

Tourists and vagabonds: heroes and victims of postmodernity

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Tourists and Vagabonds
Heroes and Victims of Postmodernity

Zygmunt Bauman

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Abstract

The opposition between the tourists and the vagabonds is the major, principal division of the postmodern society. We are all plotted on a continuum stretched between the poles of the “perfect tourist” and the “vagabond beyond remedy” – and our respective places between the poles are plotted according to the degree of freedom we possess in choosing our life itineraries. Freedom of choice is in the postmodern society by far the most seminal among the stratifying factors. The more freedom of choice one has, the higher is his or her rank in the postmodern social hierarchy.

Keywords

Postmodernity, Identity, Space, Mobility, Freedom

Bemerkungen

Professor Bauman presented an earlier version of "Tourists and Vagabonds" on 6 February 1996 at the Institute for Advanced Studies. A final version will be published in the forthcoming book "Postmodernity and Its Discontents" (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).

In Leeds, once a pioneering site of English industrial revolution, one of the most grandiose, indeed regal buildings is the Town Hall – opened ceremoniously by Queen Victoria in 1854. The building, meant to symbolise power and virtue of the up-and-coming industrial middle class, getting richer and more confident by the day, is a remarkable building: it rolls into one all the glorious traditions of the past which the designers of the building wished to blend together into a still more glorious future. It reminds you simultaneously of a Greek temple and Christian shrine, mediaeval castle and a most opulent nobleman palace. Almost the whole interior of the building is occupied by a huge Assembly Hall, in which – so the planners hoped – the *Bürgertum* of the rising city would congregate to discuss the matter of common interest. High above their heads, engraved in golden letters against the purple background, the gathered would find the principles by which they should guide their lives – principles combining into the code what they considered to be the public and private decency. Among the well known rules of what came to be called over the years as “bourgeois morality”, like “Honesty is the best policy”, “Labour omnia vincit”, “Auspicious melioris aevi”, there is one striking with its brevity and decisiveness: “Forward”. This one word served as a kind of a common denominator to all the rest. It signalled both planks on which life wisdom and life strategy rested: first, the recognition that one could not, would be allowed to, rest still. The second – that once on the move, one would and should know very well where one was going. One knew the directions; one knew, which move was forward, which was backward.

“It is the different in amount between the pleasure of satisfaction which is *demande*d and that which is actually *achieve*d that provides the driving factor which will permit of no halting at any position attained, but, in the poet’s words ‘Presses ever forward unsubdued’ (Faust)” – observed Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel offers an extended commentary on that seminal observation, tracing the beginning of self-development, identity-building etc. to the primary condition of delayed gratification, of the never-to-be-bridged distance between the ego-ideal and the realities of the present. ‘Distance’ translates as ‘delay’... Passage through space is a function of time, distances are measured by the time needed to cancel them. ‘Here’ is the waiting, ‘there’ is the gratification. How far is it from here to there, from the waiting to gratification, from the void to meaning, from the project to identity? Ten years, twenty? As long as it takes to live one’s vocation through? Time one can use to measure distances must be of the sort the rulers are – straight, in one piece, with equidistant markings, made of tough and solid material. And such was, indeed, the time of modern living-towards-projects. Like life itself, it was directional, continuous, and un-bendable. It ‘marched on’ and ‘passed by’. Both life and time were made to the measure of pilgrimage.

For the pilgrim, for the modern man, this meant in practical terms that he could-should-had-to select his point of arrival fairly early in life with confidence, certain that the straight line of life-time ahead will not bend, twist or warp, come to a halt or turn backwards. Delay of gratification, much as the momentary frustration it begot, was an energising factor and the source of identity-building zeal in as far as it was coupled with the trust in the linearity and

cummulativeness of time. The foremost strategy of life as pilgrimage, of life as identity-building, was 'saving for the future', but saving for the future made sense as strategy only in as far as one could be sure that the future will reward the savings with interest and the bonus once accrued will not be withdrawn, that the savings will not be devalued before the bonus-distribution date or declared invalid currency; that what is seen today as capital will be seen the same way tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. Pilgrims had a stake in solidity of the world they walked; in a kind of world in which one can tell life as a continuous story, a 'sense-making' story, such story as makes each event the effect of the event before and the cause of the event after, each age a station on the road pointing towards fulfilment. The world of pilgrims – of identity-builders – must be orderly, determined, predictable, insured; but above all, it must be a kind of world in which footprints are engraved for good, so that the trace and the record of past travels are kept and preserved. A world in which travelling may be indeed a pilgrimage. A world hospitable to the pilgrims.

