



THE ULTRA-MODERN SOLITUDE

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What does the concept of loneliness and isolation represent in our individualistic society? If loneliness historically takes on a negative connotation, is it still relevant today, at a time where the human being is subject to a wide injunction: to succeed in life and be fulfilled as an individual?

While Internet critics continue to discover the new technologies as a source of neo-contemporary solitude, we need to ask ourselves the question of new networks and links weaved together through 2.0 tools. Of course, technology drives us to spend more time alone behind our screen, but it is undeniable that it redistributes the cards of socialization and helps to establish new connections between people, albeit virtual, but not unreal connections.

We initially tried to find out, in collaboration with our stakeholders, whether our individualistic societies have given birth to an ultra-modern solitude. Secondly, we analyzed the ways in which social bonds are reshaping digital society. Finally, we asked ourselves about the nature of new solidarities emerging through the web and social networks.

A DEFINITION OF SOLITUDE

There are many representations of loneliness throughout history, from Ancient Greece to our present day and definitions have evolved over the centuries. For a long time, loneliness was either very positive (that of a person of faith or a thinker) or very negative (being banned from a social group). Nonetheless, it was not a part of everyday life. We can establish the genesis of contemporary individualism during the era of industrialization. This new idea came to life with the division of labor and the end of the agricultural economy.

Today we are subjected to two contradictory injunctions: on the one hand, that of social ties driving us to have many social bonds with other individuals; on the other hand, the injunction to be autonomous. There is a true cultural tension between the most valued image (to be independent, to think for yourself, to handle things on your own) and more devalued (being alone, being single, having no friends) of our time. Moreover, standards of sociability vary based on demographics.

We need to distinguish chosen solitude and “forced” solitude: we can choose to be alone, but this choice is socially constructed, it is the fruit of contemporary individualism. We should also distinguish the feeling of solitude and loneliness as it is differently experienced from one individual to another.

In the media, loneliness is presented in a negative way: one thinks of isolation and poverty. In reality, there is a form of luxurious solitude for privileged social classes that « pamper themselves» and “reinvigorate” at a time when consumption is synonym of accomplishment.

Internet enhances the atomization of society, in creating an infinite number of micro-niches. Nowadays, we create new forms of loneliness even though we are not alone. It is ultra-urban. Similarly, the need of becoming popular has never been more present among teenagers and young adults.

However, we must not forget that the Internet has very real consequences. If at first, the virtual world was a world of avatars disconnected from our lives, since the emergence of Facebook, our virtual life is much closer to our real life. It is of better interest to keep our popularity on the Internet as close as possible to our popularity in real life, if not the virtual bubble will burst.

Social networks have created a popularity metric, which will perhaps surpass the money metric: the quest for popularity and fame consumes all other needs.

Cognitive psychology is trying to show that, like poverty, loneliness is a relative concept, which depends on what you see around you. Social networks encourage this idea of relativity since it continuously compares you to others.

HUMAN BONDS HAVE NOT DISAPPEARED, QUITE THE CONTRARY

The latest internet revolution is the 3.0: we do things in real life through social networks. Carpooling, couch-surfing, are all aimed at saving money, meeting people and sharing experiences. Paradoxically, fulfillment and self-realization, which are highly valued, do not necessarily promote social bonds.

Dating sites have evolved: before they were a way of meeting people online, today we register online to meet people in real life. « Adopte Un Mec » or « Tinder » have managed to give a cool image to dating websites, because, to be frequently on such sites, it is crucial not to think of oneself as a loser.

The ideal couple is a bond chosen by one's own will, no longer imposed by a third party. Love is a contemporary ideal, a bond in which people invest the most energy and time, the one they cherish the most, even though it is in reality the most fragile. More and more, young people place loyalty at the center of a relationship, but not for historical reasons or conservative ones. Loyalty is an increased value, as people seek recognition: in this sense, being a victim of infidelity is being betrayed.

The family also becomes the most privileged relationship; we observe that young adults value the relationship with their parents more than their romantic ones.

It is important not to confuse weak bonds that are developed via the Internet and social networks - which are consistently increasing- with strong bonds, which are still the ones that mean the most to us.

We can draw a parallel with the return of the “Made in France” or the concept of glocalization: since there are many more weak bonds developed through social networks and the Internet, we tend to return to safe havens, to our roots. In times of crisis, we tend to find comfort in our family relationships. The Care theory, which was first developed by Adam Smith, is now borrowed by Tony Blair, Martine Aubry and Anne Hidalgo: the government doesn't want to help you, so you're going to help your neighbors. It thus brings solidarity back to the forefront.

NEW DIGITAL SOLIDARITY

We can support the idea that a certain web welfare, in which Internet would solve all problems, is in the process of replacing state welfare. This is what the Californian utopia that gave birth to the Internet is moving towards: the CEOs of Google and Facebook believe they are improving the world, when in fact, they are changing it according to their own ideology.

