

Unhappily Trapped in the Emancipation-Dilemma

Hans Blokland

A mounting pressure of work and a lack of substantial-rational understanding of the causes and consequences of this pressure are important manifestations of the process of modernization. In his monumental *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* Robert Lane analyzes in depth the social and individual consequences of living in a modernized society dominated by a narrow interpretation of rationality. The link between modernization and our loss of happiness, though, he has not yet fully addressed. As a consequence, he seems to be a bit too optimistic about the possibilities of alleviating the widespread desperation he finds in market democracies. To the painting of a picture of the future of these societies that is even more depressing than Lane's, I will make a small contribution.

Since the beginning of the seventies working hours have been increasing in the United States. The damaging results of too many people working too many hours are a lack of "quality-time" with one's children, partner, friends and community-members; lack of sleep, leisure and quietude; and a generalized disposition to define social relationships in instrumental ways (the "Machiavellian syndrome"). Related to this, Robert Lane confirms the critique on modern, individualistic societies of theorists like Tönnies, Simmel, Fromm, Mumford and Wirth that social relations in these societies are characterized by coldness, impersonality, self-centeredness, superficiality and instrumentality. As a consequence, Lane shows, the self-reported well-being of Americans has been on the decline for about three decades. Europe is lagging, as usual, but the trend is in the same direction. Lane signals "a kind of famine of warm interpersonal relations, of easy-to-reach neighbors, of encircling, inclusive memberships, and of solidary family life" (2000: 9). Due to this lack of social support people have become much more vulnerable to the misfortunes of life: illnesses, stress, unemployment, disappointments in relationships, frustrated ambitions, failed expectations, et cetera. The end result is a widespread, but quiet desperation.

Why do people continue to work with a determination that definitely goes at the expense of pursuits that really contribute to their happiness? In Lane's view people are caught in a "hedonic treadmill": although in the developed countries any connection between income and well-being has been absent since about

the fifties, people are still convinced that more material goods will bring a higher level of happiness. This is what they have been taught and what a barrage of media messages is telling them every day. Working harder and longer makes them in fact unhappier, but the conclusion drawn from this unhappiness leads them to intensify their work efforts. A century ago Max Weber (1905) predicted that the capitalist work ethic would ceaselessly reinforce and deepen itself in a capitalist social system. Lane affirms that the treadmill is inherent to our society: "Like other successful societies, market democracies must, by the logic of their own success, continue to emphasize the themes that have brought them to their current eminent positions. In these circumstances, individuals are not, in any practical sense, free to go against the culture that nurtures them . . ." (2000: 60).

Leaving the treadmill, thus, is not an easy step in a market democracy. Markets lack mechanisms to correct their "hedonic failure" because everything that in developed economies contributes to happiness—family life, friendship, and labor satisfaction—is counted as a "market externality" (2000: 327). No firm is interested in producing, advertising and disseminating these worthless goods. And as long as voters do not understand what in their present affluent circumstances would really contribute to their well-being, nothing is to be expected from democracies either. Although psychological research teaches that, especially in matters of well-being, this assumption is simply false (2000: 283ff), markets and democracies alike rely on the assumption that individuals know best what is in their interest. Therefore, both start, and to a high extent end, with the existing preferences.

Modernization

With his analysis of our inability of give up a way of life that mainly produces misery, Lane fits well in a long tradition that goes back, at a minimum, to Marx and Weber. Lane's analysis is superior, though, because of his unmatched knowledge of the relevant sociological and psychological research and his aptitude to empirically support every one of his statements about our predicament. Nevertheless, although he acknowledges and points to the logic of the treadmill, he unsatisfactorily analyses

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its structural character. Consequently, he seems too optimistic about our chances of, what he calls, finding our way home. According to many authors that belong to the same tradition as Lane, the main forces behind our growing unhappiness are those of modernization. To these forces we will now briefly turn our attention. I will do this mainly via the work of Max Weber, Karl Mannheim and Charles Taylor.¹

