

Pursuing 'Quality of Life' in Liquid Modernity

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Abstract

From its critical, post-WWII concerns for collective well-being and the obligations of the welfare state, 'quality of life' the idea has come to convey the individualistic market subjectivity that characterizes liquid modernity. This paper examines contemporary shifts in the discourse and pursuits of 'quality of life' in three emblematic sites. The 'mommy wars' over family well-being and caregiving values underscore the compulsory individualization of the Anglo-American liberal welfare regime. Self-help literature emphasizing work as the 'muse of quality of life' offers a consumerist orientation toward the labor market's risks. Residential migrations to 'quality of life districts' legitimate a rootless perspective, shared by the mobile and rooted alike, toward community and other bases of social commitment. Even as such shifts further the ascendance of the neoliberal *homo economicus*, 'quality of life' also provides its own aestheticized language of 'resistance,' thereby enclosing the horizons of human development and the greater good.

'Quality of life' as a Social Problem

Leonard Nevarez

To join in inaugurating the Bauman Institute, and to acknowledge the intellectual contributions and ethical wisdom that Zygmunt Bauman has offered the world of scholars and critical audiences, my paper highlights key aspects of this august sociologist's theoretical framework by taking a brief, selective tour through contemporary meanings and pursuits of 'quality of life.' Although I go easily here on incorporating specific elements of Bauman's theory, my argument fits well within the picture of the individualized society of liquid modernity that Bauman has sketched in recent years, and readers may perceive the relevance of key texts like *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (1998), *Liquid Modernity* (2000), *Consuming Life* (2007) and *The Art of Life* (2008). Nonetheless, I hope this calls attention to internal tensions within his theoretical framework, notably around the question of reflexivity, and that it perhaps modestly contributes to a clearer resolution of these tensions in Bauman's work.

A remarkably flexible concept that calls attention to the supporting mechanisms and subjective experience of human well-being, 'quality of life' has become a ubiquitous and arguably primary framework with which modern societies debate the public good.¹ Its very name evokes the critique of traditional quantitative measures of 'growth' and 'progress'—one of the more important achievements of the social tumult and political ambitions in post-WWII developed societies. Yet as the idea of quality of life (hereafter, QOL) has permeated public policy, the social sciences, and everyday discourse, it has become divorced from its critical origins in ways generally unnoticed by those who invoke it or identify the conditions that it seems to signal. Contemporary understandings of 'QOL' and pursuits to 'enhance QOL' increasingly obscure the historical contexts and social relations that were central to the idea's origins, thereby robbing the idea of its critical promise.

In this paper, I explore this development through an examination of three emblematic settings in which 'QOL' is envisioned, debated, and pursued today. My

effort here is necessarily suggestive, as a paper of this length can hardly address the idea's many permutations in scholarly and lay discourse. Instead, I offer a thesis, intended for further consideration and empirical scrutiny, about how 'QOL' constitutes an uncritical, consumerist framework of 'the good.' My methodological premises are threefold. First, this paper conducts not so much an intellectual history *per se* as a sociology of knowledge for 'QOL,' as I juxtapose the idea's manifestations in discourse and social action to social and historical context. In contrast to much of the "QOL research" (a.k.a. social indicators research), the idea of QOL here is not a paradigm to organize empirical analysis but rather a dependent variable to be explained, and its causal contexts do not apparently deal much with 'QOL,' at least in the ways usually conceived in its namesake scholarship. Second, my claim that 'QOL' has shifted significantly is clearly a historical thesis. I base my before-and-after argument in the post-WWII era, popularly known as the *affluent society*, in which the idea first flourished; while my treatment of this era is cursory, its imprimatur on 'QOL' is sufficiently clear for my purposes here. Third, in the spirit of critical theory, I use the affluent society as the analytical and normative position from which to scrutinize the unquestioned conditions and meanings that inform contemporary understandings and pursuits of QOL. Mine is admittedly a modest critical theory, however, as I avoid the deconstructionist regress of criticizing the affluent society critique (for which, see Horowitz 2005).

