

PERSPECTIVES

# Society Enables and Disables

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The carrying capacity of a bridge is measured not by the *average* strength of its pillars, but by the strength of the *weakest* among them; and so is the “carrying capacity” of society, that is, its humanity and hospitality. Society is as much human as the life conditions of its most humble and least potent members.

Half century ago, in my student years, I learnt from my anthropology teachers that the beginnings of culture or “civilization” (that is, of a fully and truly *human* society) could be dated thanks to the discovery of a humanoid skeleton of a male who died at the age of 30 years, but who had broken his leg and begun limping in childhood. My teachers told me that only in a human society could such a creature survive to 30 years of age. I learnt that human society differs from an animal pack or herd by its ability and willingness to count such damaged and indolent creatures among its members.

What I learned from my teachers, and have remembered ever since, was that compassion and care stood at the cradle of human society; that the surest way to recognize human society is by its “enabling” work – enabling to survive those who otherwise would not manage to stay alive on their own. It was that enabling skill and labour that made society and all its members (those cared-for as much as those who cared for them), human. To be truly and fully human and secure in one’s humanity one needs to be cared for by other human beings and to be confident that care will be provided when needed; but to be human one needs also to be moral – one needs to care for other human beings and be ready to hurry to provide help when it is needed. It is ultimately on the relationship of caring and being cared for that human society is built and the humanity of its members is sustained.

This is the truth of human society, but not the whole truth, alas. The same society that *enables* disabled humans is also expert in branding and casting certain humans as “disabled” – in *disabling* such humans as would otherwise be able to live a human life, or in denying that they have such ability.

“To disable”, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means to incapacitate – “to pronounce incapable; hence, to disparage, depreciate”.

Incapable of what, you may ask? Of meeting the standards, the patterns, the norms of conduct that society has set for its members. Setting norms and standards presages the gruesome job of segregating and excluding: norms and standards would hardly be set in the first place were all people expected to fit and obey them. We could even say that the separation of the “able” from the “disabled” is the prime purpose of norm-setting. In addition, once the norms are set and so the test is set for the present members and would-be members claiming admission, some people may be pronounced in advance incapable of passing the test and thus unfit to present themselves for examination: they may be “incapacitated” before trying to prove their capacity and without being given a chance to prove themselves. This branding invariably leads to stigmatizing, and then disparagement and depreciation follow. This is, after all, how the power of the norms over those who are meant to abide by them is established and how the virtue of norm-abiding is promoted.

Each norm selects its own targets. Whether people are declared/rendered disabled or not depends on the norm, not on their inherent qualities (by common opinion, in the “Country of the Blind” described by the English writer H. G. Wells in a short story the same title, a one-eyed man would have been a resented and feared monster).

Ours is a society of consumers and an individualized society. “Normal” members of such a society are expected primarily to be “sensation-gatherers” – seekers of ever new and ever more numerous pleasurable experiences – and so to open themselves to the attractions and seductions of the consumer market. Such openness is, in the last account, the deepest meaning of the “bodily fitness”, which our society exhorts its members to develop and guard. The ideal of “fitness” invokes a body that is able to absorb the delights on offer, while at the same time serving as a finely tuned fiddle on which the sweet tunes of pleasures are played. The “owner” of a “fit body” is simultaneously the virtuoso violinist and consummate connoisseur of musical arts.

The cult of the body and the obsession with bodily fitness is what one would expect to be a “norm” in a life serviced (or, more correctly, driven) by consumer markets.

Another norm to be expected would be the cult of youth and the young. Adulation of youth chimes well with the consumerist life-strategy. Objects of consumption are assumed to be destined for one-off, or at least a short-term, use. Since their seductive power lies mostly in their not having been experienced before, their attraction quickly wears off after the first experience... Increasingly, this applies also to the so-called “durable goods” (e.g. cars, computers, mobile phones, clothes, furniture, music, books, sexual partners). No wonder that, in a society of consumers, youth is celebrated: the young, by definition, fit the bill in both roles – as consumers and as objects of consumption. The old, on the other hand, are the epitome of having been around for a long time and holding no surprises – and therefore of being both “jaded” and “blasé”, of having experienced everything that there is to be experienced and of having exhausted the supplies of novel experiences that could be offered. “Being old” is a “disablement” because it stands for

limitation of desires, modesty of wants, insensitivity to market seductions; indeed, “being old” is an anathema in a society of consumers.

Apart from money (or credit cards) a fit body is the main resource required to meet the norms binding a society of consumers. However different they may seem in other respects, both the un-creditworthy and the “bodily unfit” belong to the same category of “flawed consumers”: men or women who fail the test set for the fully enabled society members. A body “unfit” (in the “consumerist” sense explained above), whether for reasons of physical impairment, of absent or lackadaisical drill, or of ageing, is a sign of the norm broken and tends therefore to be “disparaged and depreciated”. An unfit body breaks and defies the rule that is promoted as universally binding and presented as amenable to all who try hard enough, and is felt therefore to be not only dysfunctional, but also aesthetically offensive.

Add to that the effects of accelerating “individualization”, which prompts us to treat “the other” after the pattern of objects of consumption meant for one-off or short-term use, and considered useful solely for the sake of their pleasure-giving capacity – and you will see how awesome are the threats that the ongoing transformations present to the very substance of human society – to that form of togetherness and cohabitation which, as we have seen, has been founded on and is held together by compassion and care. On the one hand, the bar has been raised higher than ever before, and so an increasing number of people risk “disablement” and indeed end up as “disabled” because they lack the capacity to clear the hurdle. On the other hand, in our hedonistic and thoroughly individualized society, odds more powerful than ever militate against the moral stand that always implies readiness to forego some personal and private interest and make some degree of self-sacrifice. In such a society, loving care for others for the other’s sake is disparaged as leading to detestable “dependency” and so to be avoided at all cost, while taking responsibility for the other’s well-being tends to be condemned as an imprudent limitation of freedom to go where pleasurable experiences beckon. Ethical impulse can count on less and less support from the increasingly frail and brittle (above all, revocable and admittedly temporary) human bonds – and so must rely ever more on its own strength of conviction and determination. People who dedicate their lives to the care of others, and particularly such others as have been failed by the society upheld precisely by their invocation of humane compassion and care, are the frontline troops of humanity. On their courage and determination depends not only the well-being of people in their care, but also the humanity of the society we share.