



OBITUÁRIO

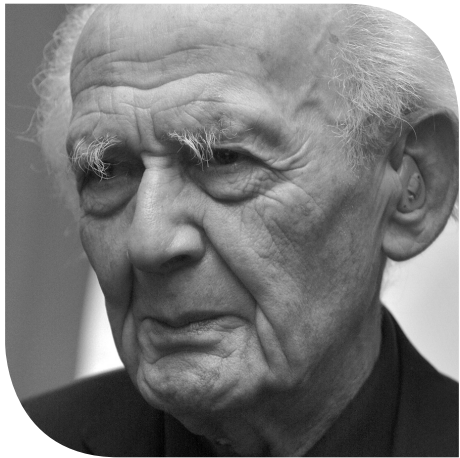
Remembering Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017), por Filipe Carreira da Silva

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EDIÇÃO E PROPRIEDADE

Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa. Av. Professor Aníbal de Bettencourt, 9
1600-189 Lisboa Portugal — analise.social@ics.ul.pt





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Remembering Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017)

At the time of his death, 9 January 2017, Zygmunt Bauman was one of the foremost social theorists in the world. During an academic career spanning seven decades and several countries, Bauman published relentlessly (more than 50 books) and won several international awards. He was consensually recognised as a commanding voice in debates on ethics, globalisation, modernity, consumerism, and lately on the rise of populism. Although his thinking evolved significantly over time, his writings express a continued preoccupation with the moral vagaries of our time and, in particular, with the suffering of the dispossessed and the excluded. As he writes in *Globalization: The Human Consequences*: “If you define your value by the things you acquire and surround yourself with, being excluded is humiliating.” This insight, according to which exclusion is the flipside of the promises and realities of democratic inclusion, a contradiction at the heart of the modern condition, is perhaps the central and most enduring feature of Bauman’s thinking.

For my purposes here, I discuss Bauman’s work around four main themes, which correspond to specific time periods. The first refers to Bauman’s early work and his critical engagement with Marxism. This period ends in 1968, when Bauman leaves Poland as a result of a political purge engineered by the Polish Communist regime. The second deals with Bauman’s work on postmodernism and his writings on the changing status of intellectuals in late

20th century capitalism. The third theme concerns Bauman's work on the Holocaust, which expresses both a coming to terms with his Jewishness and his professional identity as sociologist. The fourth theme follows from his earlier critical re-examination of "solid" modernity and refers to Bauman's systematic exploration of "liquid modernity" in the latter part of his career.

BAUMAN AND THE DIALECTIC OF DISSENT

Zygmunt Bauman was born 19 November 1925, in Poznan, Poland. His was a Polish-Jewish family who were to experience first-hand some of the darkest episodes of the twentieth century. Bauman is not yet 14 when Germany invades Poland in September 1939, triggering World War II. The Baumans are able to escape the Holocaust by fleeing to the Soviet Union. There the young Zygmunt joins a Polish army unit that will help liberate his country from the Nazi occupation. After the war, Bauman remains in the army, where he has a successful military career until the mid-1950s. He is also a member of the Polish Worker's Party. He joins the University of Warsaw, where he studies sociology and philosophy, and eventually obtains a teaching post.

In this period the central idea governing Bauman's engagement with Marxism is that there was continuity in Marx's thought from the 1844 *Manuscripts to Capital*. This continuity could be identified by one central theme: alienation. This thesis of a fundamental continuity in Marx's thought can be traced back to the history of the reception of Marx's early writings in Eastern Europe. It was as a reaction to Stalinism in countries such as Hungary (with the "Lukács school"), Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia (the *Praxis* group), and Poland that the critical use of Marxist thought as a basis for a rejection of official ideology first emerged in the 1950s.

Uniting these otherwise diverse Eastern European intellectual groupings was the project of a Marxist humanism, a revisionist approach based as much upon the young Marx of the 1844 *Manuscripts* as upon non-Marxist sources such as existentialism and phenomenology. It is here that the expression "dialectic of dissent" was first coined to refer to the subtle interplay between content and form, thought and structure, that dissident intellectuals needed to navigate given the all-encompassing nature of Marxist ideology in that part of the world. The main figures of Polish humanist Marxism were the philosopher Leszek Kolakowski and Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman's work, in particular, which shows how sociology would contribute to the revisionist humanist critique of Stalinism from 1956 on, can be seen as an expression of that dialectic, a project that continues today in Bauman's profoundly humanist critique of liquid modernity. Bauman's interpretation of the dialectic of dissent will soon

lead him to question not only Marxism, but also modernity itself. In 1968, as the result of an anti-Semitic campaign by the Communist regime, Bauman loses his lectureship at the University of Warsaw and he and his family are forced to leave Poland along with thousands of other Polish Jews. The Baumans decide to relocate to Israel, where they arrive in early 1969.