Closely related key elements of modernization are rationalization, differentiation and individualization. Capitalism and bureaucracy are manifestations as well as catalysts of rationalization. Together, according to Weber and Mannheim, they cause the dominance of one impaired model of rationality: instrumental or functional rationality. In practice this is at the expense of value- or substantial rationality. Substantial rationality, Mannheim writes, is “an act of thought which reveals insight into the inter-relations of events in a given situation” (1940: 53). Substantial rationality implies that one is able to understand and evaluate individual events in a wider, inevitably value-charged perspective (1940: 58). Mannheim speaks of functional rationality when “a series of actions is organized in such a way that it leads to a previously defined goal, every element in this series of actions receiving a functional position and role. Such a functional organization of a series of actions will, moreover, be at its best when, in order to attain the given goal, it coordinates the means most efficiently” (1940: 53).

Although these two modes of rationality can combine perfectly, the number of spheres of life wherein functional rationality dominates, has grown unceasingly. Of this process of rationalization Mannheim considers industrialization as the most important cause, primarily because in this process more and more human activities are being ordered in organizations dominated by this impaired rationality. People have no other choice than to adjust to this rationality. According to Mannheim this adjustment, though, does not stop at one’s front door. In this respect he is even more despondent and pessimistic than Weber. Weber thinks that value-rational behavior is increasingly pushed away to the steadily shrivelling private sphere. Mannheim agrees, but on top of that he fears that also in this private sphere people will progressively lose the *potential* for substantial rational thinking. In his view the moment people enter a functionally ordered organization they transfer their ability to autonomous thinking, to awareness and responsibility, to the leaders of this organization. From then on these will think on their behalf. After some time people get used to this subordinate, subservient position. Only with decreasing frequency do they take pains to reflect in

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a critical and autonomous way on their predicament. Their capacity to do so does not develop or even dwindles (1940: 58ff).

More than Mannheim, Weber recognizes the market system as a whole as a disseminator of functional rationality. Yet, before capitalism can play this role, it already must have been partially developed. According to Weber this can only happen in an environment that to some extent has been rationalized. A somewhat rational attitude of mind, an *Entzauberung* of the world, has to have been evolved. When subsequently capitalism develops, a process for which ascetic Protestantism proves to be a beneficial breeding-ground, it stimulates on its turn the dissemination and deepening of the rational attitude of mind. At issue is a vast aggregate of mutual stimuli which together gain an enormous,

for Weber even *monstrous* momentum. In this vein he describes the modern capitalist order as the “schicksalsvollsten Macht unsres modernen Lebens” (1920: 4). Capitalism constitutes an inescapable iron cage with bars made up of the technical and economic conditions of mechanical production. In a cold, indifferent and unrelenting manner these conditions define the lives of the people that have to function in the gigantic capitalistic machine. These people have no other option than to

resign themselves to the formal rationality which governs the market system and individual corporations.

As the prime manifestation and disseminator of instrumental rationality, though, Weber considers bureaucracy.² Bureaucratization evolves from the rationalistic will to control reality on the basis of rational, universal, unambiguous principles. Weber emphasizes that bureaucratic organizations work more efficiently, effectively, reliably, predictably, discreetly, precisely, unambiguously, smoothly, and quickly than any other possible form of administration and that only these organizations can adequately respond to the enormous need in a highly differentiated, extremely complex, modern society for effective and efficient administration. There is thus a highly plausible reason to make use of this organizational form. In addition, Weber holds capitalism responsible for fueling bureaucratization. Modern large-scale corporations are, obviously, themselves prime examples of bureaucratic organizations. As their very operation is based on rational calculations—on predictability, transparency, continuity, universality, punctuality, and unambiguity—they cannot deal with an irrational environment. Therefore, they force their environment, including the government, to organize itself on the basis of corresponding principles. Thus, once the allocation of activities to bureaucratic organizations is underway, this process takes on a momentum of its own. Therein lies Weber’s great fear. Public

and private bureaucracies alike seek to optimize their efficiency and effectiveness by leaving the human element out of their calculations—banishing all that is grounded in value-oriented rationality. In that sense, they pose an enormous threat to personal creativity, individuality, and freedom as well as to diversity, innovation, and dynamics in society at large.

