

**Jordi Busquet**

# The fear of loss of status

**“Nowadays people often feel that their private lives are a series of traps” with these words, written in 1959, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills began *The Sociological Imagination*. They are words that could easily apply to the present day and seem particularly apt for understanding how the crisis affects many people who have lost their job. The crisis may above all affect young people who, having finished their education, are getting ready to start out on their professional career at a moment of closures or blockages in the jobs market. Many of these youngsters who have left school cannot find –or are not even looking for– a job. The social concern a few years ago for young *mileuristes* (earning €1,000 a month), who despite having had a good education were earning only modest salaries, has been transferred to a concern for a new kind of young people, those who neither work nor study.**

The crisis also affects the adults who are at the end of their working life and who may be forced to abandon —perhaps prematurely— a relatively successful career. The last years of their working life may be tough and arduous (very different from what they had imagined).

**Cheik**, Miquel Barceló (nov 2009)  
Mixed media on cardboard, 70 x 50 cm



We are living in a time of change and profound uncertainty that affects many people's opportunities and expectations. In times of crisis many individuals feel trapped by a series of structural changes that they cannot control, but which affect them directly. They are apparently impersonal changes. The events of contemporary history —as Mills says— are at the same time events relating to the successes and failures of particular men and women who may suffer the consequences directly: "When a society is industrialised, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke" (Mills, 1994 [1959], 7-8).

Whereas in traditional societies the individual maintained a stable professional status and

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a defined social identity (linked to this status<sup>1</sup>), in advanced societies one may change one's position or social status relatively easily. In modern societies identity is quite undefined, insecure and changing (Berger, 1987 [1963]).

There is often a tendency to exaggerate its inconstant and unstable nature. The changes do not affect everybody, nor do they affect them in the same way. However, many individuals experience important changes throughout their personal and working life. All these changes

make it necessary to (re)define one's social position. People who change their position in the world are also people who change their perception of themselves.

Life expectancy has grown notably but, paradoxically, in many cases personal life has become more unstable and insecure. In advanced societies the human condition has become quite uncertain and fluctuating. This is why, at the height of the age of uncertainty the idea that we are living in a liquid society, as suggested by the renowned sociologist of Polish origin, Zygmunt Bauman (2006), has been successful. Modern men and women are in a state of permanent doubt about the world and themselves. At the heart of "liquid modernity" identity is relative and this leads to reflection and doubts about one's own personal worth.

### STATUS ANXIETY

The term status comes from the Latin word *statum*, 'position' (past participle of the verb *stare*, 'to stand upright'). Strictly speaking, the word refers to the legal or professional position that an individual occupies within a social group. However, in a broader sense it refers to the worth or the importance an individual has in the eyes of others. The German sociologist Max Weber defined the position of status (*Ständische Lage*) as the position one occupies within the social structure. Status, then, refers to the consideration that one *deserves* by virtue of one's social position<sup>2</sup>.

In capitalist societies status is difficult to achieve and even more difficult to keep all one's life. Status depends, above all, on one's professional role. It is true that social position is often expressed and accredited through a certain level of consumption and what we might call a *suitable lifestyle*, but this can only be maintained over time thanks to a certain financial position.

From a philosophical perspective, Alain De Botton (2003) speaks of *status anxiety*. According to the Swiss author, even though we apparently live obsessed by wealth or power, what we are really worried about is losing the esteem and recognition of others. If our position on the social ladder worries us it is because the idea that we create of ourselves depends on how others see us. The opinions of others are important. This is why self-esteem is often in relation to the respect and recognition that others show us. In close circles we get anxious over the possibility of losing the support of the closest and most important people. In public life we are more worried by the possibility of losing prestige and social recognition. The effort to get rich would be —according to De Botton— a way of earning the esteem and admiration of others: “Money, fame and influence are probably more valuable as symbols of love —and as ways of achieving it— than as ends in themselves” (De Botton, 2004, 15).

## EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITIES

In modern democratic societies equality between individuals is postulated as a basic inalienable principle. The universal declaration of human rights asserts equality between all human beings. This does not mean that we should all be identical (something unthinkable), but that everyone deserves respect and recognition as a person.

At the same time *meritocratic societies* are governed by the principle of equal opportunities. Equality of opportunities implies that there is a sort of open competition in which everyone can demonstrate their talent and ability. The problem with this theoretical principle is that in practice the conditions on the starting line are not the same for everyone. It goes without saying that there are individuals who enjoy a very advantageous social and family position.

Moreover, in a meritocratic system, individuals may fall from favour and expose themselves to losing their social position and status. The social ladder makes it possible to climb socially, but people can also fall. The meritocratic system is one that blesses social success but curses failure. *Failures* probably feel responsible for their failure, especially

■ <sup>1</sup> Feudal society, despite all its defects, had a psychological advantage of the highest order, given that everyone or almost everyone occupied his or her “place in this world”. In closed societies social positions were clear and defined. Of course, the possibilities of changing or social condition were virtually nil for the majority of the population, which had to resign itself to the position marked out by a certain social or family origin, but it was also very difficult to lose one's status.

<sup>2</sup> In the sociological tradition, the concept of status is undeniably important. However, it should be considered with a certain degree of caution given that it is an ambivalent concept that is not always understood in the same way. For some experts, status is identified with the individual's social and professional position; for others, on the other hand, status is identified with social prestige and recognition. The two meanings are often mixed up. It is obvious that they are two phenomena that are directly related, but which are not the same thing.

when the individual setback coincides with a moment of economic expansion and collective optimism.

The existence of social mobility is an important social fact. In (theoretically) open societies in which there is competition, social mobility means that everybody can aspire to improve their social condition and position. In actual fact —as has been said— mobility is very limited. Most of the studies carried out in advanced democratic countries show that, despite some notable exceptions, social and personal success is closely tied to family origins and the social condition of one's parents.

### CHARISMATIC IDEOLOGY

The fact that in capitalist society differences have been minimised (or that they have lost the rigidity characteristic of feudal society) does not mean that they have disappeared completely, nor that the need has disappeared for the members of dominant social groups to distance themselves from the members of social classes that are in a *lower position*. This explains the persistence of important differences and of the *closing of ranks* by members of the middle class who do not possess any essentially distinguishing characteristics by birth: “In order to be middle class it is not enough to have been born middle class: you have to live your entire life as a member of the middle class!” (Bauman, 2005 [2004], 72). If the proof or evidence supplied is not convincing enough, you can lose your class credentials, and become *déclassé*.

This is why, as a class, in certain circumstances the middle class tends to accentuate the barriers that separate it from the rest. When the differences are not “natural” it is necessary to highlight the differences, even though artificially. According to Edmond Goblot (1965), distinction is the way of highlighting these differences: what distinguishes the middle-class person is the difference or distinction (*“Ce qui distingue le bourgeois, c'est la distinction”*).

People who change their position in the world are also people who change their perception of themselves

The middle class, in order to justify its position of privilege, cannot appeal to its family tree (as the nobility does); nor can it let its fate depend exclusively on meritocratic effort (as the *petite bourgeoisie* usually does). When it enjoys a hegemonic situation, it needs —like all dominant classes— to justify its situation of power and privilege, as if this were a direct emanation

of its talent. It is a specific example of the *charismatic ideology* that C. Wright Mills expressed masterfully: “People with advantages are hardly predisposed to believe that what happens to them is the product, precisely, of their advantages. They easily believe themselves to be inherently worthy of what they possess; deep down, they believe that they are a kind of natural elite; and they do indeed think that their possessions and privileges are natural extensions of their elite condition” (Mills, 1956, 14).

## DEMOCRATIC ENVY

Alexis de Tocqueville warned of the risk implied in the desire for equality (egalitarianism) as opposed to the idea of freedom and individual dignity, championed by liberal tradition. He believed that there is an insuperable conflict between freedom and equality; freedom guarantees all people the right to be different, while equality implies a tendency to uniformity and, even, vulgarity.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the brilliant historian went on a long journey around the United States of America. From his observations and thoughts he wrote *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1840), which has become a timeless classic. Tocqueville stated that while the conditions of freedom in American society implied greater independence and autonomy of individuals, on the other hand—and perhaps in subtler ways—they led to new forms of servitude.