BAUMAN AND POSTMODERNISM

Their stay in Israel, however, will not last. After lecturing at universities in Tel Aviv and Haifa from 1969 to 1971, Bauman and his family decide to move and resettle once again. The port of call now is Britain, namely the University of Leeds. It is in this industrial city of the North of England that Bauman will resume his social-theoretical ruminations on modernity.

Bauman's critical engagement with what he calls "classical modernity" (which will later become "solid modernity") falls under two fundamental themes, both distinctively sociological and Weberian in tone. The first is the changing role of intellectuals, from a social group able to influence political decision-making by monopolising specialist knowledge, to that of a strata whose professional status is increasingly undermined as they are only able to offer yet another reading of events. The second has to do with the role of consumption as an axis of social integration, of meaning production and subjectivity construction, increasingly superseding that of production and the workplace.

By the mid-1980s, Bauman started to develop a keen interest in modernity and postmodernity. Modernity stood in opposition to pre-modernity and referred both to a philosophical outlook (the Enlightenment) and a societal organisation (rational planning). The key difference between the pre-modern and modern eras is the way order is conceived. While in pre-modern times there was a generalised belief that social and political order was preordained, with modernity order becomes man-made and fragile. Crucially, for Bauman, with this newfound freedom and autonomy came the moral obligation to improve humanity's achievements. As a result, any impediment toward that aim was to be deemed irrational, and any imperfections not to be tolerated. As modernity unfolded, the early tolerance and encouragement of diversity gradually gave way to the distinctively modern understanding that diversity was in fact opposed to order, and that to reach perfection rational planning is required. Planning, of course, is easier when undertaken in conditions of homogeneity.

At this time, Michel Foucault's idea of bio-politics, according to which the life and death of human bodies as well as of entire populations and the human

species has become a matter of political choice that the rational-bureaucratic state makes partly with the help of the knowledge produced by the human and social sciences, can be seen exerting a strong influence on Bauman. Bauman uses the metaphor of a “garden” to describe the political programme that accompanies the modern search for perfection and uniformity. For Bauman modern politics is about taking care of “cultured plants” that are necessary to the modern utopian dream of perfect rationality or legibility, and the concurrent weeding out of those features, institutions, practices, or people who do not conform to this particular understanding. This desire of homogeneity and perfection easily slips into downright hostility toward cultural diversity and, most important, ambivalence.

Bauman explores this insight in *Legislators and Interpreters*, a book first published in 1987. With the shift to modernity and the emergence of the nation-state, intellectuals acquire a new, unprecedented role: that of assisting the government in the task of directing society and people toward a more rational, ordered, and perfect future. Modernity’s utopia cannot be realised without valid knowledge, as it alone guarantees control and prediction, providing clear criteria for distinguishing between valid and invalid courses of action. In Bauman’s famous phrase, intellectuals are like “legislators.” Because of their monopoly over specialised knowledge, intellectuals are in a privileged position to steer social progress. They make the “law,” or blueprint, others are supposed to follow. Examples of intellectuals as legislators include the likes of Emile Zola, Jean-Paul Sartre, and John Dewey, as well as a much wider community of anonymous bureaucrats and experts.

Bauman, however, is as interested in documenting the shift from pre-modernity to modernity, as he is in discussing the shift from modernity to post-modernity. This he saw as the cardinal feature of the advanced industrialised societies of the 1980s. Expressing this shift was a change in the social role of the intellectual. In the course of the twentieth century, legitimate politics resides less and less on pursuing a perfect blueprint, and increasingly in solving technical problems according to pre-established methods. In this increasingly specialised era, intellectuals lose their previous legislative function. Postmodern intellectuals no longer seek to attain objective knowledge and guide the hand of government. Instead of assuming responsibility for nation building, economic performance, and social betterment of conditions of living, the post-modern intellectual interprets, translating statements from one tradition or culture to another. The intellectual as interpreter no longer aims at transcending language and culture but at facilitating communication between cultures with the help of sophisticated hermeneutic tools. Edward Said, whose work *Orientalism* (1978) revolutionises the study of cultural history exactly along

these lines, is the epitome of Bauman's intellectual *qua* interpreter. Today, 30 years later, one realises just how prescient Bauman's analysis was. The role of the public intellectual is much more fluid and open to redefinition than at any other time in the past century. While comedians such as Jon Stewart perform "serious" language games in *The Daily Show*, the tabloid press is discrediting experts on a daily basis.