And so the modern men and women lived in a time-space with structure; a solid, tough, durable time-space – just the right benchmark against which to plot and monitor the capriciousness and volatility of human will – but also a hard container in which human actions could feel sensible and secure. In that structured world one could be lost, but one could also find his or her way and arrive exactly where one aimed to be. The difference between getting lost and arriving was made of knowledge and determination: the knowledge of the time-space structure and the determination to follow, be what may, the chosen itinerary. Under those circumstances, freedom was indeed the known necessity – plus the resolve to act on that knowledge.

The structure was in its place before any human deed began, and lasted long enough, unshaken and unchanged, to see the deed through. It preceded all human accomplishment, but it also made the accomplishment possible: it transformed one's life struggle from an aimless tussle into a consistent accomplishment. One could add one achievement to another, follow the road step by step, each step leading, thanks to the road, to another; one could built one's accomplishment from the bottom up, from the foundations to the roof. That was the world of life-long pilgrimage, of vocation, or – as the Owl of Minerva was to pronounce later on through Jean-Paul Sartre's lips of the 'life project'. David Copperfield and Buddenbrooks alike were wrestling with indomitable standards, commanding yet slippery, obligatory yet well-nigh impossible to reach. And so they knew from the start where to seek success and knew right away if they failed. Our life struggles dissolve, on the contrary, in that *unbearable lightness of being*. We never know for sure when to laugh and when to cry. And there is hardly a moment in life to say without dark premonitions: "I have arrived".

The world is not hospitable to the pilgrims any more. The pilgrims lost their battle by winning it. They strove to make the world solid by making it pliable, so that identity could be built at *will*, but built systematically, floor by floor and brick by brick. They proceeded by turning the space

in which identity was to be built in a desert. They found out that the desert, though comfortingly featureless for those who seek to make their mark, does not hold features well. The easier it is to emboss a footprint, the easier it is to efface it. A gust of wind will do. And deserts are windy places.

It soon transpired that the real problem is not how to build identity, but how to preserve it; whatever you may build in the sand, is unlikely to be a castle. In a desert-like world it takes no great effort to blaze a trail – the difficulty is how to recognise it as a trail after a while. How to distinguish a forward march from going in circles, from eternal return? It turns virtually impossible to patch the trodden stretches of sand into an itinerary – let alone into a plan for a life-long journey.

In the life-game of the postmodern consumers the rules of the game keep changing in the course of playing. The sensible strategy is therefore to keep each game short – so that sensibly played game of life calls for the splitting of one big all-embracing game with huge stakes into a series of brief and narrow games with small ones. ‘Determination to live one day at a time’, ‘depicting daily life as a succession of minor emergencies’ become the guiding principles of all rational conduct.

