

# The transformation of individualism and loneliness in times of pandemics

JAVIER BARRAYCOA MARTÍNEZ

Abat Oliba CEU University, Barcelona

[jbarrayc@uao.es](mailto:jbarrayc@uao.es)

ORCID: 0000-0002-9573-2209

**Abstract.** The characterisation of mass society in a society without God, as a mere mimetic, hypnotic and unstable phenomenon is clearly insufficient. For its rise, social, psychological and relational changes had to take place, both among people and between people and their environment. Many scholars in recent times who have tried to explain the phenomenon of mass society have undoubtedly linked it to individualism, especially to one of its characteristics that could be considered specifically modern: loneliness. The study entitled “The Spiral of Silence” is well known, in which Noelle-Neumann, taking up Tocqueville's classic thesis, highlights the tremendous negative force – as a psychosocial agent – of individual behaviour in the face of social forces. As Erich Fromm forcefully points out: “Feeling completely isolated and lonely leads to mental disintegration, just as starvation leads to death”. The phenomenon of a worldwide pandemic has forced a rethinking of the concept of isolation and loneliness, theoretically displaced by virtual and telematic forms of communication. However, mimetic effects and mass behaviours have not disappeared with isolation, but have been transmuted into new psychological, behavioural and cognitive attitudes.

**Keywords:** isolation, mass society, social control, social loneliness, individualism.

## Introduction

A society without a personal God will eventually lose the concept of personal dignity. This society will be transformed into a mass society. The characterisation of mass society, as proposed by Gustave Le Bon, as a conscience-nullifying, violent and unstable phenomenon, is today insufficient. The emergence of mass society's own individualism was only possible after powerful social, ideological, psychological and relational changes. Erich Fromm makes a comparison between the psychology of medieval man – where “the individual never felt alone” – and that of modern man. In the Middle Ages, because of the vast network of guilds, man always belonged to a group or social body that sheltered and protected him. However, with modernity: “The medieval system was destroyed and with it the stability and relative security it offered to the individual” (Fromm 2000, 74). Worse, Fromm continues: “This lack of connection to values, symbols or norms, which we might call moral loneliness, is as intolerable as physical loneliness” (Fromm 2000, 39).

### 1. Characterization of solitude

A society without a God who communicates with men also ends up being a society of lonely men. The moral loneliness of our times has been characterised in many ways. Zygmunt Bauman proposes, on the one hand, that the individual who experiences loneliness cannot free themselves from a fear and uncertainty that makes them yearn for community life: “Frightened lonely people, bereft of community, will continue to search for a community without fear”

(Bauman 2001, 22), which they will never find. On the other hand, loneliness and individualism foster a false sense of freedom that reduces society to “a grouping of free but solitary individuals, free to act but who have no say over the environment in which they act” (Bauman 2001, 175). Finally, he calls this new “species” of human beings “*monadic* individuals” since: “have become monads because they feel that the networks of links that made them part of the 'grand totalities' have disintegrated one by one” (Bauman 2001, 75).

We must understand that individualism implies a special form of isolation, spiritual solitude, which is not incompatible with the presence and explicit contact with other individuals. An insight into this phenomenon is provided by Elias Canetti in *Masa y poder*. It would seem that one of the dynamics of individualistic society would be to achieve “social distancing” or physical isolation, since by nature, man has a compulsive fear of being touched by a stranger. However, Canetti proposes that the *mass* is the only reality in which this fear is reversed: “Only in the mass can man be redeemed by the fear of being touched [...] From the moment we abandon ourselves to the mass, we have no fear of being touched” (Canetti 1981, 4).

Therefore, gregariousness or mass social gatherings are perfectly compatible with loneliness. Similarly, physical isolation does not necessarily mean mental or moral isolation. This is Fromm's argument when he states that a man in the midst of a crowd can find himself alone in not participating in the values and principles of those around him. On the other hand, a prisoner isolated in his cell may feel spiritually linked to a community with which he shares his worldview of existence. In this sense, man would be uprooted from a communal reality, where: “Feeling completely isolated and lonely leads to mental disintegration” (Fromm 2000, 39). This mental disintegration is one of the

prerequisites for the emergence of the masses as a substitute for spiritual and political life and requires first the transformation of the nature of language.