The paper is organized as follows. First, I briefly address the emergence of 'QOL' in the social debates and policy initiatives that characterize the affluent society critique in Western nations from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. I then turn to three settings where the chief contours of today's *dominant QOL outlook* 'QOL' can be observed. The "mommy wars" over family well-being and caregiving values reveal the compulsory individualism of the Anglo-American liberal welfare regime. Recent expertise on how work can be the muse of quality of life enshrines a market orientation that obscures the collective organization and negotiation of work's quality. Residential migrations to places associated with "a high QOL" engender a rootless perspective, shared by the mobile and rooted alike, toward community and other bases of social commitment. I conclude with an assessment of

how the dominant QOL outlook encapsulated in these three instances informs and encloses the horizons the public good.

THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY CRITIQUE

On its face, the idea of QOL pertains universally to the historical and cultural spectrum of human conditions as a framework for measuring and evaluating how well people live. Many scholars argue for its universality as a social concern by dating its earliest known reference back to Aristotle, who proclaimed in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, "the quality of life is determined by one's activities." However, as a social fact, the idea bears the far more recent vintage of the post-industrial era often called the affluent society, in which age-old questions of human scarcity (how will we survive and be secure?) became eclipsed by questions of human abundance (what are the possibilities and costs of social affluence?). Following others, I view the affluent society as a specific political and cultural moment in the West from the late 1950s to the early 1970s, when critical thought and policy initiatives set the goalposts, so to speak, for the post-WWII political consensus that we call 'liberalism' and for the ambitions of the modern welfare state. **In the U.S.**, public consternations in this period over the Cold War, racial inequality, environmental degradation, and the deterioration of old cities grew against a backdrop of unprecedented economic prosperity and scientific progress following World War II. The concern that postwar affluence could betray the promise of democracy and justice, so long as the nation failed to reflect upon and redirect its economic prosperity, surfaced in several widely read books, most notably David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite* (1956), William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958), Vance Packard's *The Waste Makers* (1960), Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), Michael Harrington's *The Other America* (1962), Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Gunnar Myrdal's *Challenge to Affluence* (1963). Sidestepping the question of cultural cause and effect,

it is clear these literary works drew from and further influenced social and cultural movements that thrive in some form to this day: civil rights, the anti-war movement, environmentalism, feminism, and so on up to today's advocacy movements for causes sustainable development, simple living, and slow food.

Importantly, the affluent society critique shaped U.S. public policy during the administrations of presidents John F. Kennedy and especially Lyndon B. Johnson. In 1964, to promote his ambitious "Great Society" initiative targeting domestic poverty and racial injustice, President Johnson famously uttered, "the Great Society is concerned not with how much, but with how good—not with the quantity of goods but with the quality of our lives" (quoted in Rapley 2003: 4; for LBJ's reference to "QOL" in establishing the Department of Housing and Urban Development, see Vitale 2008: 33). Although the Great Society eventually foundered as the Vietnam War escalated, in many regards the affluent society critique made greater impact in Western Europe and Canada; as the welfare state in these nations expanded, so too did the idea of QOL into public policy. Meanwhile, the idea directly resonated with a number of intellectual currents across the world that occasionally evoke 'QOL' explicitly: from the field of welfare economics, to Abraham Maslow's ideas about the "hierarchy of needs" and "self-actualization" (now intellectual fixtures of environmentalism, voluntary simplicity, and other ostensible QOL movements), to the capabilities approach in the field of human development, to scholarly initiatives to gather data on social indicators (and, at the local level, community indicators) that measure sustainable human well-being more directly and more meaningfully than do benchmarks of economic output. A detailed history of the idea's diffusion in everyday discourse is beyond this paper's scope, but a suggestive picture comes from a content analysis of the phrase "quality of life" in popular books and magazines, scholarly journals, and governmental reports; see Table 1.²

Table 1: Publications with the phrase “quality of life”

Period	Mentioned in publication	Stated in title
1880-89	467	0
1890-99	611	1
1900-09	628	1
1910-19	646	0
1920-29	666	0
1930-39	679	6
1940-49	686	1
1950-59	818	1
1960-69	1366	25
1970-79	5530	828
1980-98	6370	814
1990-99	12600	1098
2000-08	11000	1827

Source: see endnote 2.

Obviously, it is a point of faith in this paper that 'QOL' has resonated past the unrecorded moment in the 1970s that marked the end of the liberal welfare-state's expansion. Nonetheless, there is reason to accept that a narrow empirical focus on explicit references to 'QOL' (for instance, in the manifest coding method I use in Table 1) underestimates the idea's broader influence as a social fact of everyday life. On this point I follow philosopher Christopher Megone (1990: 29-30):

Does the ordinary person have a grasp on this notion [of QOL]? Although it is plausible that he does not talk, nor even reflect, employing such a term, it is also plausible that he does have a grasp on it. To grasp the notion of quality of life, it is simply necessary to grasp the application of qualitative terms to one's life; and such talk of life, or of projects which constitute life, as going better or worse, is common enough... Thus the notion of (private) quality of life is not in itself theoretical.