Once dissembled and no more a vector, time no more structures the space. On the ground, there is no more ‘forward’ and ‘backward’; it is just the ability not to stand still that counts. Fitness – the capacity to move swiftly where the action is and be ready to take in experiences as they come – takes precedence over *health*, that idea of the standard of normalcy and of keeping that standard stable and unscathed. All delay, also ‘delay of gratification’, loses its meaning: there is no arrow-like time left to measure it. What possible purpose the strategy of pilgrim-style ‘progress’ could serve in this world of ours? In this world, not only jobs-for life have disappeared, but trades and professions which have acquired the confusing habit of appearing from nowhere and vanishing without notice can hardly be lived as Weberian ‘vocations’ – and to rub salt into the wound, the demand for the skills needed to practice such professions seldom lasts as long as the time needed to acquire them. Jobs are no more protected, and most certainly no better than the stability of places where they are practised; whenever the word ‘rationalization’ is pronounced, one knows for sure that the disappearance of further jobs and places is in the pipeline. The stability and trustworthiness of the network of human relations fares not much better. Ours is the age of Anthony Giddens’ “pure relationship” which “is entered for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person” and so “it can be terminated, more or less at will, by either partner at any particular point”; of “confluent love” which “jars with the ‘forever’ ‘one-and-only’ qualities of the romantic love complex” so that “romance can no longer be equated with permanence”; of “plastic sexuality”, that is sexual enjoyment “severed from its age-old integration with reproduction, kinship and the generations“. One can hardly ‘hook on’ an identity to relationships which themselves are irreparably ‘unhooked’; and one is solemnly advised not to try – as the strong commitment, the deep attachment (let alone loyalty – that

tribute to the by now obsolete idea that attachment has consequences that bind, while commitment means obligations) may wound and scar when the time to detach the self from the partner arrives, as it almost certainly will. The game of life is fast and leaves no time to pause and think and draw elaborate designs. But again, adding impotence to bafflement, the rules of the game keep changing long before the game is finished. In this “cosmic casino“ of ours (as George Steiner put it), values to be cherished and actively pursued, rewards to be fought for and stratagems to be deployed to get them, are all calculated “for maximal impact and instant obsolescence”. For maximal impact, since in the world over-saturated with information attention turns into the scarciests of resources and only a shocking message, and one more shocking than the last, stands a chance of catching it (until the next shock); and *instant obsolescence*, as the site of attention needs to be cleared as soon as it is filled, to make room for new message knocking at the gate.

The overall result is the *fragmentation* of time into episodes, each one cut from its past and from its future, each one self-enclosed and self-contained. Time is no more a river, but a collection of ponds and pools.

No consistent and cohesive life strategy emerges from the experience which can be gathered in such a world – none remotely reminiscent of the sense of purpose and the rugged determination of the pilgrimage. Nothing emerges from that experience but certain, mostly negative, rules of the thumb: do not plan your trips too long – the shorter the trip, the greater the chance of completing it; do not get emotionally attached to people you meet at the stop-over – the less you care about them, the less it will cost you to move on; do not commit yourself too strongly to people, places, causes – you cannot know how long they will last or how long you will count them worthy of your commitment; do not think of your current resources as of capital – savings lose value fast, and the once vaunted ‘cultural capital’ tends to turn in no time into cultural liability. Above all, do not delay gratification, if you can help it. Whatever you are after, try to get it now; you cannot know whether the gratification you seek today will be still gratifying tomorrow.

What we know today we do not have is, in other words, the facility to set apart the structure of the world from the action of the humans; the rock-steady solidity of the world out there from the pliability of human will. Not that the world has suddenly turned submissive and obedient to human desire; like before, it all too often makes light of human intention and effort and easily twists and bends the effects of human labours. But this world out there more and more reminds one of another player in the game, rather than of the indomitable rule-setter and a no-appeal-allowing umpire; and as a player in a game in which the rules are made and remade in the course of playing. The experience of living in such a world (or is it, rather, the experience of living that world?) is the experience of a player, and in the experience of the player there is no way of telling necessity from accident, determination from contingency: there are but moves of the players, the art of playing one’s hand well and the skill of making the most of one’s cards.

Human action has not become less frail and erratic; it is the world in which it tries to inscribe itself and orient itself by, that seems to have become more so. How can one live one's life as pilgrimage if the shrines and sanctuaries are moved around, profaned, made sacrosanct and then un-holy again in a stretch of time much shorter than the journey to reach them would take? How can one invest into a life-long achievement, if today values are bound to be devalued and inflated tomorrow? How can one groom oneself for the life's vocation, if skills laboriously acquired turn into liabilities the day after they became assets? When professions and jobs disappear without notice and yesterday specialisms are today blinkers? And how can one mark and fence one's place in the world, if all acquired rights are but until-further-notice, when the withdrawal-at-will clause is written into every contract of partnership, when all relationship is but a 'pure' relationship, that is a relationship without strings attached and with no obligations earned, and all love is but 'confluent' love, lasting no longer than the satisfaction derived?