This was just one aspect of the shift from modernity to postmodernity. The other aspect has to do with consumption and consumption practices. For Bauman, postmodern societies were as much characterised by new modes of production and dissemination of knowledge, as they were about the shift from production to consumption as the key arena where social integration and identification processes play out. Class politics and class identities are increasingly fractured. As a result, the universal project of socialist transformation that motivated radical politics for the better part of the past 150 years is now rapidly becoming obsolete. Before he went on to explore the implications of this momentous societal shift, however, Bauman returns to an issue central to his identity in more ways than one – the Holocaust.

BAUMAN AND THE HOLOCAUST

Modernity and the Holocaust, first published in 1989, is arguably Bauman's most famous book. For him, as for Hannah Arendt, the Holocaust was not an emotional, irrational outburst. Instead of a breakdown of modernity, it was its fullest realisation. It was the necessary outcome of routine bureaucratic procedures and rational cost-benefit analysis. Bauman explains the targeting of the Jews by the Nazis in terms of modernity's intolerance toward ambivalence. The drawing and maintenance of boundaries and neat categories or dichotomies made European Jews particularly vulnerable as they did not fit neatly within any clear national and cultural demarcated boundaries. The image of the "rootless" Jew, often accused of spying for other countries or working for some international secret organisation, is the result of modernity's unease with group-identities that do not tie in with nationhood. Jewish identity reminds everyone how arbitrary the equation between group identity and nationhood really is. If this book can be read as an attempt on the part of Bauman to come to terms with his own Jewish identity, it is also part of his effort to reconceive of sociology as a modern academic discipline. If modernity is giving way to postmodernity, to keep using the old vocabulary and operate according to traditional modes of thinking is no longer possible. Change is not only necessary; it is urgent if sociology is to be able to address contemporary audiences in a meaningful

way. Bauman saw this task of disciplinary redefinition as a central element of his work from the 1990s on. With it, a new research theme emerges: the fluidity of the contemporary era.

BAUMAN'S LIQUID MODERNITY

Bauman retires from the University of Leeds in 1990. It was in his retirement, however, that Bauman really came to life as one of the leading social theorists of the age. The basic opposition around which Bauman's work now revolves is between "solid modernity" and "liquid modernity." The "solid" stage of modernity refers to an historical period of Western civilisation in which the solid certainties of pre-modern times were being replaced by new, no less solid certainties – only this time more rational and man-made. The risk of solid modernity was that of totalitarianism, either in the form of a repressive Communist regime he knew only too well, or in the literary form of George Orwell's 1984. Of course, much was achieved under the conditions of solid modernity, from the universal suffrage to the expansion of civil rights and from social rights to the rights of self-determination and cultural identity. For Bauman, unlike postmodernism, "liquid" modernity is a continuation of the modernisation process, which it prolongs and intensifies until it reaches the liquidity of our time. The key metaphor employed by Bauman to depict our liquid modern times is that of one skating on thin ice. The only thing that stops one from falling through into the icy waters below is speed.

This idea that our liquid societies are characterised by frenzied, restless movement is central to the other main topic Bauman is interested in: consumerism. Solid modernity had the savings book, the written testament of one's slow and steady accumulation of resources to purchase the desired goods or services. Liquid modernity, by contrast, is epitomised by the instant gratification made possible by the credit card. In today's neo-liberal globalised era, social bonds have been weakened significantly. People, as much as companies or capital, are being forced to dislocate at a faster pace and over longer distances, often in virtual terms, than at any time before. Bauman writes in *Liquid Modernity*: "In a consumer society, sharing in consumer dependency – in the *universal* dependency on shopping – is the condition *sine qua non* of all *individual* freedom, above all, of the freedom to be different, to "have identity."

At the time of his death, the 91-year-old Zygmunt Bauman was at the height of his fame and influence. Until the very end, Bauman, who was no stranger to war, poverty, racial discrimination, and political persecution, never ceased to write about what he cared for the most – the dignity of human

suffering. That he had, in recent years, turned his attention to the refugee crisis and the rise of populism in the United States and across Europe should remind us all of the perils that lie ahead and the tools we possess to deal with them.

SILVA, F. C. da (2017), *Obituary* “Remembering Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017)”. *Análise Social*, 222, LII (1.º), pp. 221-227.

Filipe Carreira da Silva » fcs23@ics.ulisboa.pt » Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa
» Avenida Prof. Anibal de Bettencourt, 9 — 1600-189 Lisboa, Portugal.
