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"On Death. What's to know? What's to tell? What's to do? The Limits, The Merits, and The Claims of Contemporary Death Studies" (2013, in preparation)

GENERAL REFLECTIONS ON PRIVATIZATION OF DEATH IN LATE MODERNITY: WHEN DOES LONELINESS COME INTO PICTURE AND WHY?

The crucified ones talked among
themselves, full of faith and hope.
But nobody talked to Barabbas.
(Pär Lagerkvist, ***Barabbas****)*

The aim of this study is simultaneously modest and implausibly adventurous. We will make an attempt to bring to your attention a few underrated theoretical obstacles in late modern sociological research of death and dying. For doing so, we are obliged to put up with an uncomfortable procedure: that of discerning between correctly rated, underrated and overrated "truths" in a multi-determined yet accurately up-dated academic field.

First, let us explain the "self-accusation" of implausibility: approaching different kinds of loneliness and/or solitude, as a collateral, but decisive concern meant to further explain late modern approach of death and dying, led to a seeming taking over of the secondary "problem" over the primary "problem". In our yet-to-come book we have taken our time and space to explain the overlapping of "loneliness" and "death" in late modernity; however the present study, aiming to capture major aspects of both "problems" without always displaying thoroughly enough the reasoning behind, may suggest, at times, a certain modesty of researching tools and a certain uncertainty of researching questions. We hope we will succeed to honestly deal with both disadvantages.

Among the honest (research) questions one may raise could be the following: how should sociology and thanatology deal with death without overlooking its fundamentally *existential* nature? What should we take into account? What should we leave aside? Could one actually claim firm theoretical standpoints? What would we call "legitimate" methodological

procedures when it comes to studying death and dying? And eventually, would they be relevant for leading to minimally decent (and entirely honest) conclusions?

I. "Privatization of death" might not always be what it seems

The connection, in modernity and late modernity, between the public irrelevance of death (*tabooing of death*[1]) and its inherent visibility in private contexts induced the idea of *"subjective" death* (the modern and late modern sense for privately dealing with death[2]) which has rapidly become one of the taken for granted truths in sociology of death and dying. Therefore any contemporary theoretical approach may rightfully emphasize *death as a socio-psychological phenomenon*, while downplaying its existential and religious nuances that naturally circumscribed the matter in traditional societies.[3]

What we will try to debate further on is *where* the abusive theoretic use of "privatization of death" starts. We will also try to suggest an *essentially* different way of looking at private death. Rooted in our previous studies and book on death and dying[4] as well as in our empirical research we have conducted in the latest 3 years in Sweden, our reasoning will invite the readers to see in "privatization of death" something else/more than a "four-wall-funeral" or a typically modern solitary experience of dying in a hospital room. These are, of course, obvious cases to capture and discuss in theoretical writings, but are they the only ones?

It could be helpful to circumscribe modern private death (exclusively subjected to sociological management and therefore defined as a social phenomenon, described in sociological terms, and "solved" with the help of medicine and/or psychotherapy) by setting it in contrast with the traditional, "mainstream" death (usually contained, defined and justified by traditional religion). In our opinion, *private death should be mostly referred as a label for any form of* ***discontinuity*** *in meaning, regulation, location and form with the traditional manners of handling death, mourning and burial, presumably public and presumably shared and largely accepted as "reliable"*. Three years ago, the Swedish Church made unintentional allusion to such contrast by writing that all burials not taking place in the church could increase *the "risk"* for privatization of death.[5]

As we have often noted, privatization of death as circumscribed by recent works within social sciences is mostly based on half a century old

suggestions coming from the history of ideas field.[6] The works of Philippe Ariès or Michel Vovelle came to justify the lack of continuity between traditional attitudes and modern attitudes, and they were not purposefully designed to explain modern arrangements for dealing (or not dealing) with death. Contextualizing late modern death representations in a world that found itself in the process of privatization of *all* meanings should be more than setting a contrast between "then" and "now", between "public death" and "private death". In the latest decades we witnessed a chaotic disintegration[7] of all previous cultural forms and social values so that it has become difficult to discern (existentially and scientifically) between the "problem" of death and the concrete problems of the dying, of the hospital staff etc. Subjective solutions of coping with death (those having nothing to do with general explanations offered by largely-accepted systems like traditional religions), are obviously less efficient even if only because they are, at any time, disputable by other mortals. After all, the problem of death – so unequivocal and objective – does not have much in common with the favorite "states" and "sayings" of late modernity: role taking, individual ambition, personal responsibility, momentary-identities.[8]

There should be a correlation between the growing need of *defining* death in one's *own* terms and keeping death away from the public space, which is considered to be one of the main traits of our society.[9] We are witnessing not only *the reducing of the public relevance of death, but also* ***the blocking*** *of the access of any kind of shared knowledge on death and dying that could make other's experience more significant (in the sense of producing and reproducing anticipated or already recognized meanings) for the community as a whole*.

II. Loneliness of the dying?

Discovering *researchable* connections (causal connections, filiations, or reciprocal determination) between loneliness and death in late modernity is more difficult than one may expect. It even tends to be an extravagant research step as long as both are rather "extra-scientific" matters. We did our best to show in our PhD thesis that loneliness *can* be considered the prevalent emotional state of late modernity.[10] But *how* should we deal with the relation between the absence of death at the public level and its compelling presence at the individual level? We believe that answering this question will lead us to the "problem" of loneliness.

Perhaps Norbert Elias[11] was the first scholar to explicitly advance and establish an empirical connection between modern death and loneliness by simply stating that those who die are left alone these days. However, the French sociologist Yves-Hugues Déchaux believe that Elias' observations were excessively dramatic. In a study entitled "La mort dans les sociétés modernes. La thèse de Norbert Elias à l'épreuve" as well as in the collective article "Comment les familles entourent leur morts"[12] it is suggested "solitude" and "loneliness" in connection with dying should be both replaced with an optimistic word: „subjectivity".

