

**Unsuspecting Souls: The Disappearance of the Human Being**

By Barry Sanders.

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Reviewed by Ayşem Mert

Sarah told me, ‘This Tuesday Dad will die.’ Or maybe she said, ‘It’s Dad’s death day.’—something like that.... I spent minutes trying to find the words to write that down on my Outlook Agenda, so I don’t know how I felt.

These sentences belong to my neighbour and they had a profound effect on me. They made me wonder where the new tragedy of humanity lies. In the fact that his friend Sarah can talk about her father’s death in this fashion? In the fact that euthanasia is now a choice? In that the last soul Sarah’s father will see is his physician? In that my neighbour actually wrote this event on his online agenda? Or that he couldn’t find the words?

And then again, would my neighbour be equally shocked and intimidated had he been a woman? A woman his age might have written a sentence like, “Doctor appointment: I will give birth on the 9<sup>th</sup> of August” on her online agenda at least once, as it has become increasingly fashionable to give birth by appointment. Now, one dies by appointment. Maybe there is a gender-based difference in the extent to which such developments surprise us. As for gender, for a while now, we’ve been learning what’s to come “before the *id* knows.” Hélène Cixous reflects:

You see, I’m a woman of the period of time—and time, too, is in the process of passing—in which we didn’t know if, when pregnant, we were going to have a girl or a boy—not till the last minute. I want the last minute. I don’t want to know before the last minute. Even if *id* knows. The problem: when is the last minute? The last minute is in the other world. It’s afterwards.<sup>1</sup>

Time, too, is in the process of passing; within a lifetime, we moved from the point of “It’s a boy!” to the point of “This Tuesday is Dad’s death day....” How did those *other worldly* minutes of birth and of death—distinct from life itself—become entries on online agendas? How did we carry that precious, mysterious, sacred last minute to our mortal world? How did we give it up? And why?

Barry Sanders’ new book *Unsuspecting Souls: The Disappearance of the Human Being* is precisely about such questions concerning life and death, and the most novel tragedy of humanity. In a string of exciting anecdotes from the nineteenth century onwards, the book explains today’s United States (and certain features of much of western, industrialised cultures). Its main argument is that human essence is lost and human beings are no longer what they once were. This is not news either; the human essence has been in a gradual process of disappearing for more than two centuries now. In fact, most of the groundwork was laid in that short nineteenth century, and we are continuously inventing new ways of further disembodiment of our already disappearing *being*.

At first, I disagreed with such an undertheorised idea of essence (As Cixous demonstrates, at our most primal, women experience this process differently than men, even if we “want the last minute,” it’s been a while since we have lost any control over the matter...). It is difficult to imagine a certain essence for the whole of humanity, experienced in a similar fashion. Halfway through the book Sanders also makes this point: the various

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 40.

nineteenth century endeavours to distil the essence of humanity not only failed but also further thwarted the conceptual possibility of essence as such. However, despite this crucial disagreement, I have been overwhelmed by the snapshots Sanders takes of the nineteenth century to explain the twentieth and ask questions about the twenty-first. He scrutinises almost every dimension of that mysterious time: politics, entertainment, literature, philosophy, science, art, and technology all take turns in this photo album. Just like a family album, the more one looks, the more one understands the past, her parents, and in fact herself. Unlike a family album, each snapshot is well-chosen, perfectly executed, and carefully ordered. This collage of nineteenth century anecdotes, hovering around some common themes, weaves today to yesterday and tomorrow. In the middle there is something ethereal, so hard to grasp that it justifies (if not requires) this creative method: the disembodiment we are subjectively experiencing every day. Taking a string of snapshots is indeed one of the few ways to make sense of this experience. And making sense *is* difficult for the disembodied individual. Today's *greatest* tragedy is our constant need to imbue matters of life and death with meaning, while we are increasingly unable to. The greater the need, the less the ability—existential *heteronomy*.

This is where Sanders' project becomes convincing and impressive. What has been lost throughout the nineteenth century is sacredness, of the universal order and of our place in it as a society or as a species. Since the myth of the Great Chain of Being has been disrupted by the scientific method, there is little we value as sacred (and sacredness assumes the kind of commitment that would label one a fundamentalist today!). Surely, the place of human beings in the Great Chain of Being was rather expedient; this probably made it such a successful myth. But imagine how it must have shocked and hurt those first few generations of souls who once stood between that which is divine and what which is earthly, to be rendered 'just another species.' And human societies have received little healing after falling off the chain (Can we blame two world wars on this shock? Are we sure we healed?). The book's focus on the nineteenth century is therefore justified if we are to understand, heal, and forgive ourselves.

