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**ON THE SOCIAL COSTS
OF MODERNIZATION**

**SOCIAL DISINTEGRATION,
ATOMIE/ANOMIE AND
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

by Johan Galtung

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◆ Preface

The following paper was delivered in the closing session of the international conference on **Rethinking Social Development**, held in Copenhagen on 11-12 March 1995. For this event, UNRISD invited ten outstanding social thinkers — Ralf Dahrendorf, Amitai Etzioni, Johan Galtung, Anthony Giddens, Eric Hobsbawm, Fatema Mernissi, Tetsuo Najita, Emma Rothschild, Wole Soyinka and Tatyana Tolstaya — to explore the present economic and social crisis and, if they wished, to sketch alternative scenarios for the future. The conference was designed to complement political debate, simultaneously in progress at the World Summit for Social Development, by drawing Summit participants from many walks of life into a wide-ranging discussion of current development models.

In this paper, Johan Galtung presents a provocative and pessimistic picture of the human condition. “To go straight to the issue”, the author begins, “the first thesis is simply this: many human societies (perhaps most) are in a state of advanced social disintegration at the close of the twentieth century”. At the roots of this process Galtung finds a trend toward “destruction and deculturation, heading for structurelessness and culturelessness” — or what he defines as **atomie** and **anomie**.

This is a sociological argument which is concerned in part with the changing nature and quality of the **relations** among people. To make his line of reasoning clear, Galtung briefly explains in his paper how models of social interaction have changed over the course of human history, from the earliest (primitive) societies of hunters and gatherers, through the development of traditional structures of age- or caste-based power within agricultural societies, to the modern industrial order. In this progression, relations become increasingly hierarchical and impersonal. The post-modern phase, which the current revolution in communications and robotics seems to portend, in Galtung’s view is characterized by a breakdown of human relations — a collapse and corruption of institutions, an isolation of individuals and the growing predominance of purely egotistical motivation for action.

There is also a cultural dimension to Galtung’s analysis. He criticizes sociologists and development practitioners for concentrating far too single-mindedly on **structures** of social relations without focusing sufficiently on the changing **content** of motivation and belief. Human beings need not only workable links to others, but also a set of values and explanations which give meaning to life. Here again, Galtung feels that modernization has created an increasingly untenable situation, as the advance of secular faith in reason has undermined religious belief without replacing it to an adequate extent with other, clearly binding ethical commitments.

In the concluding section of his paper, Galtung urges everyone with a concern for human development to work toward “rehumanizing” political and economic institutions, creating settings for close and co-operative personal interaction within them — not only to improve the quality of life of people, but also to strengthen and revitalize large institutions themselves. At the same time, the author believes that there is a central role to be played by religion in reversing the current slide toward anomie. In particular, he urges that we distinguish less between different formal religions and more between “hard” and “soft” variants to be found in each of these. The task, in his view, is to

replace “hard”, or intolerant, belief structures with “softer” — more tolerant, more compassionate — alternatives.

The reader will find many challenging, and often iconoclastic, interpretations of the current human predicament in the following pages. The picture drawn by Galtung of “humanity on the road from nomadism to monadism” — a state in which individuals have lost all capacity to relate to each other at all — is sufficiently dramatic to engage attention and provoke response. That in turn furthers his goal of ensuring that the future he posits will never come to pass.

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PART I: THREE THESES ON SOCIAL DISINTEGRATION

To go straight to the issue, the first thesis is simply this: **many human societies (perhaps most) are in a state of advanced social disintegration at the close of the twentieth century — at the threshold of the third millennium AD.** This does not mean the situation is irreparable. But it does mean that remedies have to be found and enacted quickly, partly to halt disintegration (negative social development) and partly to build more solid societies, not only integrated but less susceptible to social disintegration (positive social development). Such societies should also be capable of providing “human security”, here interpreted as satisfying basic human needs (positive human development), or at least of reversing processes of human needs degradation (negative human development). In the same vein, they should be capable of enhancing the ecosystem¹, building diversity and symbiosis (positive nature development), or at least of halting processes of ecosystem degradation (negative nature development). To this should be added a world dimension: if the world is a society of societies, that society should also be integrated (positive world development), or processes toward disintegration (negative world development) should be reversed.