Elias' conclusions can be of course tempered in many others way. The British sociologist Clive Seale showed in a practical study called "Dying Alone"[13] that his interviewees made obvious efforts to *maintain* the ideal image of an empathic community meeting, whenever possible, the psycho-social needs of the terminally-ill, and feeling tremendously responsible for those (neighbors, relatives) who ended up dying alone. We are also remembered the tremendous importance of the "professional management of love"[14] in the Western hospices[15] and hospitals, embodied by well-prepared staff in the art of accompanying the dying: reliability and intersubjectivity defining a true *profession de foi.*[16]

Yet we would like to stress the contradictory nature of the qualified care: one of the terminally-ill interviewees says: "[the hospital] sent terminal care nurses – but they were just girls"[17]. Ulla Qvarnström writes that there is little chance for the patients to actually maintain a deep and meaningful relationship with the care-takers.[18] The "charitable elite" of late modernity has successfully professionalized compassion and has properly indexed it in the classified lists of professions; yet, the "psychodrama"[19] of the dying supposed to be directed with notable success by care-professionals, is still an expression of two *unmet* needs: **1.** the strong desire of being surrounded by friends and family,[20] and **2.** the desire to adopt a *safe and previously efficient "dying role".* The more we emphasize the importance of the expert management of dying in late modernity as well as the decline of the "community inspired rituals",[21] the more attention we should pay to the new types of accords between subjectivities which are called to reinvent the classic concept of "la bonne mort";[22] along with it, the "classic concept" of loneliness should also be called into question. In Sweden, for instance, more than 85% die with professional assistance in an institution of some kind;[23] invoking Elias' "loneliness of the dying" for understanding what institutionalized death is all about, cannot be a workable option. A

re-considering of the privatization of meanings of death and dying should be of great help, but first, we should finish what we have started:

III. Why/what loneliness?

III.1 Why loneliness?

Our interest for loneliness and aging is, as showed, tangential and has to do with a certain stage of our empirical research when we came across a socio-psychological "banality": more stable answers to our questions about what happens after one dies were given by interviewees in their 50s; unlike the discourses of the young (often displaying rhetoric bravery) or that of the old (often positive clichés), middle-aged people's accounts seemed to pay little tribute to oratorical skills, and more to a compelling need to justify their existential route, to legitimate themselves and their choices, and to discuss death and eventual afterlife according to such self-legitimateness. Even if asked about their option for death as a doorway or death as a final stop, the key-element in many stories seemed to be loneliness. The more our discussions have been perceived as "everyday talk" about how death was supposed to be, the more cultural scripts of loneliness have been displayed. There are many interesting perspectives on loneliness as understood by our interviewees worthy of being explored in comprehensive studies, but perhaps the most striking one was that of *loneliness being more feared than death*, social isolation being more feared than physical disappearance.

Loneliness seems to be the measure for "everything" in our late modern world: from the most glorious life to the most pathetic death. If each one dies on one's own, then it is also safe to say that, while alive, each one has to deal with one's own measure of loneliness. Loneliness tends to be the substructure of the (Western) world, and our society is fatally and naturally built from a complex scaffold of such loneliness-es. From the mystical (or monastic) well-articulated isolation to the unbearable loneliness of the immigrant, passing through the claustrophobic feeling of the white collar worker all the way through the loneliness of the artist and the existential isolation as described by existentialists, we would discern innumerable shades and innumerable cultural and psychological conditionings, intimate failures, social frustration, spiritual decantation, self-gratifications, self-flagellation, in short, the entire banality, the bizarreness, the sublime

and the derisory of the world; however nothing (or too little) seem to lead to a "primary" feeling or to the "fundamental" meaning of loneliness.

A study on loneliness will never be a "profitable" scientific business, because "Loneliness" is, just like "Death", in irritating generality and a generality. Apart from an enormous medical and psychotherapeutic literature, all metaphors have been imagined, all essays have been written and all theoretic speculations have been already created – some brilliant, some embarrassing, but most of them just sentimental. It is not our intention to insist on what loneliness has irremediably banal or grossly metaphorical; however, if loneliness in the Western world can take infinity of forms, one may say that the Swedish society successfully resumes "all" of them.

The Swede talks about his or her loneliness with the nonchalance of a Latin talking about minor extra-martial escapades. 8 of our 10 interviewees provided extensive explanations about benefits of solitude, unwanted loneliness, social failure or fear of isolation. Unfortunately, an extremely rich set of empirical data on loneliness will not be considered in our present discussion. Nonetheless, by the end of this study, we will shortly explore some aspects of loneliness that reflect themselves in the late modern death and dying approaches. By their notorious and acutely-felt presence, such aspects of loneliness have given form and meaning to our ontological "texture", precisely where the sting of death once used to be felt.

III. 2 What loneliness?

We suggested that privatization of death in late modernity could be something else than the simple spatial reduction of the event between the four walls of a hospital room. What if the same "logic" were applied to the "loneliness of the dying"? We know that death poses the problem of *individual meaning* whose coherence and consistency define (or weaken) ontological security[24], but living in a society that does not facilitate the awareness of death and, moreover, make the importance of a reliable *savoir mourir* seem minimal and relative, the experience of death, dying and grief comes down to personal taste. *Bringing death and loneliness together in late modernity does not only mean reinforcing the classic image of the old dying man alone in the hospital bed, but to people – especially aged ones – that die* ***on their own****, being aware of the relativity of the solution they have improvised for* ***urgently*** *solving the "unexpected" problem of their mortal destiny; the feeling of loneliness*

grows proportionally with aging and with the awareness of the crisis of the solutions for ***favorably*** *solving the problem of death.*

The fact that "living a solitary existence in old age is associated with a more negative or fearful concept of death"[25] remains one of the most reasonable and widely spread assumption to be found in studies on later life. We will therefore not discuss it further. We would assume instead that *the feeling of loneliness grows proportionally with the degree of indecision regarding that what happens when one dies.* The strong belief in either posthumous life or nothingness could be seen as an antidote for the loneliness of the aged because, once the social isolation (and therefore the social death occurs), the prospect of death seems to be getting closer, and which inherently leads to a growing anxiety about „the future".[26] A coherent, *trusted* discourse on death (ranging from a religious story to a highly rational explanation) on death could determine a more acceptant (and even forward-looking) attitude toward an otherwise nebulous experience. In other words, it makes sense to talk about the feeling of isolation of an aged person who becomes aware of his or her inability to rely on a largely accepted and reliable *savoir mourir*'s: *a symbolic isolation comes to enforce the physical isolation of the aged.* This is when both nature and culture collapse in an unexpected and terrifying *don't-know-how*.