At any rate, since the Chain broke, we seem to have lost some of our ability to think of the universe and our identity in synch. Moreover, this incapability seems to coincide with a specific paradigm—in the euthanasia example, with my neighbour's will to write this event on his Outlook Agenda. His self-reflection has been halted, at least to some extent, by having to write this unusual event on his online agenda. And although the exact causality is hard to point to, this is no random coincidence. Think of Ivan Illich's observation that, 1978, the year Microsoft launched its DOS operating system, was also the year the term *immune system* was coined, marking the beginning of systems analysis that quickly and "surreptitiously affected people's perception of themselves."<sup>2</sup> Illich was referring to a paradigm shift that escaped most theorists of modernity: a shift towards an *amortal society*. Although medicalisation resulted in the dependence of the individual and the counterproductivity of the health system, disembodiment only came along with systems thinking. Once we started to perceive and construct ourselves as "living systems," we could no longer die our own deaths:

The ability to die one's own death depends on the depth of one's embodiment. [...] [L]ives in managed states like the RAM drive on [a PC] do not die; they break down. You can prepare to die as a Stoic, Epicurean or Christian. But the breakdown of life cannot be imagined as a forthcoming intransitive action. The end of life can only be postponed. And for many, this managed

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<sup>2</sup> Ivan Illich, "Death Undefeated," *BMJ* 311 (1995), 1653.

postponement has been lifelong [which] began when their mother observed a fetus on the ultrasound screen.<sup>3</sup>

The amortal society is the state in which this life-long management commonly impedes our acceptance of our fragile existence and irredeemable death. *Unsuspecting Souls* is a historical account written from within the amortal society. Both for Illich and for Sanders, the amortal society represents a lesser way of 'being.' They join Cixous in the understanding that when it comes to matters of life and death, these last minutes are sacred, other-worldly; and they want the ultimate last minute back! They both believe that the return of the last minute will have affects on life itself.

Illich regards institutionalisation as a root cause of corruption, while systems thinking relies on the assumption that each institution is a system. In order to constitute a system, the relationship(s) in question must be repetitive or cyclical, at times defeating their initial function and aim. Autonomy, conviviality, adaptability and flexibility are all secondary if not fundamentally opposed to the formation of a system. In its most perfect abstraction, a social system is the institutionalisation, the sedimentation of social codes, symbols and relations. For Sanders, on the other hand, the problem appears to be in the transformation of death (and how this affects life). Once a solid experience, after the nineteenth century, death has become elusive or even worse it has been reduced to deletion. If someone (or something) lives and dies, it leaves a mark, a memory, a little sediment that has changed the world forever—albeit insignificantly. If something is deleted, however, it simply disappears—no trace, no remains, no nothing. Deletion is not similar to death! It is much more similar to what has happened to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Very few experience deletion and survive to tell the story. Thus, when Hillary Clinton used words such as “wiping it off the map,” or “totally obliterated them” about Iran, the metaphor didn't become scary, it simply collapsed.<sup>4</sup>

Deletion and narration do not coincide. As I write this text (ironically on a word processor), I cannot simultaneously delete it. As I delete, I can't narrate. The metaphor collapses when we cannot narrate our own stories of life and death, however brutal, uncomfortable, brave, or tragic. Sanders' project is to close the circle in three steps: 1) Sanders notes how Illich understands Erwin Schroedinger as “the first to use writing no longer as a metaphor but as an explanatory analogy.”<sup>5</sup> 2) He is fascinated by the subversive side of Schroedinger's experiment. In a time of forceful categorisation, the only way to collapse categories is by making them irrelevant, however counterintuitive this may be:

Schroedinger postulated [...] an object may exist in several states at once, but when a person observes that very same object it always collapses into one state. Schroedinger annoyed those outside the scientific community by arguing, for example, that his cat could be both alive and dead at the same time, but that when he looked at it, the cat always collapsed into the one state—of total aliveness. Historians of science have taken to calling this phenomenon *the observer's paradox*. And to name this situation that ran so counter to logic, Schroedinger paid homage to a fantastical work of nineteenth-century literature: He described the condition of his mystifying cat as Draculated. [...] Schroedinger allowed us ordinary people to believe in either/or at the same moment.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Barry Sanders, *Unsuspecting Souls: The Disappearance of the Human Being* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2009), 325.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. (my emphasis)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 320-21. (my emphasis)

3) Sanders dares us to engage in two simultaneous opposing actions. On the one hand he shows us the need to water down that which is categorised by science, by law, by biology, by convention, by politics, by logic *etc.* On the other hand, he dares us to look inside the box that is the twenty-first century and exert *the observers' influence*. Only then can we see the state of human *being*. Only then will humanity collapse into one state and that state is such that we will have to reflect upon and respond to the life and death of others.

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