The meaning of identity, as the late Christopher Lasch pointed out, refers both to persons and to things. Both have lost their solidity in modern society, their definiteness and continuity. The world construed of durable objects has been replaced with disposable products designed for immediate obsolescence. In such a world, identities can be adopted and discarded like a change of costume. The horror of the new situation is that all diligent work of construction may prove to be in vain; the allurements of the new situation, on the other hand, lies in the fact of not being bound by past trials, of never being irrevocably defeated, always 'keeping the options open'. But the horror and the allurements alike make life-as-pilgrimage hardly feasible as a strategy and unlikely to be chosen as one. Not by many, anyway. And not with a great chance of success.

And so the snag is no more how to discover, invent, construct, assemble (even buy) an identity, but how to prevent it from being too tight – and from sticking too fast to the body. Well sewn and durable identity is no more an asset; increasingly and ever more evidently, it becomes a liability. *The hub of postmodern life strategy is not making identity stand – but avoidance of being fixed.*

The figure of the tourist is the epitome of such avoidance. Indeed, the tourists worthy their salt are the masters supreme of the art of melting the solids and unfixing the fixed. First and foremost, they perform the feat of not belonging to the place they might be visiting; theirs is the miracle of being in and out of place at the same time. The tourists keep distance, and bar the distance from shrinking into proximity. It is as if each of them was enclosed in a bubble with tightly controlled osmosis; only such things as the occupant of the bubble admits may leak in, only such things as he or she allows to go, may seep out. Inside the bubble the tourist may feel safe; whatever the pulling power of the outside, however sticky or voracious the world outside may be, the tourist is protected. Travelling lightly, with just a few belongings necessary to insure against inclemency of alien places, the tourists may set on the road again at a moment's notice, as soon as things threaten to get out of control, or as their potential of

amusement seems to have been exhausted, or as still more exciting adventures beckon from afar. Mobility is the name of the game: one must be able to move when the needs push or the dreams call. This ability the tourists call freedom, autonomy or independence, and they cherish it more than anything else, since it is the *conditio sine qua non* of everything else that their hearts desire. This is also the meaning of their most often heard demand: "I need more space". That is: no one be allowed to question my right to go out of the space I am presently locked in.

In the tourist life, the length of stay in any place is hardly ever planned in advance; neither is the next destination. The point of tourist life is to be on the move, not to arrive; unlike in the case of their predecessors, the pilgrims, the tourists' successive stopovers are not stations on the road, since there is no goal beckoning at the end of life travels which could make them into stations. If the successive addresses add up into an itinerary, it happens only retrospectively, when a logic is discovered or imputed which did not guide the wanderer at the time of his wandering. When still on the move, no image of the future state is at hand to fill the present experience with meaning; each successive present, like the works of contemporary art, must explain itself in its own terms and provide its own key to read out its sense.

The stopovers are campings, not domiciles; however long each respite in the travel may prove in the end, it is lived at each moment as an overnight stay. Only the shallowest of roots, if any, are struck. Only skin-deep relations, if any, are entered with the locals. Above all, there is no mortgaging of the future, no incurring of long-term obligations, no allowing something that happens today to bind the tomorrow. The locals are not, after all, the keepers of half-way inns, which pilgrims had to visit again and again on each pilgrimage; the locals the tourists come across are literally 'bumped at' incidentally, as a side-effect of yesterday impulse, which the day before yesterday was not yet imagined nor anticipated and which could easily be different from what it was and bring the tourist to some other place. Their company has been born of one impulse and will die with the next. True – that company is the consequence of the move, but it is an unanticipated consequence; it was not part of the bargain, and it has no claim on the wanderer's loyalty.

