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Bauman (Zygmunt)

Submitted by Forum Vies Mobiles on Tue, 02/28/2017 - 12:17

Life and work

 Bauman's long and fully lived life was marked by major political upheavals of twentieth-century Europe. Born in Poznań (Poland) to non-observant Jewish parents, Bauman was a teenager when he fled to the Soviet Union escaping the Nazi army. There he joined a Polish military unit under command of the Soviet army and, in 1945, was awarded a military decoration for his actions in the battles of Kolberg and Berlin. Still in his mid twenties he became a major and worked at an intelligence unit. His military career ended in 1953 when he was dismissed after his father approached Israel's embassy to enquire about migrating to Israel. Out of work, he completed an MA in sociology and in 1954 he began teaching at the University of Warsaw until 1968 when, following a political purge, he, along with other Communist Poles of Jewish descent, left the country after having been forced to renounce to his Polish nationality. This second exile took him to Tel-Aviv and, shortly after, to Leeds (England), where he spent the rest of his life as a professor of sociology. This experience of exile and marginalization impacted his worldview and forged a lifelong concern for moral and ethical issues in relation to questions of cultural belonging and social exclusion.

A prolific author, Bauman wrote more than fifty books on modernity, consumerism, identity and globalization. Amongst his most celebrated works before retirement in 1990 is Modernity and the Holocaust, inspired by his wife's experience as a prisoner in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. In this book Bauman argues that modernity was a necessary condition of the Holocaust. Rather than being a reversal of modern values of progress and civilisation as other thinkers had written before, the Holocaust was the outcome of modern rationality, bureaucracy and industrialization.

In the 1980s and 1990s Bauman made seminal contributions to the debate about postmodernity, but from the mid 1990s he began to take a more critical stance towards this term. Rather than having left modernity behind, he argued, we have entered a new phase of modernity. He develops this argument in Liquid Modernity[^1], his best known book after retirement, which was followed by a series of shorter texts expanding this thesis such as Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds, Wasted Lives. Modernity and its Outcasts, Liquid Life, Liquid Fear, Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty. Along with other social theorists such as John Urry, Manuel Castells and Arjun Appadurai, Bauman has contributed to our understanding of the transformative unrest of modern society through metaphors of 'flows' and 'fluids'[^2].

Mobility in Bauman's work

 As a way of understanding mobility in Bauman's work, five inter-related entry points can be usefully applied:

 #### Ambivalence Contrary to general opinion, Bauman is not a pessimist regarding mobility. But he is not an optimist either. Rather than taking a normative stance, Bauman conceives of mobility in terms of ambivalence. This does not mean reducing its status to mere neutrality, attaining value only through its appropriation. Mobility is rather like what ancient Greeks called a Pharmakon, a substance which is simultaneously a cure and a poison.
 #### Mobility as relational This status of ambivalence is better understood through Bauman's notion of mobility as relational. Mobility for one only occurs at the expense of immobility for another. This means that there are 'losers' and 'winners'[^3] in mobility (1998: 88). The winners are those with the greatest degree of freedom to choose a life itinerary. The losers are those with their freedoms drastically curtailed. Globalization, Bauman argues, is a highly stratifying form of social organisation which 'divides as much as it unites ... what appears as globalization for some means localization for others; signalling a new freedom for some, upon many others it descends as an uninvited and cruel fate' (1998: 2). Mobility is the key stratifying principle in this new global order. The winners are the extraterritorial elites, the 'absentee landlords' who exist independently of 'territorially confined units of political and cultural power' (1998:3) and who, always ready to depart at will, grab opportunities wherever they rise. The losers are those who are bounded to place and whose life chances are affected by the relocation of global capital. 'If the new extraterritoriality of the elite feels like intoxicating freedom, the territoriality of the

