

The End of Utopia as We Know It? Zygmunt Bauman's Take on Our Contemporary Times

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Abstract

According to Zygmunt Bauman, we live in a world of hunting and hunters, where instead of lingering in the present and appreciating it for what it holds, we push into the future at an ever-increasing speed, unable to seize the day and live the moment. When too concerned with maintaining a state of flux we lose sight of the utopia that we may partly be living in – at least in a western world generally spared from first-hand warfare, where citizens enjoy technological advancements and breakthroughs. To paraphrase Bauman's words written in 2005 but holding true to this day we harbour a continuous dream of a world void of accidents. Restlessly we live through the day while eagerly anticipating the next. In doing so, we not only disregard the importance of the present but also that of the past, seemingly forgetting about it altogether. On a national level, this is a hunter's "utopia" where citizens are engaged in an individual postmodern hunt into an uncertain future and belonging to a collective would rather hold you back than facilitate the process of moving forward. Bauman questions whether in the name of game-keeping globalisation and a utopia that is ultimately unachievable, we are witnessing an end to what may have been regarded as an ideal time and place. Fast-forward to 2017 and having now embarked on an equally shaky journey into 2018 we face a world in disarray and fragmentation. This paper applies Bauman's lucid thoughts to an analysis of our unpredictable present.

Keywords: Bauman, postmodernity, utopia/dystopia, fearfulness, unpredictability, fragmentation

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Introduction

This study is steeped in a postmodern tradition, with Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman being one of the most iconic and important figures within the field of sociocultural studies and philosophy to date. As such, he provides us with insights and tools through which we may better be able to interpret our often unpredictable and fearful present, and future. By analysing a snippet of current news from a Baumanian perspective, I hope this paper can shed light on trends and events that need to be examined in view of individualism and the breaking away from the collective, disintegrating tendencies on a national level, lack of diplomacy and collaboration on a political level, and a general lack of stability in a world defined by ambivalence, anxiety and loneliness on an individual level and by a state of flux also on a national and global scale.

Bauman, his work and legacy

If Leonard Cohen was the singing poet of our times, commenting on all aspects of the individual and society through pertinent and insightful lyrics and haunting and evocative music that allows our feelings and emotions to soar to new levels and moves and affects us to this day, his contemporary Bauman who, like Cohen, passed away in 2017, can be regarded as the postmodern prophet and guru par excellence. Without a doubt one of the greatest thinkers to date, in his impressive body of work that can be analysed from an interdisciplinary perspective, Bauman embraces topics ranging from industrialization, modernity, consumerism, morality (and the lack of it), and the Holocaust, to theories relating to postmodernity and individualism as expressed within the context of an increasingly globalised world. Originally elaborating on aspects of modernity in books such as *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991) and *Modernity and The Holocaust* (1989) - where he draws from Hanna Arendt, arguing that “The Holocaust could merely have uncovered another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar, face we so admire” – Bauman coined the expression “liquid modernity” to refer to the increased fluidity of our times, a state of flux where society undergoes a process of liquefaction or non-solidification with regard to social and political norms and structures, as well as to our identity and, one might add, gender expressions, which are also fluid and ever shifting. In *Liquid Life* (2005) Bauman reflects at length on the overall lack of stability of contemporary society and its individual. The arguments in this text could be considered an initiation to his further development of ideas on postmodernity as an era subjected to constant changes and where little is certain or predictable. In a collaborative publication, Bauman views postmodernity as an “unfinished” and also “unfinishable ... project of modernity” (Bauman and Tester, 2001), thus linking the two concepts and seeing them as interrelated and interdependent. He further talks of an individual under siege and defines “liquid modern” as a society in which “the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines”.