Of course, such "symbolic isolation" when it comes to signifying one's own death could be seen as a banal, well-documented vice of individualism, the inherent waste material that comes with the excess of autonomy and with those "precarious freedoms" that Ulrich Beck has warned us about. In other words, it should not be unusual to have late modern people not looking at death from a certain angle, but rather juggling with philosophical, religious or logic adjustments, thinking up ambiguous hypotheses, or, as it is often the case, indeterminately postponing the matter. And if it is so, then death as a research matter in late modernity is not at all different from any other research matter with minor or major social impact. The attitudes toward death, the perceiving of dying experiences, as well as the infinite number of nuances that human loneliness can take in relation to these experiences do not make "more" sense than other social problems of late modernity: isolation due to unemployment, the role of cultural scripts in maintaining certain memberships, etc. So what happens when death and loneliness become no more than "trivial" social problems requiring *nothing more than* proper social solutions and elaborated sociological corrections?

IV. Where does thanatology "end" and why?

There is a risk to collect fresh, distinct data on death and dying, but to analyze them in the light of the theoretical truths that were formulated a few decades ago. Such theoretical revelations were born out of certain cultural concerns and social circumstances that are not always directly connected with our late modern sensibilities. Let us give an example: rationalizing, professionalizing and institutionalizing death – one of the biggest "thanatologic truths" of the 70s – is not a hot social and/or sociological issue nowadays. Its social and sociological consequences are "used up"[27] and one may say that, even if they are still part of the contemporary "death system",[28] it is not them shaping the late modern individual approach of death and dying. More concerned with the inner life than ever, today's man tends to give death a much more personal touch,[29] be it in the sense of a more tragic grief (especially when death of the young occurs), or a more openly indifferent approach (when the old pass away). The relationship of the late modern man with death is obviously far beyond its institutionalization aspects. 50 years ago, the *individual duty* of fulfilling one's life purposes and the *personal meaning* of social success were not seen as urgent tasks. Half a century ago, the world was "freshly" disenchanted. The sudden lack of intelligibility of life stirred and justified certain nostalgia for a lost religious order and revealed a turning point in modern attitudes toward death: the lack of "symbolic authority" of a certain recipe of good death that has encouraged the reliable truth (today taken for granted) about the exclusion of death from public debates. However, today, such public debates are not expressly meant to be "off-death-topic", but to do what it takes so that *social success* of individuals to be encouraged and stimulated: be it in the sense of death denial or in the sense death "hyperawareness" as a driving force behind their everyday success.

Perhaps too many studies approaching the *concrete* social and problems raised by death and dying start by announcing *the unproblematic nature* of their research questions as part of their introductory theoretic protocol. We do not intend to doubt the practicality of the information they provide nor do we believe that the role of such punctual studies in the mainframe of disciplinary and interdisciplinary projects on death should be decreased. We only want to take a further step and note that the potentially crucial aspects of a study are too often and too easily downplayed by their "default" placement in the category of "predictable

truths"; the investigative practices are actually conducted within this frame, and the research questions have been, at their turn, formulated and determined by it. If one is genuinely interested in various aspects of late modern death one will sooner or later have to deal with the practical impossibility of gaining access to some "new intuition". Once we agreed upon the fact that death denial is an important trait of today's society, we would immediately acknowledge innumerable paths (read "research questions") leading to the same Rome. So we *do* have the required local details for providing the best novelty and relevance of the new death studies, and we *did* inherit a number of precious frames of discussion as well as a number of interpretive filters that sort out and pertinently signify the new bodies of information in relevant, coherent manners. It is, then, not surprising that no one can deny the specific ways in which an "invincible" truth has been one more time reinforced. The applicability of such filters seems to be unlimited as long as the entire problematic of death and dying has become strictly social and sociological. And why would anyone want to ask more from an extremely vivid and correctly updated academic field? For sure, we are reading a correctly revised and agreed-upon "edition" of death.

V. Zygmunt Bauman is helping us out

In the subchapter above, we made an attempt to show that the predominant focus across the entire field of death studies is maintained by a number of "harmonizing elements" that have been formulated throughout the latest 50 years. They have remained the safest interpreting keys because of two obvious reasons. The first one has to do with the nature of death itself which is a rigid and perennial "problem" that does not easily validate a new interpreting model,[30] while the second reason has to do with the nature of today's world going through a "terminal phase" of modernity that Giddens called "high modernity". In spite of the highly sophisticated manners of validating innumerable existential modes, it is said that contemporary society approaches death in a simplified manner: negation, avoidance, and other "life strategies".[31] The desire to openly deal with *the one and only issue* of death is obviously not on the agenda of those sitting in the public markets small talking relativism and Human Rights. But here we come across a little illogicality. Since social sciences have been trained to loyally reflect the position and the discourse of the

"project of modernity",[32] then, as both Phillip Mellor and Eva Åhrén Snickare[33] show, the treatment our society applies to death is *inherently mirrored in the academic treatment of death and dying* because the idea itself of *researching* death has to do with the theme of modernity. But can we really say that social sciences "undermine" or "marginalize" death? Apparently not. Let us begin from somewhere else.

In 1992, Bauman engaged himself in writing a provoking essay using different "techniques" of finding less notorious hiding places of death. His approach is not to be found in other academic works on death and dying. He even calls it "a detectivistic adventure of a psychoanalytic kind".[34]

His hypothesis is that our everyday cultural solutions are "sediments of the processes which have been set in motion by the fact of human mortality and motivated by the need to cope with the issues that fact posits; as well as by the parallel need to repress the awareness of the true motives of such arrangements".[35] Everything, from institutions to cultural rhetoric, from self-identities to ideological agendas, from technological progress to monthly medical check, all those "global powers and stubbornly local meanings"[36] are "elaborate subterfuges"[37] built as fortresses against death. Under multicultural circumstances, such cultural scripts have been diabolically refined. These symbolic routes to immortality, because (multi) culturally determined, have proliferated to the point of meaninglessness. Today, innumerable paths lead to a most wanted Immortal Rome and Zygmunt Bauman made a brilliant cartography of these paths, with an excellent "geographical" flair.

