to come, and how that world would fit their ingrained expectations.

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<sup>1</sup> See Philip French, 'A Hootenanny New Year to All', *The Observer Television* 30 December 2007 -5 January 2008, p.6.

<sup>2</sup> See Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *L'invention de soi: Une théorie d'identité*, Hachette 2004, p.214.

<sup>3</sup> *Les uns avec les autres*, p.108.

<sup>4</sup> See *The Guardian Weekend* of 4 and 11 August 2007.

<sup>5</sup> See 'The Thoughtful', in *fo*, January 2008, p.11.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.wxii12.com/health/16172076/detail.html>