Having established the idea's continuing resonance in everyday life, I now turn to three sites that reveal its characteristic understandings and pursuits today.

THE FAMILY QOL 'CRISIS'

For most families today, 'QOL' is more than an esoteric idea; it speaks to an acute crisis of material security, caregiving, and emotional labor. Three decades of economic restructuring and falling earnings have joined the women's movement in drawing a steadily growing number of mothers into the workforce to supplement fathers' incomes as traditional breadwinner. At the same time, norms of parental investments in money, time, and direct attention for childcare have ratcheted up, particularly for the middle and affluent classes. Popular media and self-help literature focus on parents' dilemmas: to stay afloat, parents take on more work hours... but family QOL suffers when time together at the dinner table becomes ever harder to schedule. Children are falling behind in educational attainment and workforce readiness to their counterparts in many developing countries... but advanced classes and extracurricular activities meant to enhance college applications have diminished children's QOL, leaving them overscheduled, overworked, and exhausted.

Alarmed that they "don't care enough" for their children's current and future well-being—a fear that bemuses many historians of childhood (e.g., Stearns 2003)—a growing number of parents now do more than parents ever did before. Many function as "split-shift" or "tag-team" parents, with at least one parent pulling a non-daytime workshift so that both can attend to children while bringing home two incomes. In the U.S., over one-quarter (27.8 percent) of dual-earner two-parent households fit this profile (Presser 2004: 51); data for other countries show lagged but growing rates of split-shift families (e.g., 15 percent of all dual-earner couples in France: Lesnard 2008). Furthermore, parents everywhere devote more time to the direct care of their children. Sociologist Suzanne Bianchi and her colleagues report that in 2000, the time that working mothers in the U.S. spent "primarily" tending

children increased to 11 hours a week, or “virtually the same” number of hours that stay-at-home mothers spent on this activity back in 1975. The increase in primary daycare also extends to single mothers (for whom the double shift of income earning and childcare is seldom a choice) and working fathers (Bianchi *et al.* 2006: 77, 64); similar patterns are found in 18 other Western nations, albeit at different levels and with different gaps between mothers and fathers (Gauthier *et al.* 2004). However, despite their remarkable increases in time spent on ‘quality time,’ working mothers still lag behind the standard set by nonemployed stay-at-home mothers. In 2000, U.S. stay-at-home moms spent an average of 15.6 hours a week on childcare—4.6 hours more than working mothers, and, needless to say, far more than earlier generations of stay-at-home mothers (Bianchi *et al.* 2006: 77).

As this suggests, behind the upward trends in childcare and rising standards of parenting—for working parents and stay-at-home mothers, married or single—lies the caregiving burden that women shoulder disproportionately. This gendered burden surfaces in the popular attention given in North America and the U.K. to the “mommy wars” between mothers who work full time versus mothers who stay at home. Sustained in talk shows, popular literature, Internet blogs, and message boards, this so-called cultural conflict pits mothers against one other based on their apparently antithetical priorities: stay-at-home mothers seek to maximize quantity and quality of their time with children, while working mothers provide families a fulfilled caretaker, a socially productive role model, and of course extra income (see Hays 1996: 145-6). Whereas service to children’s well-being is common ground in the mommy wars, debates on mothers’ own QOL often center on the issue of choice. Some advocates of stay-at-home motherhood embrace the traditionalism of maternal ‘sacrifice’ to the family, but others invoke the women’s movement legacy (and a venerable psychological dimension of QOL) of asserting women’s autonomy to choose a path for themselves. Thus, to working mothers who cite the feminist struggle to establish equality at work, many stay-at-home mothers counter with the “post-feminist” value of choice in deciding their own lifestyle. “Here is my admittedly utopian definition of feminism: self-determination for women,” says one

stay-at-home mother. "I am doing exactly what I want to be doing in this fleeting chapter of my life that includes my daughter's childhood" (Shea 2006: 112).