Countering Modernization

All in all, according to Weber we were heading for a cold, impersonal bureaucratic market in which value-rationality will be largely overrun by instrumental rationality. Lane's study indicates that we live in this market, bureaucratic democracy today. Like Lane, Weber was struggling with the question of how we can bring and keep under control the process of rationalization. Functional rationality could only start its march to supremacy after substantial rationalities, originally backed by religion, tradition and culture, had started to fade away. Consequently, when one desires to stop, or at least to direct and aim this march, one first needs to create new substantial rationalities. Informed by these, people should then be equipped to intervene in the current blind, autonomous processes.

For the creation of new purposes, aspirations and directions Lane has pinned his hopes on academics, writers and artists (2000: 337). Weber is not much more encouraging. Even more than Lane, he was deeply pessimistic about the potential of mass democracy to develop the needed substantial rationalities. In the last resort he hoped for a charismatic political leader, a visionary who could stay in command of and could give some direction to an ever expanding bureaucracy (1978: 1405-7). He also believed the economic market could save some of the freedom, diversity, dynamism and humanity increasingly stifled by bureaucratization. But this position is inconsistent: bureaucracies can be public as well as private, the market itself is an important disseminator of the instrumentally rational attitude of mind and just like bureaucracy the market constitutes a system of formal rationality which forces us to choices that reflect this impaired rationality.

Mannheim and traditional social democrats or liberals were more optimistic. In their views citizens could in a collective effort, via democratic political action, give meaning and direction to their community on the basis of a substantial-rational political program. To summarize his ideas on this topic Mannheim developed conceptions like "planning for freedom" (1940), "militant democracy" (1943) and "the Third Way" (1943), conceptions that were highly influential in postwar social democ-

ocracy. In this vein, social democrats in the past tried to curb and direct the process of modernization and to pose a substantial-rational alternative to a society mainly organized on functional rational principles. For this reason too they supported the welfare state.

The chances, though, that citizens will politically organize to give substance to their future and that they will support collective projects such as the welfare state, have increasingly decreased as a consequence of the differentiation and individualization that accompany rationalization. Differentiation means that more and more human activities are organized in a steadily growing number of increasingly specialized institutions. Individualization is partly connected with this process. It means that to a continually

decreasing extent people define themselves and are defined by their membership in one specific social group, a group characterized by a specific pattern of values, norms, practices and expectations. The number of memberships grows, but these bonds become more and more meaningless: in a decreasing degree they confer on their members an identity. Similarly, the domain expands in which individuals,

unhindered by external interventions, can do or be what they are able to do or be. But this does not imply that their capacity to master their lives also expands. It is not a matter of course that a growing negative freedom goes with a growing positive freedom, a growing ability of individuals to make informed choices and to justify these choices by referring to personally defined values and ends (cf. Blokland 1997). In still other words: individualism, defined as "pursuits of one's own goals rather than of group goals," leads to superficial and impersonal relationships, to social isolation and lack of warmth (Lane 2000: 111), and, since man is a social animal that needs interactions with meaningful others to develop an individuality of his own, individualism leads to shallow, heteronomous personalities.

Differentiation and individualization have important political consequences (cf. Mannheim 1940, 1943; Taylor 1991). These processes, as well as the economic, social and political expansion caused by rationalization, increasingly make it harder for individual citizens to identify with others and with a "public cause." As a result, they are less and less willing and able to realize a common political project. Instead, citizens invest their political energies mainly in the promotion of their private interests. Politics as the expression of a collective will, as the mobilization of electoral majorities on the basis of a substantial-rational political program, slowly fades away. Consequently, it becomes increasingly difficult to counter the social fragmentation and the

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primacy of instrumental rationality. The loss of the capacity to organize effective political majorities Taylor aptly describes as “to lose paddle in mid-river” (1991: 118).

Modernization, thus, results, in many different ways, in political impotence. Firstly, there is the problem of the advancing instrumental rationality that causes the erecting of “iron cages” of nearly uncontrollable structures and processes of bureaucratization and economization. These structures and processes disseminate a functional-rational worldview which is the translation of and meanwhile foster the very same structures and processes. Secondly, individualization, differentiation and the withering of substantial rationalities in more and more spheres of life increasingly hamper citizens’ ability to identify with each other and a public interest. As a consequence of the erosion of common values and ends chances decrease that people will proceed to political action to shape their society. The shared conceptions of the Good life and the Good society that are constitutive for this action are lacking.