## 2. Word and interior life

It is worth recalling Aristotle's famous reflection in the *Politics*, when he states that social life is only possible because man has *speech*, unlike animals, which only have a *voice*. While the animal communicates with the world through the *voice*, to explain pleasure and pain, man communicates with the world through *speech*, which enables him to make judgements about good and evil. Sociability needs words, as does the spiritual life. A distinction should be made here with regard to solitude and man's relationship with the world around him. Dumont, in a reflection applicable even to Christian asceticism, proposes that: “The man who seeks the ultimate truth abandons social life and its constrictions to devote himself to his own progress and destiny” (Dumont 1987, 37). As such: “A *distancing* from the social world is a prerequisite for individual spiritual development. The *relativisation* of life in the world is the immediate result of the renunciation of the world” (Dumont 1987, 38).

We can therefore distinguish between two forms of loneliness. One is a path to perfection for the individual insofar as distancing oneself from society allows one to transcend it; the other, loneliness, is more of an inner shrinking, an expression of the panic produced by confrontation with reality and the relationship with others. This second form of loneliness is intrinsically linked to modern individualism. We can therefore confront the vital loneliness of the

hermit with the agonising loneliness of the inhabitant of a big city. The latter, even if they live immersed in a sea of media, information and entertainment, will not be able to lead an interior life or a true community life.

Garrigou-Lagrange, in the introduction to her work *The Three Ages of the Inner Life*, defines this: “the interior life [...] is a high form of the *intimate conversation that each one has with himself*, as soon as he concentrates on himself, even if it is in the midst of the tumult of the streets of a big city” (Garrigou-Lagrange 1944, 2). It is this intimate conversation that will enable man to achieve conversation with God, thus germinating the spiritual life. St Thomas calls this faculty of the soul a *mental word* or *verb*, or it is the *inner man* referred to by St Paul (Rom. 7, 21). The current lack of habits of interior conversation – with oneself or with God – means that dialogue with people becomes mere communication and not the transmission of thoughts. That is why there is something of mechanisation and repetition of codes in modern language.

### 3. The paradigm of the “Homo Sacer”

Any secularising power system, therefore, necessarily has to eliminate speech and try to reduce language to communication, i.e. voice. Communication is understood as the mere quasi-mechanical response to certain received codes. Giorgio Agamben, commenting on St Paul's letter to the Romans in some seminars, warns that this is happening today: “the alienation of language itself, [and] of the very linguistic nature of man” (Agamben 2006, 66). The paradigm of the “Homo Sacer” that he proposes in his extensive work allows us to better understand our times. One of the keys is based on the

Aristotelian distinction between *zoé* (animal life) and *bios* (social life). He proposes that modern politics aims to appropriate the animal in man and integrate it into political life, to replace the *bios*. He calls this “bare life” (Agamben 2004, 18) and it will be the basis for the exercise of Foucauldian biopower. In other words, man is no longer considered a political subject, but a living being structured by the political. For this reason: “The assumption by power of the *bare life* as a political object also had consequences in the field of language. The bare life [...] is marked not only by isolation, i.e. loneliness, but also by mutism; for it is not crossed by the word and by the convention that one might expect to find in the political dimension” (D'Alonzo 2013, 105). In short, spiritual and communal life dies to the detriment of the exercise of biopower.

We mentioned at the beginning the ancestral fear of being touched by a stranger. This fear is only fully exorcised when the mass is formed. The mass as a “bare life”, organised by power, should drive away individual fears. However, on the contrary, one of the strategies of biopower is to have control over fears. If for Aristotle society would be impossible without speech and friendship, for modernity it is fear and the way it is transmitted that will be the foundation of society: “those who are afraid”, says Luhmann, “are morally right [...] thus, when fear is communicated and cannot be rejected in the process of communication, it gains a moral existence” (quoted in Estrada 2015, 33). Thus, with fear comes a „morality” based on the “common interest” of minimising risk and living free of fear. In short, Niklas Luhmann warns that fear is the only unifying principle of modern societies. When fear is the principle that has absolute validity, all other principles become relative (Bude 2014).