Some observers of the mommy wars express skepticism about the terms of mothers' choices. As American writer Judith Warner observes after raising her daughters in France,

It seems to me that the French, where mothers are concerned, have wedded their society's belief in *différence* to a realistic and humane view of modern women's lives. We Americans, on the other hand, have wedded an abstract belief in equal opportunity to punitive notions of women's "choice" and women's "compromises." The result is that once children come into the picture, women retain the right to compete in the marketplace, but lose the right to any kind of decent quality of life (Warner 2001: B1).

Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests the 'choice' of working or staying at home *for the duration* of their offspring's childhood is illusory, or at least overstated, for most women. Regardless of their preferences, mothers in North America and the U.K. usually find themselves in both camps over the course of their lives, staying home with children at some points and working (at least part-time) in others. The number and age of children, maternal leave policies, childcare availability and affordability, career opportunities and prospects, the stability of a breadwinner's job—such variables change frequently in the family's life-course and alter the costs and benefits for women and families if mothers stay at home or seek employment. What remains constant amidst the flux is the legacy of maternal devotion that is women's unique burden, a legacy that generates résumés marked by episodic employment and insubstantial experience in any single workplace. Alongside the resistance of employers to make workplaces and career tracks family friendly, it helps explain the recent plateau reached in women's entrance into the workforce (Porter 2006).

If the quality of mothers' choice to work or stay at home is suspect, it is nonetheless symptomatic how choice—more specifically, the necessity to choose—

casts a shadow over the mommy wars and the broader crisis of family QOL. This reflects the *liberal welfare regime* that characterizes welfare policy in the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In these countries (arguably, other Western nations are tending toward this regime), national policy on caregiving and other forms of welfare support is 'liberal' in terms of economic philosophy, designating the market as the chief mechanism for distributing social welfare and the individual householder as the normative recipient. Except for households living in means-tested levels of poverty, income to support family caregiving is normally obtained through parents' paid work (Gornick and Meyers 2003). Caregiving services, if they are not produced through families' unpaid labor, are similarly distributed through the private market: daycare centers, nannies, extracurricular classes, take-out food, and so on. Characteristically, the liberal approach to providing welfare stratifies its affordability along socioeconomic lines. Although compared to most other nations private childcare seems relatively inexpensive in the U.S.—at the low-end, it costs about 6 per cent of average family income (Esping-Andersen 1999: 56-7)—the chief reason is the nation's sizable pool of low-wage workers, which yields a large number of informal, unaccredited daycare and domestic services. This hardly bodes well for the overall quality of private childcare in the U.S., a fact that further compels many mothers to stay at home with children despite their preferences and complicates tidy notions of "competing values" over family QOL (Hofferth 1996).

More generally, the Anglo-American liberal welfare regime eschews the provision of collective welfare and, a separate possibility, the collective provision of (individual) welfare. The latter is what feminists call and Scandinavians enjoy as the decommodification of caregiving, and its implications go well beyond the public provision of childcare facilities. The liberal welfare regime compels all its subjects to enter the market by themselves in order to 'pursue QOL' for themselves and their households. It gives rise to a worldview of individual market choice that, despite its regressive consequences, colors even the most progressive or 'QOL-enhancing' initiatives in the workplace, as the next section illustrates.

WORK AS THE MUSE OF QUALITY OF LIFE

Related to the crisis of family QOL, a crisis of work-based QOL has emerged over two to three decades of job restructuring. Anxiety over job loss, underemployment, and other forms of work's precarity takes its toll upon blue- and white-collar workers alike. Many are compelled to put in a historically unprecedented number of work-hours, often just to keep themselves and their households financially afloat. And even in secure, well-paying jobs, workers find that the demands of spending time at work, bringing work home, and being on call around the clock create work-life imbalance that undermines QOL for themselves and loved ones.

At the same time, public interest in the potential of work to *enhance* personal QOL has grown. One popular discourse found in self-help bookshelves and human resources departments comes from renown positive psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who studies the ways that people experience what he calls "flow." His research identifies eight dimensions to this state of subjective well-being:

When people reflect on how it feels when their experience is most positive, they mention one, and often all, of the following. First, the experience usually occurs when we confront tasks we have a chance of completing. Second, we must be able to concentrate on what we are doing. Third and fourth, the concentration is usually possible because the task undertaken has clear goals and provides immediate feedback. Fifth, one acts with a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life. Sixth, enjoyable experiences allow people to exercise a sense of control over their actions. Seventh, concern for the self disappears, yet paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over. Finally, the sense of the duration of time is altered; hours pass by in minutes, and minutes can stretch out to seem like hours (Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 49).

