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**Choice**

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In a complex modern society, an individual needs a mechanism with which to reduce the social complexity to a moderate and still bearable level of everyday life. The instrument of choice is one of such mechanisms. It should enable an individual to pick out which goals to achieve and which material goods one desires that will be gained without unnecessary confusion or anxiety concerning failure. However, something that can reduce anxiety and bring contentment can also have the opposite effect. It would be naive to believe that in modern society the decision as to which direction the scales will be tipped, either anxiety or contentment, depends on individuals alone. But it would be even more naive to assume that in modern society the prevailing ideology behind the individual's behaviour is based on rational choice and, as a consequence, that this successfully reduces the individual's anxiety. The latest book by Renata Salecl, *Choice*, is an excellent attempt to offer a plausible explanation of why in modern society, despite the constant engagement with anxiety and insecurity and the never ending quest for contentment and safety, people are increasingly subjected to

anxiety, fear and a feeling of precariousness and danger.

To be individually responsible for one's own life seems to be the ultimate credo of modern society. According to the ideology of choice, the individual may not only achieve whatever they wish and decide to do, but is literally obliged to use all resources available to improve the quality of their own life and social status. In order to fulfil social expectations, the individual is willing to submit to various and numerous treatments and should as well become a knowledgeable consumer. The knowledgeable individual questions their own identity through the mechanism of choice on two different levels. First, the individual is constantly under the surveillance of others (Salecl refers to Lacan's Big Other), so they become sensitive to others' reactions to the choices they make as they test them on others' reactions. Second, the individual is anxious about their own identity and thus anxious about the choices they make. From the individual's point of view, anxiety is justifiable as a proper choice can result in climbing one step higher up the ladder of success; an improper choice may result in their social decline.

In the past, when individuality was not so highly accentuated and valued as it is today, the gaze and agency of people was necessarily oriented towards their own community. Now, when it is evident that consumerism and the ideology of choice have triumphed in late capitalism over solidarity and communality,

people are inverting their gazes towards themselves. Two elements are important for this shift from community to individualism: the home and the body. Slightly awkward perhaps, but otherwise entirely correct, the author says that *»The house is simultaneously the mirror of the self and its incubator. 'You are your home' is the sort of remark one might overhear«* (p. 35). Medical knowledge is no longer applied merely within hospital walls. It is used by the individual on a daily basis by way of prevention or correction. One's physical capital is an equally important factor in the individual's promotion as cultural capital. People spend more and more time rearranging their bodies according to the standards set by the consumer society. Although the home (and family) is highly valued now, its extension is shrinking and is often reduced merely to the individual's body (I prefer to use the term body-home). As a rule, those who are obsessed with their own self forget they are part of society. Consequentially, they replace social critique with self-critique.

The ideology of choice is in itself deeply controversial. This can be well illustrated by pointing to the paradox of self-help books. To develop the self to the fullest extent as a knowledgeable subject, an individual needs certain knowledge and practical skills which can be bought packed inside self-help books or as paid-for coaching. On one hand, the books and coaches suggest that people should make something unique

of themselves while, on the other hand, they prescribe in advance quite precise instructions for how people can become unique. Of course, when the method of transformation is prescribed in advance then the outcome is also more or less so prescribed. Accordingly, the uniqueness of individuals lies in their minds, more by way of wishful thinking or a feeling, while in real life "uniqueness" is in the best case transparent as a unique composition of industrially designed and manufactured material and cultural elements. Another aspect of controversy is incorporated in the high standards that consumerism inflicts on people. Especially for women, aesthetic criteria are set so highly by the cosmetic and beauty industry that scarcely any women can meet them. This paradox propels the economic market of late capitalism. No matter how much the individual tries, the criteria are always beyond one's faculties; they are set to frustrate and motivate one to act in the spirit of consumerism.