In the face of fear, society can only be constructed under the criteria of inclusion established by “normality”, standardisation, economic level and capacity for consumption, among other images of the ideal of well-being. The fear of being excluded generates a constant uncertainty that feeds itself: “at the heart of political life lies a deep and insatiable desire for security: and acting on that desire produces even greater insecurity” (Bauman, 2001): 32). Thus, the individual psyche must somehow evacuate uncertainty. One way of doing this is through humour and laughter. But this laughter is in agony, as Lipovetsky says: “the individual no longer needs to manifest themselves through laughter” (Lipovetsky 2000, 146). Hence, humour is replaced by cynicism. While laughter is a manifestation of sociability, cynicism is a manifestation of narcissistic individualism. And the appearance of the latter is a demonstration of the dissolution of the Polis. It is therefore no coincidence that the school of the Cynics appeared in the midst of the decay of the Athenian community (Sloterdijk<sup>2013</sup>).

#### 4. Cynicism and eutrapelia

We could find thousands of examples of the emergence of cynicism in 20th-century literature. We propose as a paradigm the character of Jean Baptiste Clamence, the protagonist of Albert Camus' *The Fall*. It is an exploration of the consequences of psychological isolation in a society where the Christian value system is collapsing and for citizens God does not exist. The result is cynicism as the only self-destructive therapy. Clamence, at one point, says: “I never came to believe deeply that human affairs were serious [...] I had no

idea where the seriousness of it all lay, except that it was not in what I saw, that it seemed to me only an amusing or inopportune game”.

So far removed from the Roman virtue of “gravitas”, which implies a sturdy attitude (*constantia*) in social matters (*honestum*), a dignity in posture in actions and words (*decorum*). This gravitas in the face of community and transcendent life did not exclude laughter or festive joy in life. St Thomas rescued from Aristotle one of the virtues expounded in his Nicomachean Ethics: *eutrapelia*. Aquinas considers play to be necessary for the development of human life. But not only in individual life, but as a foundation of friendship. The meaning of *eutrapelia* can be extended to that virtue necessary for friendship to be festive and sweet; the fruit of spiritual agility to turn towards beautiful and jovial things, without losing seriousness or moral rectitude. That is why cynicism, a false substitute for *eutrapelia*, kills friendship and makes sociability impossible.

Authority can only be exercised over a political community. Authoritarianism, on the other hand, has individualism as its subject. As Hannah Arendt pointed out: “Loneliness, the very terrain of terror, the essence of totalitarian government, [...] is closely related to rootlessness and superficiality” (Arendt 1998, 706). That is why Bauman, too, reaffirms that: “Instead of speaking of 'alienation', we should speak today of 'uprooting'., (Bauman 2001, 169). This uprooting occurs at all levels of existence. We have already seen how Agamben warns that language has been uprooted from reality and transformed into a system of communication to coordinate individual actions from power; or how animal life –zoé– is uprooted from nature and controlled by biopower.

But there is also a deeper uprooting as politics is separated from the nature of community life. This depends on power's ability to establish an absolutely arbitrary law (unrelated to a natural order)

and to determine who is excluded from society. In other words, who is “out” and who is “in”. It is clear that Agamben draws from Carl Schmitt, who argues that the sovereign is the one who can establish who is “friend” and who is “enemy”. But above all, we know who holds the power because it is he who can decide on the “state of exception”.

Agamben takes up this idea and takes it to its ultimate consequences. The sovereign is the one who, representing the highest expression of the law, is able to suspend it. The paradox is that it is the law that suspends the law, creating a space of indefiniteness where power can act. It is in this space that the so-called “inclusion-exclusion” takes place. Schmitt thought that the state of exception made it possible to establish a boundary between friend and enemy. For Agamben, the state of exception is a “reality” where the political can modulate what is within its reach by nature. That is why, he says: “the fundamental categorical pairing of Western politics is not that of friend-enemy [as it was for Schmitt], but that of bare life-political existence, *zoé-bios*, exclusion-inclusion” (Agamben 1998, 18). This space of indefiniteness will grow wider and wider, culminating in the ultimate expression of totalitarianism. In other words, the state of exception is not a narrow border that momentarily legalises what is illegal, but becomes a permanent state where exceptionality can be applied at any time. In that space it is no longer possible to distinguish between the natural and the political, between life and the norm, fact and law, or between biological life and political life. This would be the total triumph of biopower (Foucault 2007).