The Emancipation-Dilemma

Given this predicament, what is there to do? We are brought up in market democracies that have taught us, and will teach us more and more aggressively, a rationalistic, consumerist, individualist world view, a world view that on the one hand reproduces these very same political systems and on the other hand progressively undermines our well-being. Anybody trying to escape this dead-end is confronted with what can be called an emancipation-dilemma.³ This dilemma consists of two parts. On the one hand, those wrestling with this dilemma establish that aesthetic, ethical, cultural or political preferences are to a high degree products of enculturation, socialization and indoctrination. Accordingly as people are more aware of these processes and have more knowledge of the alternatives available in their culture, their preferences can become more authentic or autonomous. On the other hand, the critics concerned cherish the democratic principle, that individuals know best what is in their interests and that electoral preferences should always be respected. In combination, these two assumptions create a dilemma: like other social democrats, Lane considers the present cultural and political preferences troublesome and, therefore, wants to change them. This endeavor is justified by the sociological understanding that preferences, especially the current ones, are to a large extent the product of social processes and structures, as well as by the psychological finding that prefer-

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ences exist that are more fulfilling and rewarding than the present ones. To change these processes and structures one must to some degree deny the current preferences, preferences that fortify the very same processes and structures. Himself part of the western liberal tradition, Lane is not very eager to do this: he, too, cherishes the value of negative liberty, the value of letting people themselves decide what is worth living for and what kind of government should make this possible. In other words: consumers and voters do not see any problems connected to their present preferences and, consequently, to the processes and structures that these preferences stimulate and fortify. Therefore, they will not ask for or back any proposals for fundamental social and political reform or reconstruction. Fundamentally, the values and dispositions furthered by the process of modernization have become too generally accepted and too common to make acceptable any pleas for the transformation of the current modern society. Consequently, we are confronted with an inescapable and irresolvable dilemma. Accepting the present preferences, as good democrats do, implies accepting the structures and processes that produce these preferences and implies accepting preferences which we know are false. Denying the present preferences implies putting on hold our democratic principles. How to escape this dilemma, without becoming a totalitarian state?

I hope that in his next book Bob Lane will provide us some more heartening answers than he has provided in *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*. In the context of the emancipation-dilemma this implies a less libertarian and more *political* answer. More attention is needed for people’s positive freedom and less for the negative freedom of those who take advantage of the social structures that today mold our preferences. As remarked, Lane hopes that academics, writers and artists will play a role in showing people other, more fulfilling ways of life (2000: 337). To me, the likelihood of this taking place seems small. But even if it would, it would not matter much. The social or political role of writers and artists is over. Worldwide, since the introduction of television the time spent on reading books, magazines and newspapers has fallen dramatically (Blokland 1997). Artists have drawn back into tiny, specialized, internationally oriented “arts worlds” or mutual admiration societies in which they no longer give comment on and communicate with the society at large, but in which they mainly react to each other. The same increasingly applies to human and

social scientists, a tendency also strongly stimulated by the recruiting policies of universities. On top of that, the gratifications of working within models of thought and science that are drenched in the kind of rationality Lane rightly attacks, are for most of us irresistible. Most importantly, in comparison to the forces that cause our loss of happiness and our inability to do something about this, the counterforce of a few enlightened artists, writers and academics is negligible. We don't have time for them. We are too busy amusing and working ourselves to death.

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Endnotes

1. I discussed this subject at length in my *De Modernisering en haar Politieke Gevolgen* ("Modernization and its Political Consequences") of which the English edition will appear next year at Yale University Press.

2. A development not yet noticed by Weber is the blending of bureaucracy and market: functionally organized schools, hospitals, old people's homes, universities that (have to) compete with each other in a commercial market that is also dominated by functional rationality. Apparently, the thought of this today increasingly realized option was more than he could take.

3. This dilemma formed the leading motive in my *Freedom and Culture in Western Society* (cf. also Benton 1982).