A backlash of this thought is emerging, for example through Evgeny Morozov's theory of solutionism, criticizing the idea that everything can be improved with Internet. In reality, it's much more complicated than that: Internet isn't only a utopia, it also benefits dictatorships.

In welfare states, people feel less protected than in countries where there are trusting communities, family solidarities, and private solidarity. It is not because we receive the RSA (help from the state for poverty-stricken individuals) that we feel supportive of our neighbors that receive the same RSA. People are looking to go back to a system based on donations.

Religion is much more a question of identity than spirituality in France. In very religious societies, we have the impression of belonging to a common culture, that ties strong bonds. In France, Catholicism has lost that power, the national narrative tries to integrate without really reaching the youth. The search for meaning is so broad that religion has become one response among many others, the important thing being the search of a collective story.

Paradoxically, new solidarities are very individualistic because they rely on the neo-liberal idea that redistribution is not useful and that the State is useless. Parallel markets like Airbnb ignited from a beautiful idea and became businesses, all the whilst being illegal. The collaborative booming economy is facing this double ideology: wanting to live with others and having nothing to do with the State.

We are in the midst of creating a parallel world where we are able to live with less money through exchanges. In result, this is creating a new anarchical economy, stemmed from a loss of confidence for the system. Resourcefulness recreates another market and eliminates social security, education and infrastructure as it expands. Youth is forgetting the idea of redistribution and is moving towards parasystems. The new generation believes that we can break all the rules and flatten the welfare state. It has created bilateral, contractual solidarity, where the individual doesn't pay any VAT (TVA) or social security contributions. It primarily recreates class solidarity.

This ideology “without faith, nor law”, could have possibly found its roots in the fact that youth has the impression cannot make its place in society, doesn't feel desired, and there is a taboo feeling that previous generations are hoarding the money and opportunity, that there is no exchange between generations, which in turn, doesn't encourage participation.

The new injunction to precariousness (to succeed, we must consent to the “CDD” (short term contract) and to job instability) promotes social environments where intergenerational solidarity is effective: not only must one have contacts, but also the means. Investigations point out that people who have the most developed networks are those from the higher categories, even if people living in poverty have their own networks.

Among the new solidarities that came to life through the digital world, we can identify the weak links, which are links reactivated when needed. This is not the village solidarity or the state solidarity, but the Internet village. Now the community helps us rent an apartment, finance a project and solve everyday problems. It costs nothing but a community can be created by clicking on a button: we like, we retweet, we wish each other happy birthday on Facebook.

The problem is urban: all these questions of weak ties / strong ties are associated with a higher social background, installed in the city. In lower-income categories, the more we advance, the more we center ourselves on our family.

Strong bonds do not disappear when we have many weak ones: the family and the couple are always at the center. Technology creates strong links, we are constantly connected with our loved ones. The challenge is how to build new strong links. We always end up meeting people we have connected with on Internet. This is because real life has not disappeared. Today, Internet is the extension of real life, it is already real life.

IDEAS TO REMEMBER

1) Chosen solitude/ “forced” solitude

Loneliness has always existed through the ages, but today, contemporary values encourage individual achievement and therefore a more independent and solitary life. But we must always distinguish the chosen solitude to the forced solitude, as well as the feeling of loneliness and the reality of this solitude. Depending on the individual, loneliness can be as positive as negative.

2) Contradictory injunctions of our time.

Our time encourages us to both be social and autonomous, even though these dynamics are very contradictory. Internet and social networks tend to take over our social life, and introduce new forms of loneliness. They also create new weak bonds, which add on to the traditional strong links such as close friends, the couple and the family.

3) A very urban and high-end issue

Chosen loneliness is a problem that concerns the urban upper-class population. It's a luxury in which you need means and a network.

4) The Popularity metric

The addiction to social networks introduces a popularity scale, which has become a new barometer of vitality and success. Popularity is a key value for youth, where the metric could very well, in time, replace that of money.

5) The safe havens: family and the couple

During the crisis and the atomization of social life, we observe a strong focus on the family unit and couple, which becomes a safe haven. There has been indeed a paradox: while the couple has never been so fragile, it is the most invested bond because it provides recognition.

6) Web welfare replaces the welfare state

New solidarities emerged with the Internet and social networks incites a defiance from the traditional welfare state. The growth of the economy encourages collaborative contractual solidarity, which is developed in a parasystem, closer to the neo-liberal ideology. The Californian utopia of the old Internet is slowly but surely being questioned.

7) The atomization of social life does not replace strong bonds

Despite the redistribution of real/virtual connections, strong / weak bonds, sociability between individuals is not disrupted. Internet broadens an existing network for those who have one, but weak bonds do not replace strong bonds that remain at the center of our lives.