## Conclusion

This authoritarianism manifests itself when the state of exception becomes the rule and norm of a nihilistic political life (Agamben 2000). In *Homo sacer*, nihilism is defined as the true power whose structure is “validity without meaning”, i.e. the law is sustained in its purest form, beyond its content. It is a law that takes the form of non-enforceability, but can potentially always be exercised exceptionally as “normality”. All this is supported, following the school of Derrida and other post-structuralists, insofar as it is denied that behind language there can be a connection with reality. Or rather, there is no language because there is no reality.

This brings us back to the beginning of this article. For Aristotelian-Thomistic thought, language is the expression of the reality grasped by the understanding and the condition of the spirituality and sociability of man and of the political community. In it, friendship, eutrapelia, virtue and the common good can flourish. In post-modernity, the logic of the autonomy of that which is structured by power, without a basis in the nature of things, can only lead to authoritarianism. This takes the form of perpetual exceptionality, uncertainty and cynical nihilism. Living becomes “surviving” (Foucault 2006) without hope.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo sacer. El poder soberano y la nuda vida*. Valencia: Pre-Textos.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2000. *Lo que queda de Auschwitz—El Archivo y el Testigo*. *Homo sacer* III. Valencia: Pre-Textos.
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2004. *Homo sacer* II. Buenos Aires: Hidalgo editora.

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2006. *El tiempo que resta. Comentario a la Carta a los Romanos*, Madrid: Trotta.
- Arendt, Hannah. 1998. *Los orígenes del totalitarismo*. Madrid: Santillana.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2001. *En busca de la política*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Bell, Daniel. 1994. *El advenimiento de la sociedad post-industrial*. Madrid: Alianza Universidad
- Bude, Heinz. 2014. *La sociedad del miedo*. Edición digital: XcUiDi.
- Canetti, Elias. 1981. *Masa y Poder*. Barcelona: Muchnik Editores.
- Careri, Francesco. 2014. Walkscape. *El andar como práctica estética*. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili.
- Clastres, Pierre. 1978. *La sociedad contra el Estado*. Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores.
- D'Alonzo, Jacopo, 2013. "El origen de la nuda vida: política y lenguaje en el pensamiento de Giorgio Agamben." *Pléyade* 12, 99–118. <https://www.revistapleyade.cl/index.php/OJS/article/view/181>
- Dumont, Louis. 1987. *Ensayos sobre el individualismo*. Madrid: Alianza Universidad.
- Estrada Saavedra, Marco. 2015. *Protesta social: tres estudios sobre movimientos sociales en clave de la teoría de los sistemas sociales de Niklas Luhmann*. México: El Colegio de México.
- Foucault, Michel. 2006. *Seguridad, territorio, población*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica
- Foucault, Michel. (2007) *Nacimiento de la biopolítica*. Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Fromm, Erich. 2000. *El miedo a la libertad*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Gambra, Rafael. 1981. *El silencio de Dios*. Buenos Aires: Librería Huemul.
- Girard, R. 1986. *El chivo expiatorio*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Garrigou-Lagrange, Réginald. 1944. *Las tres edades de la vida interior*. Buenos Aires: Desclée.
- Lipovetsky, Gilles. 2000. *La era del vacío*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Maffesoli, Michel. 2004. *El tiempo de las tribus*. México: Siglo XXI.
- Simmel, Georg. 1986. *El individuo y la libertad. Ensayos de crítica de la cultura*. Barcelona: Ediciones Península.

- Sennett, Richard. 2012. *Juntos. Rituales, placeres y política de cooperación*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. 2003. *Crítica de la razón cínica*. Madrid: Siruela.
- Weil, Simone. 1996. *Echar raíces*. Madrid: Trotta.