Significantly, reforming the workplace is not an essential condition for more people to experience flow. "Happiness, in fact, is a condition that must be prepared for, cultivated, and defended privately by each person," Csikszentmihalyi (1990: 2-3) observes. "People who learn to control inner experience will be able to determine the quality of their lives, which is as close as any of us can come to being happy... Optimal experience is thus something we *make* happen." This voluntarism can involve making major decisions about the paths people find themselves on—getting a better job, for instance—or simply coaching themselves to think differently about those paths, either by concentrating on what is most appealing about their present work situations or simply resigning themselves to finding recreation in a personal hobby outside of work.

Another popular view of work as the muse of QOL comes from regional planning professor Richard Florida, who has emphasized the empirical primacy and human potential of *creativity* in today's economies, workplaces, and communities. His research on the so-called creative class views creativity in ways that resemble the idea of flow, but Florida emphasizes the setting and pace for creativity in ways that Csikszentmihalyi does not. Typically, the proper organizational forms for creativity are non-hierarchical, non-specialist milieus for social interaction, in which workers come together for productive collaboration and inspirational chit-chat, then break off for intense effort or recreational distraction (Florida 2002: 31-5). Such workplaces are most common in talent-heavy sectors like high technology, media and culture, finance consulting, and research and education. Particularly outside of academia, these sectors are often immersed in the lifestyles and activities that lure young talent (from recent college grads, to childless or nanny-equipped 30- and 40-somethings) to cities or other amenity-rich places. Many of Florida's critics contend that he overgeneralizes the typicality, either present or future, of the creative class, but a key reason his creativity thesis has resonated for so many is because it conceptualizes a worker who is quite attractive to employers: one who occupies the most adaptable life-stage and is rarely encumbered by family dependents or other commitments that might preempt long hours of devoted and not necessarily well-paid creativity. She usually comes recently graduated from

college and versed in the latest skills in symbolic creation and analysis; her youth inculcates her in the latest tastes, lifestyles, and sociabilities that marketers and consultants value highly. In these ways, the creative worker's life-stage and lifestyle preformat her for flexibility and creative savvy in the new world of work.

These perspectives on work as the muse of QOL contrast remarkably from the "quality of working life" initiative, popular among human resources professionals and union leaders in the 1970s and 80s, that acknowledged enhancing work-based QOL would necessarily involve major organizational reform. Arguably, this initiative's once-radical calls for task variety, worker feedback, and creative autonomy gained traction because they complemented a simultaneous corporate interest in the competitiveness derived from "total quality management" and "flexible production" (Ross 2009). Yet even this managerial cooptation drew attention to collective relations of employment in ways that are significantly absent in contemporary views of work-based QOL. Compared to the now-bygone quality of working life initiative, today's researchers and professionals emphasize *workers' lives outside the workplace* as the chief site to enhance work-based QOL. A typical article (Dallimore and Mickel 2006: 63) on employers' QOL policies published in the management journal *Human Relations* states, "We define quality-of-life issues as any that impact a person's perception of his/her overall life quality. One such example is work-family balance... [O]ther issues might include states of being (e.g., satisfaction and balance in various life domains, physical and mental health, and well-being), having resources (e.g. time, money), and doing activities (e.g. work, recreation and leisure, service to others)." Such emphasis on life outside the workplace is of course reasonable, given the turbulence and risk that accompany job restructuring. With stable workplaces and steady employment increasingly relics of the past, workers can do little but contract for enhancements to their private work-life nexus for as long as their current job lasts.

Csikszentmihalyi and Florida join other recent expert discourses—such as *Free Agent Nation* (Pink 2001), the would-be self-actualization manifesto for the independent contractor, temporary employee, and so-called permalancer—in divorcing 'work-based QOL' from the historical contexts, collective negotiations, and

concrete human relationships out of which workers have customarily derived meaning and satisfaction at work: the traditionalistic solidarity of community and labor, the stolid but reliable bureaucracy, the post-WWII "Fordist" compact between capital and organized labor, and the particular office or factory where personal relationships, office subcultures, and emotional satisfactions are found (cf. Bauman 2000: 148-9). Yet they go further than redirecting the QOL beholder's attention to workers' private lives; they assert that a good job derives ultimately from a worker's subjective potentiality, in which she cultivates a sensibility or a lifestyle/lifestage best suited to reap the 'intrinsic' rewards of work. The discourses of flow and creativity recast real social relations into a subjective, portable *thing* that workers can define for themselves, trade off against other personal preferences, seek in any given workplace, and pursue further through the many jobs they take and leave over the course of their 'careers.' In short, they naturalize the labor market as the setting in which work-based QOL is understood and pursued, recasting the idiosyncratic experience of work's joys, toils, risks, and tradeoffs into a universal currency of individual choice.