One should start one's approach of death in high modernity *by problematizing its absence.* And this is precisely what social sciences fail to do. They take this absence for granted, and the majority of studies are rather concerned with the *consequences* of the lack of public visibility of death.[38] So there was no "illogicality" in the beginning of our subchapter because *death studies pay their tribute to late modern society by* ***only*** *showing interest in the social problems of death*: insurance policies for funeral homes, professional staff in hospitals, support of elderly, etc. Hospices, hospitals, funeral homes and cemeteries seem to be the only "legal" places for death to be looked for. But Bauman believes that the perfume of death is more intense outside such liminal spaces, and therefore attention should be paid to various symptoms of a culture that suppresses its "mortality connections"[39] through various life strategies practiced on a large scale. After all, it is not in vane that Robert Burt[40] named his book on death in today's America *Death is That Man Taking Names*. We believe

that building relevant interrogations around the problem of the absence of death from the public space cannot be "just" a topic for sociological essays, but a research pursuit in its own right. By *not* doing so, theoretical attention shown to concrete death circumstances easily observable, countable and/or statistically processable will actually contribute to *disguising* death. A theoretical trick is displayed here: the artificial growth of death's social visibility, for merely analytical reasons; and a life strategy: the easiest way to repress a problem is that of turning it into a research problem.

The social consequences of the absence of death from the public space are indeed *over-exposed*, and, by all means, they receive all the deserved attention[41] from both journalists and scholars, displaying nothing more than the late modernity's obsession with social problems which never has it been more obvious than it is when connected with death. When having to serve the social moment becomes the exclusive duty of specialists, it will inherently lead to an exaggerated devotion for current, punctual consequences and to a deliberate neglecting of the "perennial" problems which happen to be less involved in concrete contexts of modernity. A comprehensive study on death and dying would not fit in the scientific picture because of its inherent eclecticism,[42] therefore few care about *the issue* of death nowadays. Its social aspects have been however indexed and, whenever possible, solved; so that we now have all qualified tools for successfully impending death to become ontologically alarming. The benefits of science, the economic structures, the cult for *loisir* and "botox", the professionalization of death made their contribution to minifying the public solutions for dying; it depends on each of us how and if we decide to counterattack, solve, and give up to death; and it depends on each of us, the researchers, how and if we decide to deal with the following paradox: *we research death while overlooking its absence.*

VI. "Biographical solutions to systemic contradictions"

Zygmunt Bauman has come to write the above brilliant sentence in the foreword of Ulrich Beck's study, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. The context of discussion was no other than the *individualization as a duty* in which we can easily guess a precondition for *death as a duty*. The parallelism – already discussed above – is convincing. They are both highly personal constraints asking for an immediate (positive!) solution, in spite of obvious

late-modern systemic impediments. Death calls us by our name, but we live in a phonically isolated society. When asked to say something about the death they would expect to have, our Swedish interviewees ended up in storytelling, and, more precisely, in depicting their existential routes. *The story of death tends to become the story of life*. Somewhat unexpectedly, asking questions about one's death leads to a *biographical narrative*.

Two years ago, after transcribing a couple of revelatory interviews, we asked ourselves whether we could indeed go on with grounding our study on "common" life stories which cannot be "judged", generalized, hypothesized, or intabulated. The stories in question seemed to have minimal relevance for what was then our theoretical ambition (of circumscribing attitudes toward death with the help of the distinction between death as a doorway to a new life, and death as a definite end). What could be then the main gain of "biographical solutions" in a study on death? And what is a "biographical solution" after all?

Not every problem of old age, loneliness or death is (or should be), in fact, a "problem". And not even a problem taken as a "problem" can be explored through a research model. If however one feels a very special methodological "calling" and would dare making an investigation of a carefully chosen "problem", he or she will soon realize that a "problem" in connection with personal aging, loneliness or dying will seldom (if ever) prove extraordinary relevant in a wider research context. People's ways of reacting to questions about aging, loneliness or/and dying use up their relevance at a certain discussion level: a certain age group, social status, family history, socio-economical features of the population within a territory, etc. If we keep in mind the fact that approaching death, old age and/or loneliness inherently involves a variety of disciplines, the last thing we need to deal with is scale confusion.

However, the need for reasonable approaches of death is universal; the avoidance of death, the decline of traditional rites and the individual struggle for conquering various kinds of immortality are present all over the Western world.[43] We have also gotten used to talking and writing about *cultural interdependency* in late modernity. For theoreticians, this is both a privilege and a fatality; the fact that the cultures "flow" into one another (Bauman thinks we live in "liquid times"), the fact that we witness the agglutination or superposition of subcultures and spiritual practices led to bizarre sociological hypotheses and even raised the suspicion of our times being simply non-researchable.[44]

Given the above reasons and in spite of huge theoretical risks, studying death at a large scale could by all odds be a conceivable attempt. A study as such would distinct itself less through a substantial consistency and more through *the coherence of the investigatory practice that will not attempt to circumscribe death, but to follow its avatars, while in constant movement and adjustment*. We believe that the "problem" of death is naturally placed between nature and culture, and that its more general features are unequally absorbed in its particular circumstances, while the particular features tend to dilate themselves, necessarily emerging and proliferating until becoming more or less *general trends of savoir mourir* determining, short-circuiting,[45] counterbalancing or nurturing the mechanisms of modernity. Without any doubt, the autonomy of unreflecting Western individual lies at the heart of the global social dynamics, and many subtle aspects of this interconnection are to be found via the "problem" of death.