rest feels less like home ground, and ever more like prison' (1998: 23). The losers are not just those who are forced to stay put, but also those who are forced to move. Bauman develops this point with the ideal types of the 'tourist' and the 'vagabond', which he describes as 'the metaphors of contemporary life' (1996: 14).
 'Like the vagabond, the tourist is extraterritorial; but unlike the vagabond, he lives his extraterritoriality as a privilege, as independence, as the right to be free, free to choose; as a license to restructure the world. … The world is the tourist's oyster … to be lived pleasurably –and thus given meaning' (Bauman 1993: 241).
 'Tourists stay or move at their heart's desire. They abandon a site when new untried opportunities beckon elsewhere. The vagabonds know that they won't stay in a place for long, however strongly they wish to, since nowhere they stay are they likely to be welcome. The tourists move because they find the world with their (global) reach irresistibly attractive –the vagabonds move because they find the world within their (local) reach unbearably inhospitable. The tourists travel because they want to, the vagabonds because they have no other bearable choice' (Bauman 1998: 87).
 Bauman argues that there are 'winners' and 'losers' because physical mobility and connectivity through information and communication technologies are the product of systemic relations. Owing to this systemic relationality, Bauman stresses that social spaces of immobility (places of marginalization and exclusion) are the inevitable outcome of a mobile world (see Postmodern Ethics, Globalization, Wasted Lives).
 #### Sociality The significance of mobility for sociality in Bauman's work is outlined clearly in Liquid Modernity. Here Bauman speaks of mobility both as a defining characteristic and as a crucial aspect of social transformation in the most recent stage of modernity that began in the 1970s and 1980s in the midst of the information revolution and the deregulation of global markets. This stage is termed 'liquid modernity', a new phase of modernity in which speed has become the most significant factor in social stratification. Interconnected with this, mobility is linked to the erosion of older forms of sociality. Mobility does not just connect some while simultaneously disconnecting others, enabling a differential advancement in the social ladder. More importantly, Bauman relates the increase in mobility with a decline of the skills of social bonding. The prioritization and reification of speed as a source of novelty, power and privilege lead to the experiencing of former ideals of strong relationships as burdensome[^4]. Commitment is seen as being fixed in one place and, in so being, having one's possibilities in the world constrained. As a result of this, relationships become fleeting and light, easy to make, but just as easy to break. This fragility of relationships is itself experienced as a threat and a source of anxiety. Thus, in Bauman's work connectivity, and mobility itself, can be a double

edged sword. This ambivalent aspect of mobility can exert painful effects. On the one hand there is the promise of a new world of possibilities. But at the same time, there is the fear of being disconnected, immobile and, therefore, excluded. If mobility, in Bauman's work, is a sign of connectivity, immobility is a sign of exclusion.
Ethics Bauman's notion of ambivalence does not preclude an analysis of the ethical implications of mobility. Here he points at a paradox; despite people experiencing unprecedented mobility and connectivity, our moral capacity has developed little[^5]. This position also links Bauman to writers such as Bourdieu and Boltanski. Mobility and connectivity permit the knowledge of global suffering (e.g. famine in Ethiopia) but, with this, the desire to alter such a state of affairs is not necessarily concomitant. The paradox therefore is this, in liquid modernity we know more but we remain impotent, and an increase in mobility has done little to further our moral capacities. Bauman does believe that this could change. However the prevailing situation in a world of liquid modernity and mobility, with their increased speed and rapid connectivity and de-connectivity, is indifference (see Postmodern Ethics).
 #### Politics The final and perhaps most important entry point is the relationship between mobility and politics. To discuss this we need to remember that, for Bauman, politics is agora: the place where private problems translate into social issues. The realm of politics has a territorial dimension, the agora, the city. Bauman views the agora as being threatened by the mobility of power, by its capacity to stay in the smooth spaces of hypermobility, attached and responsive to nothing and nobody. Mobility is the element to elevate oneself above critical mechanisms that define the public realm of the agora. In this sense mobility renders it difficult to make sociology; it makes existing mechanisms of critique largely irrelevant, because the role of the sociologist is to translate private concerns into public issues. For Bauman, the difficulty is that the agora is still territorialized but power does not participate in the agora – it remains isolated in the elite spaces of hypermobility (see In Search of Politics and Liquid Modernity)[^6].