Bauman has made a real impact also in relation to globalisation theories in an era defined by our constant hunt for connectedness yet where societies seem to be more fragmented than ever, and in his ever-pertinent reflections on our contemporary times he has been embraced by scholars across disciplines and by individuals who do not always themselves come from an academic background. The very Bauman is known

to have described himself as an "ambivalent outsider" ("Interview with Zygmunt Bauman," 2010) with regard to the set structures, norms and expectations within the field of Academia. In his words, "I guess I am doomed to remain an outsider to the end, lacking as I am the indispensable qualities of an academic insider: school loyalty, conformity to the procedure, and readiness to obey by the school-endorsed criteria of cohesion and consistency. And frankly, I don't mind." ("Interview with Zygmunt Bauman," 2010).

Having himself said that, Bauman was, in fact, a brilliant and natural scholar who astutely yet seemingly effortlessly assessed flawed human relationships in an increasingly globalised yet not necessarily positively interconnected world. In doing so he helps us better understand the world we live in – and the verdict he delivers tends to be dark and sombre. The scholar, who drew in part from his own life experiences and societal observations in his many spoken and written discourses, was of Jewish heritage and grew up in an era where the cultural and spiritual value of his people and the pillars on which their belief system rests were scorned and rejected when Jews were faced with the rising Nazi regime. Born in Poland, Poznań, in 1925, Bauman experienced the horrors of war and enforced displacement firsthand when his family were forced to flee their native territory in 1939. He later took a clear stance against his father's Zionist views, which caused a rift between the two. Bauman's comprehensive research in sociology and subsequent lecturing career took him first to The University of Warsaw then to Israel where he lectured in Tel Aviv and Haifa before making the definite move to England with intellectual sparring partner; first influential wife Janina, also a writer who supported and inspired her husband throughout. Bauman took up a position as Professor in Sociology at the University of Leeds, serving them for many important decades and leaving behind a rich and comprehensive legacy. His scholarly contributions were further acknowledged by the same University when Bauman received the title of Professor Emeritus. In 2010 The Bauman Institute at the School of Sociology and Social Policy was established in honour of their famous scholar and with the aim of keeping his spirit alive and integrating Baumanian theories into the very foundations of this institute, which sets out to "[d]evelop new insights and new directions of interdisciplinary social science research with a particular focus upon rethinking global society in the light of shared social, economic, environmental and political challenges in an age of modernity seemingly dominated by financialized capitalism" ("The Bauman Institute: About Us," 2018).

In the same year, 2010, Spain also honoured Bauman by bestowing upon him the prestigious Prince of Asturias Award" for having created "singularly valuable conceptual instruments for understanding the changing, speeded-up world in which we live" ("Zygmunt Bauman, Prince of Asturias Award for Communication and Humanities, has died," 2017). Other notable scholars, thinkers and philosophers that have been duly acknowledged for their creative, intellectual and humanitarian achievements are, e.g., Umberto Eco, aforementioned Cohen who has a lot in common with Bauman and whose lyrics, just like Bauman's discourses, can be used as guidance to interpret also the state of affairs of the United States¹ (as in the hauntingly powerful song *Democracy*), and German sociologist Jürgen Habermas expanding on

¹ Fittingly given the introduction to this paper, Cohen won the same award, in 2011.

theories relating to cosmopolitanism, which help us better understand globalisation as we know it.²

Bauman's impressive body of work that reflects his literary productivity includes, e.g., *Globalization – The Human Consequences* (1998), *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (2000), *Europe – an Unfinished Adventure* (2004), *Liquid Life* (2005), *Liquid Modernity* (2013), *Liquid Fear, Liquid Times – Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (2013), *Globalization – the Human Consequences, Society under Siege* (2013), and his last societal and historical reflections *Strangers at Our Door* (2016), as well as the posthumously published *Retrotopia* (2017), where he insightfully assesses societies making up the western world as they have been radically transformed with the arrival of new diasporas – with many displaced due to warfare and crises in their homelands. Tirelessly expressing his opinions to audiences looking for insight and guidance, Bauman gave lectures and spoke at conferences nationally and abroad, until the very end. With his lucid observations and superior ability to sum up the many dilemmas and peculiarities of our current era, the ever-active sociologist left an impact amongst readers and listeners spanning across ages who even after his own passing keep drawing value from Bauman's comparatively comprehensible and accessible arguments. He has attracted a real following in the pessimistic Spanish May 15 anti-austerity Movement, with origins in the Youth Without a Future movement and whose politically disillusioned members living in times of stifling recession applaud Bauman's negative assessment also of social media networks and the artificial reality in which their users operate, notably despite being inclined to use these platforms themselves. Bauman sees through the current social media hype declaring that “The difference between a community and a network is that you belong to a community, but a network belongs to you. You feel in control. You can add friends if you wish, you can delete them if you wish. You are in control of the important people to whom you relate. People feel a little better as a result, because loneliness, abandonment, is the great fear in our individualist age” (de Querol, 2016).