PURSUING QUALITY OF LIFE IN PLACE

For a less individualized experience of QOL, it would seem reasonable to look at its relationship to place, be that neighborhood, municipality, region, or even nation. Place offers a tangible example of "public QOL," insofar as it embodies a collective infrastructure of services, amenities, landscapes, and other QOL-affecting features that are external to users (residents, workers, shoppers, commuters, tourists, and other place occupants) and shared by them all. Also, a communitarian impulse at odds with the (civil) libertarian primacy given to individual freedom can often be discerned in understandings and pursuits of place-based QOL (Vitale 2008; O'Toole 2007). Examples include the "community policing" policy that punishes so-called quality-of-life infractions (homelessness, graffiti, informal street vending and other feared precursors to full-blown street crime and urban disorder) and New Urbanist planning codes restricting commercial development and residential land

uses that violate the coherence of planning themes and public transit-oriented development.

It is misleading, however, to locate the experience of place-based QOL completely at the scale of place itself—as, for instance, the community indicators field in QOL research typically does. To do so ignores how most people encounter place-based QOL through the experience of travel, tourism and migration across geography. Growing popular interest in visiting, living part-time in, or moving full-time to places “with a high QOL” of various stripes is reflected in the proliferation of city ratings and best-places lists in websites, magazine special editions (Money Magazine is a well-known example), and popular guidebooks that rank different places for general interest, particular demographics (e.g., *Best Places to Raise Your Family*), or specific activities and interests (e.g., *The 100 Best Art Towns in America*). These and other place media—think of travel channels on cable television, or of regional lifestyle magazines found on waiting-room tables—stimulate awareness about the QOL to be found in particular places and about the various dimensions of place-based QOL in general: environmental amenities, place character and “authenticity,” costs of living, etc. For the *QOL migrants* who, as individuals and households, take this pursuit of QOL to the next step, place provides the means to express personal values, pursue lifestyles, and derive satisfaction and well-being as a result:

Take Stuart Leventhal. A venture capitalist who now lives in Park City, Utah, Leventhal grew up in the Silicon Valley city of Palo Alto in the 1950s. When he left Palo Alto for good in 1998 for the mountaintop community outside Salt Lake City, Palo Alto no longer resembled the quaint, safe college town that it had once been. Sitting in a Starbucks several blocks from his new home, Leventhal recalled, “You didn’t lock your doors. As a kid you just ran around and no one worried. I wouldn’t want to be a kid growing up there now. There’s too much pressure in the valley now....”

“Here it’s different. The quality of life we have here is fantastic—it has all the activities you would ever want. A day in the life of a child here is great.

Here you get to structure your life the way you want it to be. This place is a time warp. Go twenty miles from where we are and the big talk is crossbow hunting season. You go here for the kids because things haven't changed so much" (Kotkin 2000: 47).

Popular and scholarly pronouncements that changes in technology and economy have triggered a rise in full-time QOL migrations are commonplace, but some evidence casts doubt on this trend as it is generally understood. Claude Fischer (2002: 193) has found that in the U.S., whose residents are generally thought to move more frequently than citizens of other developed nations, "increasing longevity, greater affluence and security, and the widening range of daily mobility" (the last especially evocative of American suburbs' auto-centrism) have made Americans *more* rooted than at any time in the recent past. If QOL migration should not be overestimated as a general pattern, this activity nonetheless colors contemporary understandings and pursuits of place-based QOL significantly. Most notably, the sustained growth in tourism, seasonal migration (e.g., the "snowbird" phenomenon), and second-home residences suggest that people increasingly access shorter-term modalities of QOL migration. Importantly, pursuers of QOL can also trade place off against other domains for QOL along over different life-stages and opportunities. Perhaps a household undertakes a long-distance commute that separates working parents for several days a week as a way to 'enhance QOL' in terms of their individual careers and shared wealth; if it wears on them over time, it may also be the 'dues' they need to pay before they can reward themselves with a more harmonious balance of work-life balance and place-based QOL.

