

# Climate change: Late/Liquid Modern individualisation and Risk in Globalisation

Luke Guest, Sociology

A key characteristic of late capitalism has been the furthering of individualization (Bauman, 2000). From this it has become quite easy for sociologists and the general population to disregard the importance of structures (Cartmel and Furlong, 2007). Structures such as ethnicity, gender, and class still have an impact on the life chances of new generations, whilst the structures of consumerism and the growth of global capital are leading to catastrophic changes in global climate. The global risk of climate change is not a new threat, but is one that is worsening, so much so that it has been named as the largest threat to the global economy (Elliot, 2016). However, as individual interests and the furthering of life chances take precedence, it seems this problem will only worsen until there becomes an imminent reason that stimulates global community interest. This reflection will examine how the process of individualisation, as a result of consumer led economic interest, has led to the perpetuation of climate change.



In late modern life the individual has become subject to risk. The consequences of the modern project have in many ways been detrimental to the citizen of the world. Globalisation has led to more formidable financial crisis that are felt across the interlinked co-dependent economies. Resource shortages, drought, and power outages have a ripple effect on the exchange values of goods across the globe. Yet for the individual more concerned with trying to maintain social credibility, these issues are largely detached from them, aware of the consequences of their decisions but a problem for another place or another time (Giddens, 1991).

Identity management and the unending task of individual fulfilment comes first. Unfortunately, this is riddled with uncertainty. Light capitalism has provided us with the means to follow a

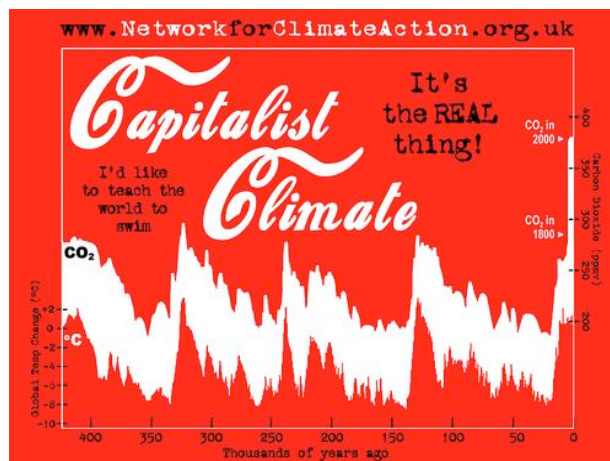
multitude of paths in life [within the capitalist structure], but we do not know where these paths will end. We base our decisions less on instrumentality, the belief that through choosing certain means we can for certain attain an end, but are instead “value-obsessed” (Bauman, 2000:61), attempting to decide which path our life should follow, not which end we should obtain. The flexibility of life and the

anxiety of uncertainty has created a *Society of Individuals* (Elias et al, 2001). The individual is more concerned with providing for the self rather than the

concerns of the community. For Bauman, the citizen has died, those concerned with the values of the community, of the town, the country, and globe have faded into obscurity (Bauman, 2000). The agent now has such autonomy that identity is a task, something that must be worked on as though it were a project. This individual fluidity has been paralleled with productive flexibility.

The determinism of heavy Fordist capitalism has been replaced with a more flexible post-Fordist labour force, a necessity for a 24-hour capitalist economy (Kumar, 2004). Whilst this has attributed to a lower level of Weberian instrumentality, perhaps Bauman has gone too far in his analysis. For certain, job/career security has become less of a given in an

increasingly flexible workforce. But students still wish to attain a degree with the belief it will make them more valuable in this flexible workforce, arguably a false perception. Yet the aspirations of a career and financial stability are still the desire of many as companies look at career portfolios and a variety of life experience.



From this flexibility though, the service class finds it difficult to use their career as a primary source for identity. This is why identity has become such a task, a task of consumption, a task to not seem so unusual you alienate others from validating the self. This is the value-obsession that Bauman speaks of, the morality of looking the part, of keeping up

appearances (Bauman, 2000). Identity construction, is not just a task though, it is a necessity, a fundamental part of late capitalist life. In the age of the synopticon, the bombardment of consumer goods instils a wish in the individual, a wish greater than the global concern of climate change, a wish to consume. The wish does not conform to the reality of obstacle that desire was tied to. The wish has an abstract aestheticism applied to it through signs and images that convey the qualitative concepts of an object. The wish is more liquid than the desire, it is eternally craving, constantly unfulfilled, and always sought after. The wish is what allows a society marked by consumption to never stop consuming (Bauman, 2000).

The consumption of identity and the concerns of the individual have had a detrimental effect on class politics. Simply, class politics have become fragmented, lacking the unity required to further their collective interests. As repeatedly stressed, the individual is more concerned with their own interests rather than the interests of the whole. But the consumer goods that they buy must come from somewhere. As the West rapidly developed its economy, it required the global south to manufacture the goods it could no longer create (Lloyd, 1982). The third world, a term marred by arrogance, became the proletariat required to take the brunt of industrial labour. Paid little, creating items that are shipped off to another continent, and required to work long hours performing repetitive tasks just to acquire the means to survive. It is here where the costs of consumption are felt the greatest.



As previously mentioned, the costs of consumption are disregarded as the problems for another time and place. The third world is that place. Low crop yields and shortage of drinkable water supplies have already had an effect in Latin America and Africa, while high levels of air pollution have damaged the health of those in Asia. The wastefulness of consumption activities can be found all over the

global south, as rubbish finds its way to favelas and ghettos where children play. The beauty of these countries has been ravaged in the name of consumerism and development, cultures have bent to the will of global capital.