Of all the problems that occupy the modern individual the most important are love and family. In her book, Salecl devotes a separate chapter to each problem. The first problem revolves around partner selection. It is primarily the nature of choice which creates the dynamic of partner selection. Because there are so many options and since there is so much at stake here, partner selection is either emotionally shallow or extremely traumatic. The former is illustrated by an example of the hook-up

culture mostly found among youngsters. It demands little or no emotional attachment and allows the individual total freedom without any responsibility whatsoever. If anything does happen, it is not important and should not bring any negative consequences for it was not meant to be serious from the very beginning. In the latter case, an individual quest for an ideal mate may create a situation in which an individual is unwilling to choose simply because they do not dare to face possible negative consequences which may arise merely as a subsequent realisation of reality. Needless to say, with the prolongation of life expectancy the average individual may have another chance to find an ideal partner over and over again. It seems that nowadays a long-term relationship between two people is thus hazardous, if not in conflict with the demand to make good use of one's life.

The family is also a place where the tyranny of choice takes one of its many shapes. When someone finally decides which person will suit best as their till-death-do-as-part partner, the next question is whether or not to have children. And when a couple decide to have a child in first place their decision is frequently about themselves, and then about the child. They are more anxious about how the child will influence their life. Little wonder they do not spend so much time pondering the positive aspects of raising kids relative to what might be the negative outcomes for their own lives. Above all, women are

again under greater pressure than men. No matter how late capitalism might be civilised in terms of gender equality, the choice of having a child, and nursing after childbirth, is still largely a burden on women's shoulders. As a consequence, the average woman is still frequently trapped in a forced choice; she has to decide between a family and child and her career.

There is only one step from a forced choice to an impossible choice. An individual confronting two or more equally important choices freezes and, instead of making a choice, decides not to make any choice at all. Not making the choice prevents failure, although it also distances one from success. At one point, Salecl even finds certain parallels between the Hegelian master-slave dialectic and the tyranny of choice when an individual is stuck in between two (or more) choices. Like a slave, one who avoids making choices exchanges the act of choosing for certainty. Ironically, the only real certainty in life is death. An individual's life is terminal; the only choice one can take is to end life voluntarily ahead of time. However, in the late capitalist and consumer society where promises of eternity are promoted on a daily basis humans work hard to defy death. It is hard to tell what society without death would look like; still the consequences of "wishful thinking" are already here. As Salecl points out in her book, the lack of social change is evident. Making a choice is a very lonely act since

it is oriented towards an individual who wishes to at least take their own life under control. »*The change was a matter of choice*« says Salecl, »*but it was also unpredictable and uncontrollable*« (p. 150). Avoiding social change leads to an unproductive society and, in the end, also to an unproductive individual.

Although Salecl's interpretation of the tyranny of choice in late capitalism makes it sound like it is in somewhat of a deadlock, her own position is not pessimistic. Her contribution to solving the problem of choice comes to readers in the form of her elegant and profound explanation of the phenomenon of choice in her slickly written book. However, she does not offer, as one might expect, any magic formula to overcome, change or annihilate the tyranny of choice. One question which may arise is why the author does not fully address the influence of the current world economic crisis? She only mentions it in passing at the end of the book (p. 142). Does she believe it is not so relevant for interpreting the ideology of choice? Or is it simply that the idea for the book came into being well before the crisis broke out? In any case, the book is a very valuable essay on the problem of the ideology of choice in late capitalist society and for that very reason the author should be given full credit.

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**Face to Face Communication:  
Emotions in a Web of Culture,  
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*Face to Face Communication, Emotions in a Web of Culture, Language and Technology* edited by Arvid Kappas and Nicole C. Krammer is an excellent book that I highly recommend to experts in fields such as sociology, philosophy, psychology, women's studies and IT because on one side it is theoretical and on the other it is very applicable. Besides, it is backed up with a series of the latest studies and confirmatory data about the meanings and cues regarding what and how to understand non-verbal communication in face-to-face communication and how they are effectively being transferred into the computer world. A lot of attention is paid to understanding and effect of positive emotions, such as smiling and happiness. Almost every article (except the first two) deals with smiling in a certain way. Results of different studies show that smiling, happiness and friendly emotions enhance our social, communication and cognitive skills in face-to-face communication as well as when working with computers, that gender also has