 ### The art of living with uncertainty
 Regarding all of these issues, Bauman provides a constant flow of new, inspiring questions but leaves the reader with few answers. Asked about how to strengthen social bonds at a time of uncertainty, Bauman replies: 'There is a Chinese proverb by Confucius that can offer resolution. It goes like this: If you think in terms of a year, plant a seed; if in terms of ten years, plant a tree; if in terms of 100 years, educate people. Educating people is the most important factor in order to create change. Simultaneously, you can't just expect quick fixes. (…) To think that change can happen fast is a big mistake. Changing the world takes at least 100 years.'[^7] Thus, Bauman offers no easy, quick solutions yet he insists that an alternative world

should be possible. He describes his essays as messages in a bottle sent out into the sea in the hope that someone, somewhere will make good use of them in the task of questioning established truths and opening up the range of what is possible[^8]. In the meanwhile our present time of liquid modernity is, Bauman argues, an interregnum, a transition stage towards an unknown future, in which the greatest challenge is to develop the art of living with uncertainty.

 ### Criticisms
 Bauman has been described as an author that paints with too broad a brush on too large a canvas. His diagnoses of contemporary society, it has been claimed, are overly general (e.g. regarding consumerism) and lack firm empirical grounding. For example, in Liquid Modernity Bauman claims that 'Mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among coveted values –and the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late modern or postmodern time' . While this sentence has been cited by 'mobility' researchers[^9] there is still little evidence explaining the causal mechanisms involved here or the relative importance of mobility as compared, for example, to inheritance in shaping inequality. Despite this, however, Bauman's work has been praised for the rare clarity of its theoretical insights (and often, too, for providing excellent hypotheses for doctoral research!).

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[^1]: Bauman argues that the term postmodernity was a useful, temporary tag after the realisation that modernity was not sufficient to capture new transformations happening in the 1980s. The term postmodernity signalled that something new was happening and there was a need to look for new frames of reference. The problem, however, is that postmodernity suggests that modernity has been left behind and this, Bauman argues, is obviously not the case. The metaphor liquid modernity emerged as a result of this search for a label that could capture the nature of ongoing events while acknowledging that we are still living through modernity: 'What is a truly

novel feature of this social world, and makes it sensible to call the current kind of modernity 'liquid' in opposition to the other, earlier form of modern world, is the continuous and irreparable fluidity of things which modernity in its initial shape was bent on solidifying and fixing' (Bauman in Gane 2004: 19-20). [^2]: In Liquid Modernity Bauman writes: 'Liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape. Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time. While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill 'but for a moment'. In a sense, solids cancel time; for liquids, on the contrary, it is mostly time that matters. When describing solids, one may ignore time altogether; in describing fluids, to leave time out of account would be a grievous mistake. Descriptions of fluids are snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture. Fluids travel easily. … From the meeting with solids they emerge unscathed, while the solids they have met, if they stay solid, are changed –get moist or drenched. … These are reasons to consider 'fluidity' or 'liquidity' as fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways novel, phase of the history of modernity' (2000: 2). [^3]: Bauman argues that 'since the ability to get things to turn as one wishes them to turn is the innermost essence of the experience of freedom, and since achieving this effect depends inevitably on other people abiding by our wishes even if our wishes clash with their own, then freedom is potentially, a zero-sum game, that is a game in which the gain of some players is a loss of some others. In that game there cannot be winners without losers. The freedom of some entails the unfreedom of some others. If this is so, freedom (at any rate positive freedom, the capacity of doing things) tends to be a privilege rather than a universal and equally shared possession' (Quote from K. Tester, Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman, 2001). [^4]: In line with Harmut Rosa's (2013) dystopic analysis of the acceleration of the pace of life, Bauman argues that developing skills for social bonding requires time and patience, two resources that lives lived on-line are increasingly bereft of: 'the side effect of acceleration is a widely noted impatience of the online regular users and the all-too-visible diminishing of their tolerance to all and any delay, deferment or procastination, in online activities yet more acute and annoying than in the offline life. Shrinking such tolerance rebounds as a diminishing readiness for lengthy pursuit of distant goals together with the mental and emotional aptitude to persist in effort, as well as the falling capacity of undertaking tasks known to require a protracted effort while promising no instant effects, or as a tendency to