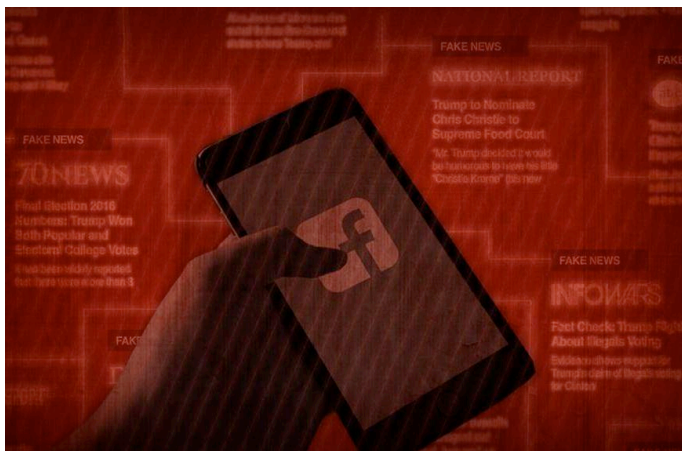
But what does this mean for us, the comfy students more concerned with personal interest and identity consumption? The lesson to be learned here is that it is the poor

who will feel the burden of climate change first. Only when those who sit in dark rooms discussing the financial futures of the many are damaged, will the ethical head of the capitalist hydra appear. When running water in every home becomes a tale of a distant past, the elite will grumble at the concept of having to use a shower on a timer. When natural disaster destroys our homes and all that we hoarded through consumption, the nonpareil will protest at the thought of not being able to go outside. Individualisation has done more than damage community spirit, it has left us unconcerned with a near future that seeks to seriously damage the quality of life we have done so much to obtain.

Unfortunately, it seems only when it is all too late will the effects of our overzealous consumption be fully realised in this *Society of*

*Individuals* (Elias et al, 2001). The reflexive modernity that has been envisaged by Beck and Giddens, has within it a strain of vitalist philosophy. To understand the past in its entirety and be aware that the past, present, and future are not these separate entities but are in unison, a singular, continuous process (Lash, 2005). Though I do not believe the reflexive modern project has been fully realised. If it were we would be more aware of the role the past has played to place us at this point in time, we would also be more thoughtful as to what dangers the future presents if we do not start limiting our consumption. We would understand that the concerns of the community are also the concerns of the individual.

Thanks to the information age, this knowledge is freely available (Webster, 2006). It is not difficult for any one of us to grasp the hazards that are approaching. Yet instead many seem to be more concerned with what the latest product released is, what celebrity gossip is trending, and what funny image with a little bit of relatable flavour text has appeared on Facebook. Because why care for a problem when you can instead distract yourself from the inevitability of its arrival?



Perhaps this is the most coercive element of late capitalism. It has granted us the ability to understand so much, to learn about nearly anything. So much information has become available to us, classical literature that once was the luxury of an elite class can be accessed by anyone. But with all this information available to us, instead we would rather distract ourselves. At most it seems that every so often a few of us will share a thoughtful article, explaining what I have just gone through. And maybe some of us will click it to open an article displaying the horrors witnessed on someone's gap year. The obligatory like will be granted because nobody wants to seem like they do not care for such a serious issue. But inevitably the reader remains detached, not realising that this is their problem as well. Empathy only goes so far. This is not to say I am any better. I understand where this will lead but am still consuming us down this path. Down this path there will be war, poverty, and mass migration. We cannot

merely rely on companies to do the right thing, unless we realise the link between ourselves and the global community and make a conscious decision to change our course, it seems things are set to get a lot worse before there is any hope they will get better. The fluidity of individual life seems to have led to a determinism for the globe.



## Bibliography

Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid modernity*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Elias, N., Schröter, M., Jephcott, E. and Schroter, M. (2001) *The society of individuals*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Elliott, L. (2016) *Climate change disaster is biggest threat to global economy in 2016, say experts*. Available from: <<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/jan/14/climate-change-disaster-is-biggest-threat-to-global-economy-in-2016-say-experts>> [Accessed: 9 December 2016].

Furlong, A. and Cartmel, F. (2007) *Young people and social change: New perspectives*. 2nd ed. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press.

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Louisville, KY, United States: Stanford University Press.

Kumar, K. (2004) *From post-industrial to post-modern society: New theories of the contemporary world*. 2nd edn. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Lash, S. (2005) 'Lebenssoziologie: Georg Simmel in the information age', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 22(3), pp. 1–23. doi: 10.1177/0263276405053717.

Lloyd, P.C. (1982) *A Third world proletariat?*

London, United Kingdom: HarperCollins Publishers.

Webster, F. (2006) *Theories of the information society*. 3rd edn. New York: Taylor & Francis.

Images:

Geograph (2010). Available from: <<http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/1925559>> [Accessed 22 February 2017].

Flickr (2007). Available from: <[https://www.flickr.com/photos/o\\_p\\_a/875816388](https://www.flickr.com/photos/o_p_a/875816388)> [Accessed 3 March 2017].

Wikimedia Commons (2006). Available from: <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cite\\_Soleil\\_-\\_Home\\_to\\_500\\_000.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cite_Soleil_-_Home_to_500_000.JPG)> [Accessed 3 March 2017].

Disinformation, Wikipedia (2016). Available from: <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disinformation>> [Accessed 22 February 2017].