We have already shown that privatization of the meanings of death is a problematic privatization and this is precisely why he or she who dies on his or her own is anxiously alone. The need for a shared knowledge on death within certain culture in certain times has been called by us "the mainstream death" and we believe it to contain *in nuce* all the required "data" for a "project of humanity" that guarantees little disputable connections between that which is temporary and that which is out of the times. Everyone has a personal "sense" of death and, in spite of dying being a subjectively perceived experience*, a "like-mindedness" concerning death is to be guessed among the mortals*; and we know from the history that such like-mindedness will sooner or later produce a *common idiom*.

The public absence of death may imply that the late moderns are not able to discern its basic (and therefore sharable) meanings. Today, when traditionally religious times are over, capturing and then revalidating the meanings of death at a personal and public level or, in other words, approaching the *problem of death as a circulating medium between individuality and community* sounds too much like a utopian project; which does not mean it should not be given a thought. When writing about "biographical solutions to systemic contradictions", Bauman reminds us about our personal lives having become the stage for unfolding the risks and the systemic contradictions of late modernity that have to be surmounted more or less successfully by personal efforts. His statement may also justify the pertinence of studying life stories for investigating one of the most useless opportunities implied by late modern excess

of autonomy: dying on one's own; an ill-fated opportunity which have brought to man nothing but troubles.

VII. Back to loneliness: does a heart beat by itself?

The disgraceful inability to connect to social network is perceived as one of the most devaluating personal experiences. The "interpersonal isolation"[46] is taken so seriously, it ends up being a matter of "life and death". As implied in the first part of our study, he who fails to connect to the social world does not "fall" directly into death, but fatally slides into loneliness. In the steps of Heideggerian existential philosophy, existential psychotherapy showed constant and specific interest in all forms of isolation (interpersonal, intrapersonal and existential) and problematized their connections with death. Erich Fromm wrote that isolation is the primary source of anxiety[47], while Irvin Yalom explains that a strong feeling of existential isolation is often the background (and the driving force) behind social success;[48] at the same time it is the entire existential philosophy drawing attention toward the awareness of an essential aloneness of the mortal, the awareness that there is a limit for all forms of belongingness, and here is precisely where death starts.

From a strictly medical point of view, the interpersonal isolation *has been* already mentioned among the most serious threats to life. By the middle of the previous century, death caused by cardiac diseases has known an alarming growth, so that in the 1950, 55% of annual deaths were caused by heart illnesses.[49] Since cardiac risk factors needed to be reconsidered, the newly elaborated "discourse of the heart" contained surprising data concerning the high mortality rate among the unmarried, widows and widowers which proved to be up to five times bigger than among married people.[50] Sedentary life, smoking and hypercholesterolemia seemed to be less damaging than loneliness.[51] However, 46% of the Swedish hearts beat alone,[52] therefore, three years ago, at a conference held in Lund, at the University Hospital's library, professor Bengt Fridlung showed that "getting together" can guarantee a longer, more meaningful life – a true shield against heart attacks.

Social integration, cohesion, long-term marriages can keep death away because they are infallible signifiers and signified-s of the life norm. Unlike hygienic solitude, sheer isolation is the opposite of life. At the long last, late modern man is essentially alone, and essentially not ready to be so.

VIII. Notorious faces of loneliness

Let us take a look at some of some factors involved in the dynamic relationship between late modern individualism, loneliness and the subjective approach of death and dying.

VIII. 1 What happened to the monk?

The apparent lack of relevance of the monastic solitude in reading the non-assumed types of modern loneliness intrigued us right from the start. Statistically speaking, social sciences can easily pretend that intentional isolation (beautifully called "solitude" and always understood as a religious or artistic "caprice") does not even exist. However our Swedish interlocutors did speak about the need of being "left in peace" and labeled themselves as "lonely wolf", "lonely as a monk", and "reflexive", willing to take long solitary nocturne walks on the shoreline or simply insisting on the miraculously benefic nature of the aloneness on the mind and the soul.

Nurtured by a long tradition[53] the monastic ideal remained somewhat intact in the Eastern Europe and from the Saint Simon The New Theologian all the way up to Saint *Silouan the Athonit*, the "isihasm" was the subtle means of propulsion of Orthodox tradition, its most intimate, most profound, and most responsible discourse.[54] The chief importance of the prayer of the heart[55] it is just one of the key-criteria meant to preserve and restore a certain Orthodox sensitivity that would exclude the disdain of the need for being alone, when spiritually grounded. However our Swedish interlocutors were not at all familiar with Orthodoxy, while our Romanian Orthodox interlocutors did not seem too keen to the idea of solitude, regardless of its nature and origin. Therefore, apart from a vaguely spiritual connotation of the alliance between "some kind of believer" (as one of our Swedish interlocutors put it) and the silent night, the spiritual privilege of isolation is more than modest and, when present, its main stake resides in condemning the daily noise of the modern world.

Our intermittent readings concerning theological thinking of late modernity do not allow us to say to what extent the contemporary spiritual attitudes still hold traces of the ascetic value of solitude. One may nevertheless suppose that exercising a non-ego-centered isolation could be a valuable exercise for dying well. Andrei Plesu wrote about the formative experience of the wilderness[56]; he who is alone is he without anyone "of a kind", which is another way of acknowledging the solitary moments

as being about one inherently facing one's own death.[57] Isolation – be it wanted or unwanted – has to do with nullifying the (social) convention between *this* particular human being and all the rest (of human beings). We may safely say that isolation *fatally* precedes and *pathetically* calls death: if something can anticipate death, meet it halfway and prepare it, then it is loneliness. If Robinson would have died, he would have died well.

VIII.2 The thousand-faced individualism and the "free-style dying"

Never mind the monks; the late modern individual is constantly seduced by "dynamic" and "surprising" spiritual movements. Danièle Hervieu-Léger believes that a seduction as such is part of the preoccupation for the self and for the "authentic",[58] first-hand experiences in general. With typical subtlety, Hervieu-Léger[59] approaches religious individualism in the context of late modern individualism *and not the other way around*.

For a start, it is important to understand individualism manifested in the late modern religious beliefs and practices as being opposed to those beliefs and practices having been prescribed in the traditional society: religion of interiority as opposed to religion of dogmatic contingencies, spiritual initiative as opposed to prescribed rules of the Church. The new religious movements ask for a flexible approach of the religious "truths", meeting each and every one's need for highly personalized (and ego-centered) spiritual adventure. Such adventures are obviously less intended to improve the relationship with Providence or with a similar other, but as a side-kick for individual performance, a vital requirement for the social perfectionism of the Self.