For Tocqueville, greater equality in living conditions did not imply a greater degree of freedom and responsibility; it meant the levelling of individuals who by nature were different, and greater material dependency. Even then the French thinker realised—a long time before people spoke in terms of the welfare state—the implications of the improvement and the levelling of

people's general living standards. Personal dignity might be confused with the fact of being able to have a certain standard of living considered *dignified*. The dignity of individuals, then, does not depend so much on an effort to improve as a person as on the fact of being able to attain certain minimal social standards linked above all to material comfort.

In these circumstances, he believed that the majority was prepared to sacrifice its freedom for greater equality and a greater share of wealth. Equality became an absolute. "A society with this principle is a society at odds with human excellence" (Giner, 1979 [1976], p. 87). Beneath this situation of apparent equality, described by Alexis de Tocqueville, a more or less buried struggle for was hidden.

De Botton: what we are really worried about is losing the recognition of others, rather than about achieving wealth or power

## STATUS SEEKERS

Thorstein Veblen was the first economist who, beyond conventional economic analysis, spoke of *conspicuous consumption* related to the desire to show off and for social status. Up to then economists had associated consumption with the satisfaction of the material needs of life. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Veblen realised that consumption is also due to profound social unease. The American author's contribution is particularly clear-sighted for the study of inequality in the so-called *consumer society*.

We have gone from being a society based on work and production to being a society in which consumption is also hugely important. In a *consumer society* objects—especially rare objects—can attain a symbolic distinguishing value. Any expense that effectively contributes to the individual's good reputation generally

has to be made on expensive superfluous things. The consumption of luxury goods, with no apparent usefulness, becomes socially honourable, as a sign of greatness and proof of human dignity. Consumption becomes honourable in itself, especially when it refers to the most expensive and sought-after things. The more expensive things are, the more *noble* and honourable it is considered to consume them.

The logic that governs the appropriation of goods as objects of distinction is not, exclusively, that of the satisfaction of needs, but that of the scarcity of these goods and the impossibility of others having them. They are *positional goods* that not everyone can consume at the same time and which put their consumers in a position of relative advantage. They are goods for which there is heavy competition, something that pushes their price up.

### “NATURAL DISTINCTION”

Distinction or snobbery is often spoken about as a desire or a deliberate quest of the individual who wants to attain a certain level of prestige. In certain circumstances, distinction may be desired for reasons of self-interest with the aim of making a good impression on others and achieving certain social recognition. It should come as no surprise however that the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu never ceased to deplore what he considered an overly simplistic and merely instrumental view of the issue. Bourdieu was critical of the use (and abuse) that was (and still is) made of the notion of the conspicuous consumption that best characterises the cultural behaviour of the *nouveaux riches*. He believed that distinction can never be considered the product of

a conscious and strategic choice. Distinction is expressive by nature and is closely linked to the individual’s identity and manner. Distinction is generally the manifestation of essentially rash behaviour, produced by education and the expression of a certain *class habitus*, which depends above all on family background.

Contrary to what is suggested by the title of Vance Packard’s

**In a meritocratic system, individuals may fall from favour and expose themselves to losing their social position**

*The Status* (1959), Bourdieu insists that cultural tastes and preferences are not the product of a rational choice. He also insists that the quest for distinction shows up the lack of distinction. Distinguished people, who are self-confident, have no reason to doubt their identity and prestige. In *La distinction* (1979), Bourdieu demonstrates that middle-class distinction is discreet, rejecting all that is too striking or superfluous. Attempts to distinguish oneself looked down upon and, on the other hand, the elegance of spontaneous and self-controlled distinction is valued. We can only understand this phenomenon as the more or less successful result of a long and subtle educational process that makes something which is a product of appear *natural*. Distinction is the result of behaviour that seems —only seems— spontaneous and natural.