As this suggests, even those who never leave their armchair can adopt the QOL migrant's gaze, evaluating and trying on different places, at least in their imagination. The weighing of utilitarian, affective, and aesthetic concerns for 'what we want from place'; the abstracting, comparative scan of geography and lifestyle—as a cultural framework, the QOL migrant's gaze can exert a remarkable cognitive emancipation upon even the most banal of activities, such as a shopping trip or a commute. "When one likes a town because it is small, one does not have to think

about or come to terms with the particularity of the town because what is attractive about it only incidentally belongs to it," Kieran Bonner (1997: 167) has observed in his study of Canadian exurban migrants. Significantly, this gaze also exerts the same force back home and throughout everyday life, freeing reflections of 'what we want from the moral inertia of extant settings, livelihoods, relationships, and daily rounds. That QOL migration serves as an emblem for the ultimate pursuit in self-actualization underscores the moral rootlessness at the base of contemporary understandings and pursuits of QOL more generally. Freeing the beholder from the local commitments and loyalties that once gave place its primordial, ascriptive power, QOL migration frames the experience of public QOL, or any inherited condition for QOL, as a choice to be reconsidered at any time.

AN IDEA FOR LIQUID LIFE

It may seem an act of scholarly hubris to conclude this cursory tour of social trends and debates by summarizing the dominant outlook through which 'QOL' informs and constrains the greater good. For one reason, this paper has only scratched the surface of the diverse expectations, conditions, and values of human well-being that the idea of QOL can accommodate. However, the underlying social contexts covered here—the Anglo-American liberal welfare regime; the "flexible" and turbulent thrust of job restructuring; the circulation of people, ideas, and place-images across geography—are hardly inconsistent with the premise that people can hold a great diversity of QOL conceptions and preferences. Indeed, the thrust of these contexts is to diversify, proliferate, and stratify the understandings and pursuits of QOL. In this sense, the dominant QOL outlook refers not to a convergence upon particular meanings or experiences of 'real' QOL, but to a broader cultural framework that informs and constrains the possibilities of this multifaceted and mobilizing idea.

Through the compulsory individualism of welfare pursuits, the emphasis on private subjectivity, and the moral emancipation from community and its social affiliations, 'QOL' makes possible—indeed *encourages*—the incessant recalculation

of personal priorities and values regarding the good life that life under liquid modernity demands (Bauman 2008). Freed from the restrictions of social commitments and historic legacies, its pursuers can undertake discontinuous reinventions of the self. They can eschew the traditional, ascriptive force of community in favor of voluntary submission to the communitarianism of their whim, if not a more radical individualism (cf. Sennett 1998; Bellah *et al.* 1985). 'QOL' constitutes its pursuers as individual actors seeking subjective satisfactions and personal expressions—in short, it enrolls them into a consumer orientation toward QOL. What does this mean? Certainly, someone may be profiting from the goods, services, jobs and properties that provide QOL! Yet even when enhancing QOL involves *refraining* from consumption (as in the voluntary simplicity movement), entrance into such QOL “communities” presumes the exercise of personal choice by *a priori* consumer subjects (cf. Bauman 1998). In this way, 'QOL' ushers in the neoliberal *homo economicus* even for those who take no action at all to “enhance their QOL.”

The irony, of course, is that pursuers of QOL frequently invoke the idea to resist the unrestrained market that neoliberalism celebrates. Corporate abandonment of the post-WWII labor peace; the shirking of welfare obligations by the nation-state; the fiscal looting of the middle and working classes, whose wages have declined steadily over three decades; the “race to the bottom” that compels localities to embrace value-free development—such trends have bequeathed the economic precarity and alienating landscapes that, in the earlier era of the affluent society, 'QOL' once critically refused. The idea's power, it seems, is to make manifest cherished values of the public good: *autonomy* for the individual, *freedom* from unthinking custom and hierarchical obedience, the cultivation of the arts and principles that constitute *civilization*. Yet if ghosts of the affluent society still haunt 'QOL,' a profound historical amnesia informs this resistance, obscuring the collective concerns for social inequality and amoral individualism that motivated the concern for QOL in that era. Gone is the politically liberal promise that individual well-being is the birthright of the unfortunate as well as the fortunate, and that collective QOL—a more meaningful measure of social progress than simple growth and

prosperity—is an end in itself (cf. Bauman 2007: 140). As the recent struggles in the U.S. to establish health care reform (perhaps the clearest descendent of the Great Society initiative, but which now dispels skepticism with references to competition and individual choice), 'QOL' uneasily supports any moral principles that might give moral primacy to—and require sacrifice on behalf of—the collective and the Other.