We had a couple of Swedish interviewees invoking yoga techniques when asked to talk about "self-improvement". In general, a laborious religious traditional discourse has been almost entirely replaced with improvised spiritual discourses displaying logical contradictions and even theoretical enormities. Logics and "the letter" are not the priorities of today's spiritual men and women. It often looks like the supreme goal of the individual is self-perfection facilitated, among others, by bodily and psycho-practices[60] chaotically borrowed from different spiritual traditions of the world, and often ignoring or repressing the "teachings" of a certain familiar religious context which should improve the feeling of belonging. It is often more than what Davie implied by "believing without belonging",[61] it is "*insisting* on believing without belonging" which would of course sooner or later influence the "dying role" one will make one's option for.

Setting up and "polishing" a highly modern subjectivity – the more autonomous and disciplined, the more competitive and self-competitive – surprisingly leads to what Hervieu-Léger calls „la plus haute conscience possible du soi":[62] *the mystic experience, the experience of being one with The One*. And so we are brought back to the monks.

If hastily analyzed, the "high standards" of the loneliness of the mystic would entitle us to talk about a solitude of excellence, about a safe path to a fully individualized religion that could be after all noticed on a large scale in late modernity; and, consequently about the "safest" way to meet one's death. But the problem at stake is *not* the progressive individualization of religion in general, but the ways in which such individualization is *articulated* by and *confronts* our times. It is precisely this articulation that Hervieu-Leger calls into question. Indeed, late modernity pays a lot of respect to *"superior" states of being in the world*, but it is the religious individualism to be absorbed into modern individualism, and *not* the other way around. Finally, we could proudly label ourselves a "mystical society" but simply because we have the awareness of our Selves as being the ultimate reality;[63] and death of the ultimate Self is, by default, excluded.

IX. Swedish systemic contradictions

Individual performance is meaningless outside competitive milieus. The need for delimiting one's self from other individualities which are also looking for new, efficient truths for marking and refining their own uniqueness requires some kind of strategy. Hervieu-Leger suggests we should go back in time and consider the traditional religious individualism of ethic type.

Even though researchers have not yet agreed on the manners in which connections between people are reflected in social structures and the other way around,[64] we can at least safely rely on Weber's explanations about the importance of intra-mundane Protestant ethic in encouraging individual performance.[65] The biggest danger encountered by the Puritan believer who cares about spiritual growth is the danger of relaxation. Before converting time into money, time is supposed to be converted into a *working routine*: the more socialization, the more occasions for surrendering to sin.

During the last three centuries, *homo economicus* has not been decisively reformulated (nor was he ready for initiating a substantial change

in perceiving welfare), even though the temptation of losing control over one's time has ceased to be seen through a religious lens. The Western world still carefully manages its daily minutes taking punctual and rapid decisions leading to immediate positive outcomes, while the spare time *(loisir)* is almost exclusively intended for diverting the attention from time matters. Swedish media for instance associate distraction with flirt, infidelity, clubbing and alcohol abuse. Scandinavian life frenetically slides between effervescence and lethargy.

In his book about Swedish[66] mentality Åke Daun comments typically Swedish ways of "letting loose" and underlines the strong contrast between the austerity of the work-periods and the lack of (moral, social, affective) scruple of the Swede in vacation. There is a typically Swedish inability of socially valuing one's inner availabilities, of perceiving one's self as a coherent unit. He or she usually fails to behave and feel himself or herself *simultaneously* citizen and human being. Many of the Swedes we have met live with the secret conviction that they cannot be incriminated for their "vacation behavior", and even less for their drinking behavior. Such difficulty in accepting themselves as they are must have something to do with the inherent contradictions implied by a fully repressed protestant background still manifesting itself under disguise, even in the absence of religious motivations. Protestantism in Sweden is an "operating system" assuring the invisible platform for various – still in use – "software applications" like the acquisition of tangible goods, the chronic lack of time, and irresistible attraction and fear[67] toward *loisir* and togetherness; the same "operating system" provides with a subtle blend of humility and practicality.

Going back to Hervieu-Leger's observation about the modern conception of the world that favors Protestant ethics on one hand and mystical approach on the other hand, we would have to underline that, unlike Lutheran, Calvinist or mystical individualism, the late modernity bets on the *the autonomy of the mundane realities*.[68] The feeling of being *dependent* is a strong feeling within the Protestant world and it is admirably exemplified by perennial Swedish socio-political realities: the citizen's dependence of the State, the painful problem of the "tithe", the strong awareness of public responsibility of each individual, etc. On the other hand, Sweden has an infinite number of regulated freedoms and "good laws" from which the Swede is allowed to pick, becoming the only human being free *exclusively* in his or her own way.

And here we can find a Swedish "systemic contradiction" between late modern requirements (valuing autonomy) and those instilled and repressed rules of the Protestant operating system (valuing dependence). Such systemic contradiction could only lead to an inherent state of conflict of the autonomies and, in the long run, to inherently fragile biographical solutions. The fact that the problem of death slides between public and private, means that it mirrors *simultaneously* the conflict of autonomies, systemic contradictions, and biographical (dis)solutions. As expected, the obtained image is extremely nebulous.

X. "Am I my father's keeper?"

The conflict of autonomies implies competition, and consequently the look for success to the detriment of all else. Such need for social fulfillment and self-improvement has become one of the highest anxiogenic individual duties; and – paradoxically? – one of the most valuable sources of "existential welfare". The Ph.D. thesis of the existential psychotherapist Rollo May[69] was built around the problem of anxiety, as perceived in the '70s. May thinks that modern man's daily mental pressure comes from an exaggerate need for social prestige.[70]

The man of success is a man of solitude, walking lonely on "mined ground". "Enemies", "rivals" and "vassals" are to be found everywhere in his way, as we have learned not only from May, but also from Hollywood movies. And there is one more consequence of social success to be acknowledged: success is not only the *notorious face of solitude, but also the favorite reverse of death* (if taken *ad litteram*, Michael Jackson's recent passing away is a unfortunate example).