## THE PUZZLE OF “CHRONIC UNHAPPINESS”

One of the most important puzzles and challenges for the social sciences is to find out why an extraordinary increase in the level of income and wealth —as has happened in recent years in the more advanced countries— has not resulted in greater individual and collective happiness.

The level of wealth or poverty is relative. It is supposed that in the advanced countries everyone or almost everyone has their material needs covered. It is for this reason that people aspire to reach a minimum level of material goods shared by the majority of citizens. These days there is a sort of

*standard package*<sup>3</sup> to which everybody or nearly everybody aspires. For example, to achieve an acceptable degree of comfort one has to have a number of goods considered essential for living in a dignified

way: a flat or a house (owned), a car, a fridge, air conditioning, one or several television sets (with DVD), a personal

computer and, if possible, a next generation mobile phone. It goes without saying that this standard package is the result of a social convention that can change quickly according to social and financial circumstances. Many individuals who cannot attain this package of *basic* items may feel deeply disappointed, but individuals who reach this standard of living also have to make great effort and, even, a certain sacrifice to maintain it.

Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter seem to have an answer to the puzzle that I announced at the beginning: “Seeing as access to these positional goods is important for determining our quality of life, it is easy to see why economic growth eliminates the relationship between happiness and absolute wealth” (Heath; Potter, 2005, 140).

In a very poor country, the basic problem is the scarcity of material goods to live.

Economic growth increases the range of these goods, which in turn makes it possible to improve the general well-being of the population. In rich countries, however, a very important part of income goes on acquiring *positional goods* (goods that not everyone can buy) and which are by no means easy to maintain (for example, a luxurious house in a residential neighbourhood). As positional goods are intrinsically scarce, economic growth does not automatically result in greater availability of these goods (but in a rise in their price). So happiness cannot increase proportionally to the rise in income.

**Bourdieu: distinction is not a product of a rational choice, but of education and family background**

## TIME FOR EXTRAVAGANCE AND TIME FOR RESTRAINT

The possibility of improving our social position can lead us to experience period of collective optimism (more or less contagious), especially in times of economic expansion

■ <sup>3</sup> The concept of *standard package* was coined by Riesman (1965) to refer this indispensable series of goods and services that, in a considerably uniform manner, the whole of American society

possessed at the time. This standard package of goods —according to the author— represents the national standard and grows constantly.



## Status anxiety is an inherent feature of modern people, aware of the changing nature of their position in the social world

that has had profound social implications. This activity (and the spectacular rise in the unemployment rate) has resulted in citizens being deeply concerned about their future.

The crisis has led to families restricting consumption and to an important change in the patterns of consumption in many homes. After a period of consumer frenzy and spending on chiefly positional goods (and of a representative nature closely tied to social status), there has been a period of austerity and severe spending restraint caused by, among other things, the massive debts of families and the restriction of bank lending.

In times of economic recession feelings of pessimism and frustration spread in many social groups. The only consolation is the collective nature of the crisis directly or indirectly affecting many individuals, who are its victims, but who do not feel responsible for it. At the same time the fact that it is a *collective drama* means that in some cases it is experienced as a kind of misfortune against which it is very difficult to fight, as at the most acute moment of the crisis opportunities are few and far between.

As I said at the beginning, nowadays people often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. This perception is almost certainly not exclusive to our times. Uncertainty is inherent in the modern era. Status anxiety is an inherent feature of the existence of anxious and modern people, aware of the fragile and changing nature of their position in the social world.

In times of crisis the uncertain nature of personal life gets worse. I hope that in these difficult times we really do learn the lesson about all the things that do not work and the traps we fell into in times of economic euphoria, when a sort of *conspicuous consumption* centred above all on the acquisition of *positional goods* was favoured.

It is a lesson that we did not learn when we should have; I hope it is not too late now ||

such as the one experienced in the last decade, moments when many individuals are able to improve their economic opportunities and living conditions.

After a period of sustained economic growth, which has lasted almost fifteen years, we have witnessed a notable fall in economic activity

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