I hope this argument makes clear how 'QOL' as it is understood and pursued through its dominant outlook embodies the amnesic state of permanent transformation that Zygmunt Bauman has theorized so compellingly as the consumer subjectivity under liquid modernity. Yet I would conclude by noting an internal tension within Bauman's theoretical framework that, for my purposes, can be discerned around the issue of reflexivity. Bauman writes frequently and caustically of the "unreflexive" impulse evident in today's consumerism. Most notably, in *Consuming Life* he states:

[C]onsumerist *culture* is the peculiar fashion in which the members of a society of consumers think of behaving or in which they behave 'unreflexively' — or in other words *without* thinking about what they consider to be their life purpose and what they believe to be right means of reaching it, about how they set things and acts relevant to that purpose apart from things and acts they dismiss as irrelevant, about what excites them and what leaves them lukewarm or indifferent, what attracts them and what repels, what prompts them into action and what nudges them to escape, what they desire, what they fear and at what point fears and desires balance each other out... (Bauman 2007: 52)

Furthermore, Bauman's criticism often emphasizes the superficial and crassly promotional products, services, and activities with which consumer subjects pursue "the art of life" under liquid modernity: choosing among brands, social networking, entering reality show competitions, and the like (Bauman 2008).

If Bauman's impulse to recoil from such banal commercialism is understandable, I would contend that the emblematic QOL seekers in this paper

would likely share his view! That is to say, contemporary pursuits of QOL of the kinds noted in this paper *do* partake of the more meaningful and less commercialized inquiry into the self that Bauman advocates. To widen the scope of the term under question, the refusal embodied in the politics of QOL illustrates the reflexive shift that, for social theorists like Ronald Inglehart (1990) and Ulrich Beck (1994), brings modern societies one step closer to the dreams of the Enlightenment. Yet these more 'authentic' instances of reflexivity still do not escape the horizons of consumer culture. How then do we understand the limits of reflexivity under liquid modernity? Contemporary understandings and pursuits of QOL illustrate reflexivity, yes, but specifically an *aesthetic* reflexivity (Lash 1994). That is, 'QOL' resists the universalizing thrust of market inequality, bureaucratic obedience, and alienating development through an expressive interpretation of the particular: a personal 'value' or 'lifestyle,' an idiosyncratic 'career' through work and life, a place 'to get away from it all'. These may be effective and meaningful strategies to enhance personal well-being, but insofar as they accommodate and seek satisfaction from unquestioned choices and external constraints, they do little to sustain the earlier, critical promise of 'QOL.'

Endnotes

¹ I use the following conventions when referring to quality of life in this paper. To emphasize the properties and usage of an abstract idea of no specific attribution, I use single-apostrophe quotation marks: 'quality of life,' 'high' quality of life, etc. Quotation marks with double apostrophes refer to statements, names, and ideas of specific attribution: the French government's "Ministry of Quality of Life," etc. Without quotation marks, I denote the empirical conditions and possessive relations of quality of life: the scholarly research on quality of life, etc.

² Although this method is indeterminately imprecise, its value derives from the sheer size of the Google Book Search database: over 7 million publications as of January 6, 2009, the date on which I conducted the search. By this time, Google's book database included the out-of-print collections of 13 English-speaking university libraries (Columbia University, Cornell University, Harvard University, Oxford University, Princeton University, the University of California, the University of Michigan, the University of Texas-Austin, the University of Virginia, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison) plus the New York Public Library. Also, at the time of my search Google had just settled a class action lawsuit brought by the Authors Guild, the Association of American Publishers and a handful of authors and publishers, which allowed the full online display and search of many in-print publications. My search method underestimates the actual publications of the phrase 'QOL' by its excluding conventional modifications (e.g., "quality of adolescent life") and variations (e.g., "qualities of life"). On the other hand, the method overestimates these publications with its occasional miscodings of publication years and multiple citations of the same publication in the same year (generally a result of multiple publishers and, for scholarly publications, multiple publication venues).

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