Four spaces of development (Nature, Human, Society, World) and for each one a more modest negative task and a very ambitious positive task. A tall bill! In addition, these lofty goals may not even be compatible: a disintegrating society may also be more flexible, capable of meeting new challenges; and an integrated society may also be too rigid to take on new tasks creatively. But that all remains to be explored.

Dramatic, somewhat apocalyptic statements like the thesis above are frequently heard nowadays. They can be brushed away as more cases of “drama supply” to meet a perennial “drama demand”. Another, less reassuring, interpretation would be that there might be much truth to them. At this introductory phase of the story to be told in these pages, one point should be made: a thesis about social disintegration is **not** in and by itself a statement about eco-crisis (depletion, pollution, over-population or any combination of the three), about misery, unemployment, low or negative economic growth, or violence and war. The statement is about **society** as something *sui generis*, of its own kind, as sociologists have always insisted.² “Social disintegration” is an additional problem, closely related to and perhaps even more significant in its consequences than all the other global problems included under the headings of nature, human and world development. And being different, the problem will hardly yield to remedies designed for the old problems. New approaches are called for.

So let us identify **social disintegration** as a **global problem**³, among other global problems, distributed on the spaces of the human condition used above, adding the “spaces” of **time** and **culture**.

SPACE	GLOBAL PROBLEM
NATURE	<i>ecological degradation, population</i>
HUMAN	<i>poverty/misery, repression; spiritual alienation</i>
SOCIETY	<i>economic underdevelopment; social disintegration</i>
WORLD	<i>massive violence, war (inter-state/inter-nation)</i>
TIME	non-sustainability
CULTURE	inadequacy

The problems italicized above have already received general attention to the point of being the basic foci of the many endeavors by the United Nations under the headings “environment” (for nature), “human rights” and “development” (for society) and “peace” (for the world). A time dimension has been added recently: “sustainability”. Although nobody is in favor of non-sustainable solutions to the problems of environment, human rights, development and peace, this is a useful reminder of the importance of solutions being **reproducible**, if possible even self-reproducible (as opposed to stop-gap measures or measures that consume more problem-solving resources than they produce).

The other three problems on the list above have not yet entered the general discourse. There are reasons for that. The specialists on “spiritual alienation” would be religionists and psychologists; on social disintegration, social scientists in general and sociologists in particular; and on the possible inadequacy of mainstream (meaning Western) culture, religionists again, cultural anthropologists, philosophers. In other words, new expertise — so far mainly limited to UNESCO meetings. These concerns do not carry the same weight as the natural sciences, economics and security studies, which are assumed adequate for the problems discussed.

The three additional problems are also found at the core of the dominant social formation, in and of the West. They imply questioning individual internalization, social institutionalization and culture. Lives lived without meaning, societies disintegrating, cultures without answers are serious problems *sui generis*; not only side-effects or side-causes of the problems of eco-breakdown, misery and war. Moreover, all of these are strongly related.

For the second thesis we need a simple definition formula: **social = structural + cultural**. By “structure” we simply refer to “patterned interaction”, the macro, gross, general picture of “**who relates to whom, how, when and where**”. This is social traffic as seen from the top of Empire State Building, not by watching drivers from the corners of Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street in New York City. The key word is pattern, not the individual variations. There are no individual name tags. Human beings appear as “driver”, “cop”, “pedestrian”. The structure changes over time. The term is inseparable from the term “process”; there may be stability, secular trends up or down, cycles (with any period, like the cycles of 24 hours and 365 days in the example above).

By “culture” we mean the **what** and **why** of interaction; and the **what not/why not** that is important in explaining missing interaction: the structure not there, the absent link of interaction. Whereas interaction is **between** actors (and patterned interaction is the mega-version of the single inter-act), culture is **within** actors. But it may be shared: patterned culture is the mega-version of the

individual why and why not; the mutual rights and obligations of interaction, the expectations, or binding normative culture.

The second thesis can now be formulated: **at the roots of social disintegration is a twin process of destructuration and deculturation, heading for structurelessness and culturelessness**. Following Durkheim we shall refer to culturelessness as **anomie**⁴; and then introduce a neologism for structurelessness, **atomie**. Of course we have not come that far. Society is not yet a heap of mutually isolated social atoms, individuals; and there is still much binding normative culture around. But we may be on the way.