The social theories of the body[71] obviously identify the body as the main source of social identity:[72] biologically deceased still have an influential social presence in the lives of the others[73] and this presence is more meaningful than that of the "vegetables" lying unconsciously in hospital beds. The old body is a never ending source of "negative self-identity"[74] and once the social expression and expressivity are inhibited by the physical boundaries of old, the middle-aged modern is – already – exposed to a series of "pre-mortal states".[75] *Such social death, often slow and perceived as terrible, is a process of (self-)marginalization which shakes the very ground he or she stands on.* When the famous man or woman is constrained by biological shortcomings to limit his or her public

appearances, a mass-mediated moment of failure is perceived as being more painful than biological death. In fact, physical death is the only one able *to restore* the glory he or she lost when the social death occurred.

One may safely say that such difficult process of *social* death is part of the *existential* protocol of any modern aged person, and it has more to do with being lonely than with being nearly dead. Peter Jupp cynically notes that the detaching of the young from the old comes as a consequence of their economic independency, as well as because of the physical death occurring long after the social death took place. Therefore, from the point of view of the young, the process of social death of the old becomes the opportunity to learn how to emotionally, socially and financially manage without the future dead.[76]

XI. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The lack of spontaneous compassion (as opposed to what Seale called the management of love) as well as of the fear of not violating the private space of the other has reached worrying proportions[77] in Sweden. There is a fear of not being labeled "intrusive" or "indiscrete" that led to what Daun calls "a culture of withdrawal",[78] but we will even call it a new paradoxical ethic denying the responsibility for the other while taking the fight for a responsible community to extremes. The Swede does his or her best not to diminish the autonomy of others. The Samaritan is the aggressor. The spontaneous charity shocks. The good-will deeds are done "with papers", and the charity man officially stands for his charity deeds. The love for another (self-enclosed one) has become a sort of "esoteric luxury" that many Swedish people systematically reject.

Using Richard Lynn's terms,[79] Daun writes about "low (emotional) reactivity" and "lack of compassion",[80] severe shyness and fear of conflict[81] that have been systematically encouraged by a social culture which is rhetorically based on the extreme autonomy of the individual, but actually regulated by neurotically authoritarian and oversimplified mechanisms of social control.

XII. Swedish biographical solutions?

"Gråt behöver inte vara privat" ("The crying does not necessarily have to be private") is the title that researcher Anna Bremborg gave to her newspaper article[82] on the decision of a national television channel (SVT) of directly broadcasting the burial of a little girl sexually molested and killed by a seemingly harmless, timid, simple man in his 30s whose case was excessively mass-mediated during the spring of 2008. How come that a good neighbor, uncle and brother in law could kill innocent children? As it is often the case, specific answers cannot be produced at the level of public debate. The public Swedish culture is often perceived as pragmatic culture, profoundly incurious about under-documentable matters, but constantly preoccupied by immediate repercussions of social facts. The social and cultural debates are exclusively born *in situ* and *in concretu*, they have practical appearances and practical goals, as for predictions and extrapolations, they are rare, wisely regulated and, whenever possible, underestimated.

By contrast, the ever growing Swedish "private culture" has never been more exposed via social media, and it pays considerable tribute to loneliness and melancholic monotony. We have commented a couple of case studies in our recent Ph.D. thesis and, as far as we are aware of, the empirically confirmed truth is that the common Swede lives and blogs in the tension between his or her obsession for ultimate questions and a regrettable poorness of restorative answers. The lonely Swede seems to actively refuse reflexivity. For most Swedish people, life is a synonym for summer, and summer is the supreme call to non-reflexivity (concretized in fishing and beer), and a state of supreme consolation for a long winter's journey that we dare call metaphorically a somnambulist walking in the cold shadow of death, always half a step behind one's self.

There are wide shifts between public Swedish lifestyle (always responsibly assumed, but lacking vigor), and the intimate Swedish lifestyle (hardly assumed, but tragically and vigorously underlined by open-ended personal accounts) displaying a lack of "existential strategy". The Swedish biographical solutions for death are often complex and highly personal because they are articulated and preceded by strong and merely positive attitudes toward loneliness; but just as often they are inhibited by the self-abandon in the merging of one's inner need to react to severe matters (like life and death) with the strictly-guarded individual social duty to keep such matters at distance.

Replacing a conclusion

Obviously, the reactions to death of a certain society, culture or person are too complex for being properly indexed. Indeed, our interviewees often use fashionable scripts for life and death instead of "workable" biographical solutions, but this should not be seen as a flaw of the study, but rather as a symptomatic relevance of the need for largely accepted prescriptions of (good) dying. The enormous corpus of information provided by social sciences is infinitely updatable, yet inert by its *intentional* lack of normative potential; it fails to provide a meaning, to open perspectives, to save, sedate, educate, integrate, evaluate or restore human lives, but however manages to solve a social problem and, if correctly analyzed, to re-confirm the known truth about late modernity's low tolerance for death matters.

We are generously offered a large amount of data on death coming from academic milieus and mass media, and we are told that this is the discourse of death from which we, the late moderns, should claim ourselves. Eventually, both the theoretical and the newsworthy "package" of death prove to be perfectly dispensable. The biologic "solution" to a systemic contradiction as such is radical, and comes like a thief at night.

NOTES

1 FULTON, R. (ed.), *Death and Identity*, John Wiley & Sons, New York/ London/ Sidney, 1965, p. 5.

2 CLARK, D. (ed.), *The Sociology of Death*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1993, especially MELLOR, P., "Death in High Modernity: the Contemporary presence and absence of death", but also FINCH, J., WALLIS, L., "Death, Inheritance and the Life Course", pp. 50-68, in the same collective volume *The Sociology of Death*, and DÉCHAUX, J. – H., "La mort dans les sociétés modernes: la these de Norbert Elias à l'épreuve", pp. 161-183, in *L'année sociologique – Études* vol. 51, no. 1, 2001, p. 161; and finally, BURT, R. A., *Death is That Man Taking Names: Intersections of American Medicine, Law, and Culture*, University of California Press, L.A., Berkley, London, N. Y., 2002, stressing the "ratification of the cultural "denial of death" , p. 45.