abandon such tasks well before the effects have had time to crystallize. Unpleasant experiences of this kind, however frequent, do not as a rule result in more realistic expectations or in mitigation of impatience; successive frustrations of expectations tend to be recycled (paradoxically, though not without keen and insistent help from designers, producers and sellers of the digital gear) into a further reduction of patience and demand for yet quicker and more expedient, obedient and obliging gadgets' (Bauman 2013: 5). [^5]: In Postmodern Ethics Bauman argues that 'there are powerful reasons to doubt the reality of moral progress, and in particular the moral progress of the kind that modernity claims to promote' (1993: 229). According to Bauman, tolerance and respect of others is only a fragile, 'conditional' disposition rather than an innate human trait. The risk of a new genocide resides in the fact that the act of granting dignity and basic human rights to a certain group of people may be suspended under specific circumstances. These instances of moral suspension occur when certain areas of human inter-relationships are treated in practice as 'morally indifferent', as exempted from moral evaluation. Being classified as a 'problem' is the first step on the path of dehumanising a collective that in the case of the Holocaust culminated in the gas chamber. However, in contemporary societies it is not discourses of 'blood-and-soil' that may trigger this 'turning of backs' on the other in terms of moral responsibility. Bauman argues that: "Rejection of strangers may shy away from expressing itself in racial terms, but it cannot afford admitting being arbitrary lest it should abandon all hope of success; it verbalizes itself therefore in terms of incompatibility or unmixability of cultures, or of the self-defense of a form of life bequeathed by tradition" (Bauman 1993: 235). [^6]: In a recent interview with the Spanish newspaper El País, Bauman elaborated the relationship between politics and power: 'We could describe what is going on at the moment as a crisis of democracy, the collapse of trust: the belief that our leaders are not just corrupt or stupid, but inept. Action requires power, to be able to do things, and we need politics, which is the ability to decide what needs to be done. But that marriage between power and politics in the hands of the nation state has ended. Power has been globalized, but politics is as local as before. Politics has had its hands cut off. People no longer believe in the democratic system because it doesn't keep its promises. We see this, for example, with the migration crisis: it's a global phenomenon, but we still act parochially. Our democratic institutions were not designed for dealing with situations of interdependence. The current crisis of democracy is a crisis of democratic institutions.' See: http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/01/19/inenglish/1453208692_424660.html In another interview with The New York Times Bauman uses an analogy with Castells concepts of

the 'space of places' and the 'space of flows': 'Powers, and particularly those among them most heavily influencing the human condition and humanity's prospects, are today global, roaming ever more freely (to draw from the work of Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells) in the "space of flows" while ignoring at will the borders, laws, and internally defined interests of political entities — whereas the extant instruments of political action remain, as a century or two ago, fixed and confined to the "space of places." See: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/02/opinion/the-refugee-crisis-is-humanitys-crisis.html?_r=0 [^7]: Macaulay, H. (2016) An interview with Zygmunt Bauman. http://www.thegryphon.co.uk/2016/12/06/a-conversation-with-zygmunt-bauman/ [^8]: Writing about the role that sociology can play in this he quotes Cornelius Castoriadis: 'An autonomous society, a truly democratic society, is a society which questions everything that is pre-given and by the same token liberates the creation of new meanings. In such a society, all individuals are free to create for their lives the meanings they will (and can).' See his essay in the edited collection by Anthony Elliott entitled The Contemporary Bauman [^9]: See Elliott and Urry (2011).

Discipline
Sciences humaines
Sciences sociales
Visuel

Activer
Activé
Niveau de profondeur
Balise H2 + H3
Ajouter le trianglesi ce contenu est affiché dans la quinzaine
Désactivé

Auteur lié
Javier Caletrío (Sociologue)
Thématique
Concepts
History