He continues: “[r]eal dialogue isn't about talking to people who believe the same things as you. Social media don't teach us to dialogue because it is so easy to avoid controversy... [...] most people use social media not to unite, not to open their horizons wider, but on the contrary, to cut themselves a comfort zone where the only sounds they hear are the echoes of their own voice, where the only things they see are the reflections of their own face. Social media are very useful, they provide pleasure, but they are a trap” (de Querol, 2016).

Utopian thoughts, and current news in light of Baumanian theories

Importantly in regard to the related July 2018 Brighton IAFOR conference on fearful futures in an “era of information and disinformation, fake news and hysterical polemic”, Bauman is deeply concerned with our fraught and anxiety-ridden times, regarding global society as what can be defined as a “dystopic utopia”. In *Retrotopia*

² A comparative analysis of Habermas and Bauman has been conducted by Jordan James McKenzie, in a thesis published in 2012.

he briefly anchors his argument in Thomas More's 16th-century vision of utopia as a society based on highly organised social and political structures. Utopia as we know it does not exist precisely because the concept is inherently a contradiction in terms. In a much-cited lecture held at Leeds School of Economics, entitled *Living in Utopia*, Bauman calls More's utopia a blueprint for a "world cleansed of security and fear" ... "but a dream" reminding us of the Greek etymological origin of the word: "eutopia" – meaning "good society" and "outopia" equalling "nowhere" (Bauman, 2005). Fast forward to 2018 and what someone may consider the utopia of a Western society generally governed by free will, that enjoys constant technological breakthroughs and where consumerism drives both national and local economics, has produced citizens inundated by information overload and who, both politically and socially, struggle to find their footing under an unscrupulous "Trumputin" world leadership – leaders joined by an equally ruthless North Korean counterpart. This so called free world is governed by political supremacy in the sign of intolerance and oppression.

When ruthless survival of the fittest becomes the rule by which to obey there is no room for weakness or dependency. In the specific case of today's global refugee crisis, the stream of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants to recipient countries has led to drastic measures, with the US known to have forcibly separated parents from children and recurring to a much contested zero-tolerance cage system a (or "fenced enclosures") (Krugman, 2018) as a way to temporarily stash away unwanted humans. In *Strangers at Our Door* Bauman addresses the panic that spreads when people are faced with the unknown and the unpredictable. He apparently makes specific reference to US-Mexican relations when he openly rejects "the building of walls ... to stop migrants short 'of our own backyards'" – calling the idea ludicrous (Bauman, 2016). And, still with reference to the policies and attitudes of a nation whose very framework rests on the principle that we are all created equal (Lindsay, 2016), what some might call an infamous speech held on the 100th day of his presidency, a crude – or perhaps downright sinister – Donald Trump borrowed passages from Al Wilson's 1968 song *The Snake*, to metaphorically refer to the influx of Syrian refugees to the US, comparing them to animals viciously biting their hosts or symbolically the hand that feeds them. Speeches along this line instil fear in people in the western world and create rifts and misunderstandings rather than comprehension and empathy.