To where, to what? To a society of Leibniz' monads⁵, fully self-sufficient? Obviously not, for human individuals can hardly survive in total isolation⁶. But we can easily imagine inter-action reduced to a thin minimum, like some e-mail contact; making society a set of isolates⁷ more than a structure relating positions filled with individuals. In other words, the actor would be the isolated individual as such, not the individual as, for instance, "head" of the family, CEO ("Chief Executive Officer") or SEO ("State Executive Officer", the head of state/government). And the normative culture informing these individuals about what to do would be centered on that which serves the individual. No interacts, only acts.

In short: at the end of the road winding through history and into the future we see a social formation ("society" may no longer be the term) basically atomized into individuals, thinly and weakly related, each acting out of egocentric cost-benefit calculations. We are close to this state of atomie, but there is still some interaction left. We are also close to anomie, where the only binding normative culture left would be individualized cost-benefit analysis. Anarchy would be another term, *bellum omnium contra omnes*, *homo homini lupus*. The social fabric (*le tissu*, *el tejido*), the social body, *lo social*, falls apart.

The third thesis might read something like this: **we are at a stage in human history where the problem is not only whether interaction structures between individuals, groups and countries are right or wrong, but whether there is any structure at all; and not only whether the culture defining right or wrong is right or wrong, but whether there is any normative culture at all**.

On the road we would expect a number of social phenomena. First, **we would expect the focus of interaction to shift from "mutual rights and obligations", a reciprocal mix of egoistic and altruistic orientation, to an egoistic orientation of "what is in it for me"**. For organization members the shift is from reciprocity to "what can the organization do for me". Like predators they descend upon macro-organizations like State and Capital, preying on them for individual benefit, then withdrawing with the booty. Meso-organizations like NGOs, including parties, trade unions and churches, are used as stepping stones. Micro-organizations, like families and friends, are not spared. Spouses will demand services like sex and security, and in addition "freedom" (particularly husbands). The offspring see the family as a launching platform in life and offer little or nothing in return after — and even before — take-off.

Second, **we would expect increasing corruption at all levels of social organization.**⁸ By “corruption” we mean a way of using organizations for egoistic purposes, influencing decisions by injecting resources (money, sex) into the process; corruptor or corruptee acting out of egoistic cost-benefit analyses.

Third, with social **nets** — organizations — decreasing in significance and social **knots** — individuals — on the increase⁹, **we would expect increasing mobility out of nets, relations and organizations**, indicating that they have been used. After exit there may be entry into new ones, or into individual monads. People will vacate bonds between spouses, parents and children, siblings, friends, neighbors and colleagues, frequently and easily. New relations may become increasingly thin, shallow.

Fourth, **we would expect increasing violence at all levels of social organization.** There would be no absolute, binding norms standing in the way, no *homo res sacra hominibus*. Other human beings inside the organizations will be seen as substitutable — the relationship being so thin anyhow — and hence as expendable. Outside the organizations they will be seen as resources. The utility supposedly accruing from violent acts will be weighed against the disutility of punishment and the probability of detection/punishment. As violence becomes pandemic, the latter probability will tend to zero given the asymmetry between the ease of committing a crime and the difficulty of detecting it.

Fifth, **we would expect increasing mental disorder**, assuming that human beings are not made for high levels of atomie/anomie but for interactive human togetherness, guided by mutual rights and obligations, in thin **and** thick human relations, definitely including the latter. Types of conduct indicative of mental disorders, such as drug consumption, alcoholism, sexoholic and workaholic behavior, perverse physical and verbal violence, are also efforts to find identity in tighter and thicker human interaction and in the deeper recesses of the Self. They are outer and inner journeys. When such efforts fail, suicide is a possible way out; not only out of despair, but also as the ultimate act of egoism.

Summarizing, this is a fairly bleak — some would say far too dark — image of human society today. But the problem right now is to understand these processes in order to arrive at some idea of where we are right now; *où en sommes-nous*. For that, we need some kind of macro-historical perspective, with all the shortcomings of abstracting and generalizing from a super-complex

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