All this offers the tourist the gratifying feeling of 'being in control'. This is not, to be sure, control in the now old-fashioned and outdated, heroic sense of engraving one's shape on the world, remaking the world in one's own image or liking, and keeping it like that. This is but what can be called the 'situational control' – ability to choose where and with what parts of the world to 'interface' and when to switch off the connection. Switching in and off does not leave on the world any lasting imprint; as a matter of fact, thanks to the facility with which the switches are operated, the world (as the tourist knows it) seems infinitely pliable, soft and friable; it is unlikely to hold any shape for long. Sightings replace shapes: it is now the tourist's wandering interests, his shifting attention and the mobile angle of view that gives the world its 'structure' – as fluid and as 'until further notice' as the gaze that brought it to be. Shaping the world in this way is effortless, but it is also, for the world at least, inconsequential.

An event which in principle has no consequences outlasting its own duration is called an episode; like the tourists themselves, the episode so says Milan Kundera – breaks into the story without being part of it. The episode is a self-enclosed event. Each new episode is, so to speak, an absolute beginning, but equally absolute is its ending: “not to be continued” is the last sentence of the story (even if, to make the plight of the unwary yet more bitter, it is written in invisible ink). The problem is, though – as Kundera hastens to add – that the decision about the finality of the ending is itself never final. One would never know whether the episode is truly over and done with. All the effort to prevent it notwithstanding, past events may return to haunt the future presents. The better-to-be-forgotten partners of past intercourse may turn up again, inside entirely different episodes, brandishing the sores left by the encounters of yore. Pruning the episodes, nipping in the bud the seedlings of future consequences, takes therefore a constant effort, and a constantly inconclusive effort with that. This is a nasty fly in the otherwise tasty ointment of a life lived at every moment as an episode; or perhaps this is a hole, through which the world out there breaks time and again into the tightly controlled space – thereby calling the bluff of the tourist’s control. This is why the tourist’s life is not all roses. There is a price to be paid for the pleasures it brings. The tourist’s way of doing away with uncertainties brings about the uncertainties of its own.

The tourists embark on their travels by choice – or so, at least, they think. They set off because they find home boring or not attractive enough, too familiar and holding too few surprises; or because they hope to find elsewhere more exciting adventure and deeper sensations than the homely routine is ever likely to deliver. The decision to leave the home behind in order to explore the foreign parts is all the easier to make for the comforting feeling that one can always return, if need be. The discomforts of hotel rooms may indeed make one homesick; and it is gratifying and consoling to remember that there is a home – somewhere – a retreat from the hurly-burly where one could shelter, where one could be unambiguously, unproblematically *chez soi* – draw the curtains, close the eyes and plug the ears to new sensations, shut the door to new adventures. Well, the point is that such a prospect stays gratifying and consoling as long as it remains a prospect. The ‘home’ as in ‘homesickness’ is none of the real buildings of brick and mortar, timber or stone. The moment the door is shut from the outside, home becomes a dream. The moment the door is shut from inside, it turns into *prison*. The tourist has acquired the taste for vaster and above all open, spaces.

The tourists become wanderers and put the dreams of homesickness above the realities of home – because they want to; because they consider it the most reasonable life-strategy ‘under the circumstances’, or because they have been seduced by the true or imaginary pleasures of a sensationsgatherer’s life. But not all wanderers are on the move because they prefer being on the move to staying put. Many would perhaps refuse to embark on a life of wandering were they asked, but they had not been asked in the first place. If they are on the move, it is because they have been pushed from behind – having been first uprooted by a force too powerful, and often too mysterious, to resist. They see their plight as anything but the

manifestation of freedom. Freedom, autonomy, independence – if they appear in their vocabulary at all – come invariably in the future tense. For them, to be free means *not to have to* wander around. To have a home and to be allowed to stay inside. These are the vagabonds; dark moons reflecting the shine of bright suns; the mutants of postmodern evolution, the unfit rejects of the brave new species. The vagabonds are the waste of the world which has dedicated itself to tourists services.