On a global scale, such is the extent of the current refugee plight that it has been noted, in a recent publication, that "if the world's 65.6m forcibly displaced people formed their own country, it would be the 21st largest – smaller than Thailand, but bigger than France" (Nguyen, 2018). The reactions to the constant stream of people from outside entering what are considered safer territories are mixed, ranging from sympathy and concrete action in support for refugees and their ordeals, as in the case of the Refugee Week held in Melbourne, Australia, from 17 to 23 June, 2018, to fear of the social repercussions the formation of these new diasporas may have on the relative status quo. The antagonism amongst people living under so called democratic rule towards newcomers from outside often translates into violence and brutality. In these democratic times democracy seems to be as uncommon as is common sense. In the case of the US, what was used as an effective (albeit rather inane) catch-phrase in the leadup to the presidential elections: "Make America great again" would be better replaced by "Make America brutal and callous again". Indeed, in the aforementioned recent opinion piece in the New York Times, Paul Krugman argues that "What we're

witnessing is a systematic rejection of longstanding American values – the values that actually made America great”.

In this fragmented and tumultuous universe where people lead by leaders lacking in real leadership skills are forced to follow decisions taken by muddled and erratic minds and try to find a meaning behind the illogic that surrounds them, the fragmentation happens on a both national and individual level. Nationally, we are now witnessing a trend in countries across the globe to lose trust in what we may still refer to as the nation state. In Europe this is perhaps most strongly seen in the case of Catalonia which is engaged in an ongoing battle for complete separation and independence from Spain – the issue a complex one not only because Spain refuses to give up its stronghold on the economic powerhouse that is Catalonia and primarily Barcelona, but also because Catalonians are themselves deeply divided in their allegiances. A split from the collective also happens on an individual level with citizens often experiencing a sense of alienating dystopia within a frantic and stressful urban environment. Instead of coming together as one, people often fend for themselves and feel estranged and isolated from one another, not able to communicate on the same level – yet this isolation between individuals is sometimes self-imposed. In Bauman’s view we are engaged in a continual “escape” which is the “very opposite of utopia.” He talks of a hunter’s utopia made up of individuals on the move, who do not look back and who are part of a “individualized society of consumers”. According to Bauman, still with reference to his Leeds University speech, “You can no longer seriously hope to make *the world* a better place to live, you can’t even make really secure that better *place* in the world which you might have managed to cut out for yourself ... What is left to your concerns and efforts, is the fight against *losing*: try at least to stay among the hunters, since the only alternative is to find yourself among the hunted. And the fight against losing is a task which to be properly performed will require your full, undivided attention, twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week vigilance, and above all keeping on the move – as fast as you can...”

Indeed, these are the times of the never standing still, times of uncertainty where we are engaged in “self-focused pursuits” but have lost our direction and fail to understand “the sense of” it all (Living in Utopia). In our constant urge to keep moving, we lose our ability to linger in the present, seize the day and connect with people on a deeper level. In a world that is becoming more technocratic by the minute we ourselves are becoming more robotic and awkward in our interaction with one another.

Is there a turning back to humaneness, togetherness and kindness or will the future be as fearful as the present? If in our hunt for an unattainable utopia we realise the present is what matters, that the present is dependent on the past for its meaningful existence, and that the real strength of a society lies within the human values within each and every one of us and in our potential to interact in a positively dynamic manner while showing empathy along the way, then perhaps we can at least temporarily halt the tide of what is, in fact, a global disconnectedness. The solution to this crisis of humanity? “A fusion of horizons” through dialogue, according to Bauman quoting Hans-Georg Gadamer, and a “conversation aimed at understanding” (Bauman, 2016). Only through real dialogue, empathy and understanding can we prevent history from repeating itself, and can we draw from historical insights to better approach our fluid lives in the speedy present. Real possibilities exist of shaping the world into a positive place if we

take agency and responsibility for our own actions and use our free will to lead by example.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the importance of Baumanian thoughts applied to better understand our often problematic times, which he perceptively defines as “liquid” or “fluid”. Bauman himself now gone, his legacy lingers and his thoughts echo across our globalised world. While he has made a real contribution in social and political sciences, we can all draw from his many insights, across the board, and gain a real understanding of issues that often seem too illogical to even dare try comprehend. My reflections have sought to highlight how Bauman’s matter of fact assessments and analyses, void of sentimentality and embellishments, can philosophically and theoretically frame events shaping and impacting on our world for better or worse.

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