3 FULTON R., GEIS G., "Death and Social Values", p. 73, in FULTON R. (ed.), *op. cit.*

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5 *Begravningen – ett brev från Svenska kyrkans biskopar*, Svenska Kyrkan, Uppsala, 2007, p. 28. Please see also the work on funeral houses written by BREMBORG, A., *Yrke : begravningsentreprenör. Om utanförskap, döda kroppar, riter och professionalisering*, Lunds Universitet Tryckeri, Lund, 2002, esp. pp. 115-117.

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8 BAUMAN, Z., *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1992, p. 167.

9 See also BURT, *the quoted work*, pp. 2, 45, 46.

10 TOPLEAN, A, *Pragul si neantul* (PhD thesis) Universitatea din București, București, 2009, pp. 140-156.

11 ELIAS, N., *La solitude des mourants*, Christian Bourgois, Paris, 1998.

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13 SEALE, C., "Dying Alone", pp. 376-392, in *Sociology of Health and Illness*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1995.

14 Ibid., p. 377. The same idea is thoroughly treated in SEALE, C., *Constructing Death. The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.

15 See PARKER, C. M., PARKER, J., ""Hospice" versus "Hospital" care: reevaluation after ten years as seen by surviving spouses", in ***Postgraduate Medical Journal***, no. 60, 1984. "Hospice" wins against "Hospital" when it comes to psycho-social care. See also SEALE, C., *Constructing Death*, esp. pp. 117, 118.

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17 SEALE, C., *Constructing Death. The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 177 (the account of a patient, quoted by Seale.)

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19 KÜBLER-ROSS, E., *On Death and Dying*, Scribner, New York, 1969, reed. 1997, p. 259.

20 FULTON, R., "Attitudes and Responses toward Death", p. 81, *the quoted work*.

21 SEALE, C., *Constructing Death*, p. 53.

22 We used the adjective "classic" because it was launched by Ariès in connection with the traditional death, always assisted by relatives, neighbors, friends etc. Also VOVELLE, M., *La mort en Occident de 1300 à nos jours*, Gallimard, Paris, 1983, and THOMAS, L. – V., *L'anthropologie de la mort*, Payot, Paris, 1975, THOMAS, L. – V., *Les rites de mort. Pour la paix des vivants,* Fayard, Paris, 1985.

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26 SEALE, C., *Constructing Death*, pp. 209, 210.

27 ÅHRÉN SNICKARE, E., *Döden, kroppen och moderniteten*, Carlsson Bokförlag, Stockholm, 2002, esp. pp. 34, 35.

28 This is how Michel Vovelle calls the way death is handled in a certain culture.

29 SEALE, C., *Constructing Death*, pp. 200, 201.

30 Ariès was among the first scholars to note *the great inertia* of the meanings and representations of death . See the quoted works, *Omul în fața morții*, p. 66.

31 BAUMAN, *Mortality…*, p. 8.

32 MELLOR, *the quoted work*, p. 12.

33 ÅHRÉN SNICKARE, E., *the quoted work*, pp. 34, 35.

34 BAUMAN, *Mortality...*, p. 8.

35 *Ibid.*

36 BAUMAN, Z., *Liquid Times. Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. 81.

37 BAUMAN, *Mortality…*, p. 16.

38 We have no choice but leaving aside the discussion concerning "death revival" in the late modern public space because it would require significant space and detailed information. It is in the logic of the present study to present the wider context of death studies without mentioning the recent tendencies of death awareness.

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51 Lynch describes the outcome of an extremely relevant survey among the Irish people living in Boston and respectively Ireland. *Ibid.*, pp. 34, 35.

52 This is how the Swedish publishing house Optimal presents the Swedish translation of Florence Falk's bestseller *On My Own* (*Kvinna, Ensam och Stark,* Optimal Förlag, 2007, tr. by Lena Källberg): „46 percent of the Swedes, that is, 2.3 million of people live alone. It is the highest percentage in Europe. (...) *Kvinna, ensam och stark* is a book for those women living on their own because they wanted to, or in spite of their will. To live alone is often shameful in our society. But living alone is not the sign of unfortune, on the contrary, being independent and free brings up innumerable opportunities for leading a autonomous, rich life. (...) "

53 We recommend ICA, I. I. jr. study, „Biserică, societate, gândire în Răsărit, Occident și în Europa de azi" in ICA, I. I. jr , MARANI, G. (ed.), *Gândirea socială a Bisericii*, Deisis, Sibiu, 2002.

54 See for a proper introduction the 2nd volume of DAVY, M. – M., *Enciclopedia doctrinelor mistice*, Amarcord, Timișoara, 1998.

55 See *ibid*, pp. 35, 39, 40. 41 for a concise description of prayer techniques.

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58 HERVIEU-LÉGER, D., *Le pèlerin et le converti. La religion en mouvement*, Flammarion, Paris, 1999, p. 177.

59 HERVIEU-LÉGER, *the quoted work*, pp. 158, 159.

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61 DAVIE, G., *Religion in Modern Europe*. A Memory Mutates, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 5, 6 and DAVIE, G., *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing Without Belonging (Making Contemporary Britain)*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, repr. 1995, pp. 2, 3.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 162.

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65 WEBER, M., *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and other Writings*, Penguin Books, New York, 2002.

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74 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

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76 JUPP, P., "Cremation or Burial? Contemporary Choice in City and Village" in CLARK (ed.), *the quoted work*, esp. pp. 192 and the following. See also le BRAS, H., "Les politiques de l'âge" , pp. 25-47, in *L'Homme.Revue française d'anthropologie: Passages à l'âge d'homme,* no. 167-168 juillet-décembre, 2003, esp. pp. 42-47.

77 DAUN, *the quoted work*, pp. 81, 82.

78 See *ibid.,* pp. 80-100.

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80 DAUN, Å., *the quoted work*, esp. p. 122.

81 Ibid, esp. pp. 68-71, 117-130.

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