The tourists stay or move at their hearts desire. They abandon the site when the new untried opportunities beckon elsewhere. The vagabonds, however – know that they won't stay for long, however strongly they wished to, since nowhere they stop they are welcome: if the tourist move because they find the world irresistibly *attractive*, the vagabonds move because they find the world unbearably *inhospitable*. They take to the roads not once they squeezed the last drop of amusement which the locals could offer, but when the locals lose patience and refuse to put up with their alien presence. The tourists travel because they want to; the vagabonds – because they have *no other choice*. The vagabonds are, one may say, involuntary tourists; but the notion of 'involuntary tourist' is a contradiction in terms. However much the tourist strategy may be a necessity in a world marked by shifting walls and mobile roads, freedom of choice is the tourist's flesh and blood. Take it away, and the attraction, the poetry and, indeed, the liveability of the tourist's life are all but gone.

A word of warning: tourists and vagabonds are the *metaphors of contemporary life*. One can be (and often is) a tourist or a vagabond without ever travelling physically far – just as Max Weber's Puritans were pilgrims-through-life even if they hardly ever looked beyond the border of their hometown, and were too busy pursuing their vocations to ever take time off and visit the seaside. Having this in mind, I suggest that in our postmodern society, we are all – to one extent or another, in body or thought, here and now or in the anticipated future, willingly or unwillingly – on the move; none of us can be certain that he or she has gained the right to any place once for all and no one thinks that his or her staying in one place forever is a likely prospect; wherever we happen to stop, we are at least in part displaced or out of place. But here the commonality of our plight ends and the differences begin.

The opposition between the tourists and the vagabonds is the major, principal division of the postmodern society. We are all plotted on a continuum stretched between the poles of the 'perfect tourist' and the 'vagabond beyond remedy' – and our respective places between the poles are plotted according to the degree of freedom we possess in choosing our life itineraries. Freedom of choice, is in the postmodern society by far the most seminal among the stratifying factors. The more freedom of choice one has, the higher is his or her rank in the postmodern social hierarchy. Postmodern social differences are made of the width and narrowness of the range of realistic options.

But the vagabond is the tourist's *alter ego* – just as the destitute is the alter ego of the rich, the savage the alter ego of the civilised, or the stranger the alter ego of the native. Being an alter ego means to serve as a rubbish bin into which all ineffable premonitions, unspoken fears, secret self-deprecations and guilts too awesome to be thought of are dumped; to be alter ego means to serve as a public exposition of the innermost private, as an inner demon to be publicly exorcised, an effigy in which all that which cannot be suppressed may be burnt. Alter ego is the dark and sinister backcloth against which the purified ego may shine.

No wonder that the tourist half of the postmodern society is in double mind as far as the other, the vagabond, half is concerned. The vagabonds mock the tourist style, and mocking means ridicule. The vagabonds are the caricature which reveals the ugliness hidden underneath the beauty of make-up. Their presence is irksome and infuriating; there is no evident use they may be put to; for all one knows, they may be disposed of to no one's – not even their own – loss or regret.

But remember – the vagabonds are the rubbish bins for the tourist filth; dismantle the waste-disposal system – and the healthy ones of this world will suffocate and poison amidst their own refuse. More importantly yet, the vagabonds – remember that – are the dark background against which the sun of the tourist shines so brightly that the spots are hardly seen. The darker the background, the brighter the shine. The more repulsive and abhorring the lot of the vagabond, the more bearable are the minor discomforts and major risks of the tourist life. One can live with the ambiguities of uncertainty which saturate the tourist life only because the *certainties of vagabondage* are so unambiguously loathsome and repugnant. The tourist needs an alternative too dreadful to contemplate to keep repeating, at the hour of stress, that 'there is no alternative'.

The vagabonds, the victims of the world which made the tourists into its heroes, have their uses, after all; as the sociologists love to say – they are 'functional'. It is difficult to live in their neighbourhood, but it is unthinkable to live without them. It is their all too blatant hardships that reduce one's own worries to marginal inconveniences. It is their evident unhappiness that inspires the rest to thank God daily for having made them tourists.