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Liquid Bauman *

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Abstract

In December 2016, Zygmunt Bauman's self-described "recent heart failure" did not deter him from providing the author with "three pieces I have scribbled" to use in revising Bauman's chapter for the second edition of the *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. The author draws from this experience working with Bauman at the end of his life to reflect on the man as a person, a scholar, and a public intellectual. He argues that Bauman had a broad methodological strategy that derived from his 1978 book, *Hermeneutics and the Social Sciences*. Reconciling himself to the historicist relativity of Gadamer's hermeneutic circle, Bauman proposed that the hermeneutic self-understanding of society "is the way in which history itself moves" (1978: 46). The author connects this hermeneutic project to Bauman's conceptualization of "liquid modernity" as the condition of contemporary society, and he draws on Bauman's three "scribbled" pieces to show how Bauman connected recent "liquid" developments – especially shifts in the character of migration – to recent political events (Brexit and the US election of Donald Trump as president). For Bauman, the goal of cosmopolitan tolerance in a global society is undercut by a lag between new worldly conditions and "outdated consciousness."

Keywords: Zygmunt Bauman, hermeneutics, modernity, liquid modernity, culture, migration, cosmopolitanism

In the latter half of 2015, Zygmunt Bauman and I began corresponding about revising his chapter from the first edition for a second edition of Routledge's *Handbook of Cultural Sociology* (Grindstaff, Lo, and Hall, forthcoming 2018). Bauman reviewed his original chapter and wrote to me that he generally found his earlier formulations still on point but was "struck by the absence of reference to the 'computerized culture,' which alongside the split of the *Lebenswelt* [lifeworld] into online and offline universes needed to be located in the very heart of cultural sociology of our days." Initially, he was reluctant to undertake a revision: "the chance of setting down to the task of rewriting is virtually non-existent," he emailed. But in September 2015, when I promised a long lead-time, he committed, "on condition that God agrees to my survival till then...." A few months later, in January 2016, when we agreed that I would undertake a draft revision of his chapter, he claimed to be my "insolvent debtor" for my efforts. Some eleven months later, on December 8, 2016, I sent him my draft revision, along with some comments and queries. Professor Bauman was always quick on the uptake, and the same day, to answer my queries about recent social developments – immigration, Brexit, and the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency – he emailed me back.

Thank you, dearest John, for lifting so many hard chores off my shoulders, further debilitated by a recent heart failure...

* My thanks go to Zeke Baker and Peter Beilharz for their very thoughtful comments on a draft of this essay.

But off-cuff I attach three pieces I have scribbled to deal with the issues you deal with the second and third of your comment. You may use them as you wish [and find] useful in reworking my original text... You are better judge what is needed!

Love, eternal inestimable debt to you, my eternal gratitude - Z.

Characteristically charming, witty, energetic, up-front, and warm to the end, "Z.," as he always signed his emails, died a month and a day later.

Many people know Zygmunt Bauman far better than I, and I look forward to reading their remembrances. Yet having worked with him on a project at the very end of his life, I feel a special bond with Z., and our project together may reveal something about him. I reflect on these interactions in trying to understand a man for whom I developed a genuine affection, without fully understanding him intellectually.

Zygmunt Bauman was one of those rare social critics who could address the "big" issues about modernity in a way both credible and revealing. He was a sociologist best connected with previous generations of public social thinkers across the political spectrum, people like Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, W.E.B. DuBois, Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Freidan, C. Wright Mills, Daniel Bell, and Christopher Lasch. The greatness of these thinkers is not a matter of social science *per se*. Some of them are counted as "founders" of sociology, but others lacked advanced degrees or came out of other disciplines. No matter, their compelling visions lay bare otherwise hidden aspects of the social and cultural order. They provided a broad audience with what Mills called the "sociological imagination."

Laura Grindstaff, Ming-Cheng Lo, and I wanted Professor Bauman to contribute to the *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Sociology* because, like most of the thinkers I've mentioned, he understood the centrality of culture to social life. His nuanced position reduced culture neither to a weapon in the struggle for social status nor to a relatively autonomous set of binary semiotic oppositions. And he resisted any postmodern impulse to fold the entirety of social life into the enveloping reality of some Baudrillard-esque simulacrum. Not that Bauman denied any of these phenomena. But he historicized them. The enculturation of social life depended for form and significance on its historical moment. Bourdieu (1984) had consolidated his analysis of "distinction" at a particular historical moment, Bauman wrote, "when the Enlightenment work of culture by and large had been completed – at least in the 'center' where the maps of the world and its anticipated/postulated futures were drawn...." But in the years thereafter, Bourdieu's glorious culturally signaled status order – what Bauman dubbed a "homeostatic contraption" – would become unglued. The culprit, perhaps ironically, was capitalism: for our era, Bauman riffed on a classic theme of critical theory in the vein of Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno, and Marcuse, describing something like a colonizing of individuals under the spell of capitalist consumerism's dizzying array of choices. Yet consumerism precipitated its own blowback, Z. insisted, in the self-fashioning of individuals who create their personal cultural zones (forthcoming 2018).

In an essay in the *New York Times* reflecting on Zygmunt Bauman's work after his death, sociologist Neil Gross (2017) rightly noted that Bauman

engaged many different subjects, discussing bureaucracy, intimacy, the Holocaust, politics, by some feat of intellectual gymnastics pulling together an account of modernity from its origins to what Bauman called its “liquid” contemporary phase. Gross offered an appreciative account of Bauman’s accomplishments, concluding that whatever the benefits of American-style empirical social science with its penchant for testing hypotheses, “we could do with more of the broad intellectual sweep and vision that Mr. Bauman brought to the enterprise.” Yet Gross also worried that Bauman’s writings either “could be fruitful or dilettantish.” And he posited a rather undisciplined and perhaps antidisciplinary side: “Any sober appraisal of Mr. Bauman’s work would conclude he spread himself too thin. Much of his writing was scattershot, aphoristic, and repetitive.... Imagination and acumen counted for everything.” And, describing Bauman’s *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), Gross suggested the book “had no methodology to speak of.”

Almost inherently, rigorous methodology in any strong positivistic sense is not likely to surface in books that seek to understand large societal complexes, historical processes, and their relations to people’s lives and undertakings. Yet, as Gross rightly observed, narrow scientific methodology is hardly the only route to analytic significance in the social sciences. And, it should be added, the absence of positivist methodology is not the same as the absence of methodology *tout court*. The social sciences are pluralistic in their paths to knowledge. Even *within* disciplines, much less *across* them, scholars bring radically alternative “cultural logics” to inquiry (Hall, 1999). And this is true for broad-gauged treatises as well as more focused studies of relatively bounded phenomena. After all, Marx had his dialectical method; Weber, his use of interpretive ideal types in comparative and historical sociological analysis; Parsons and Giddens, each in their own ways, a theoretical edifice on which to drape and link disparate events. For his part, Ulrich Beck might be considered an outlier on methodology, but clearly, the dynamics of risk and uncertainty provided a strong thread that he used to develop a novel account of modernity.

Was there method to Professor Bauman’s approach, a cultural logic, or was it intellectually acute madness? How, in strategy and practice, did he produce the incisive arguments about modernity that he has left us? Hopefully, others more knowledgeable about his sprawling corpus of writings will address that question in the years to come. Assuming they do, they will find an important clue in Bauman’s 1978 book, *Hermeneutics and Social Science*, written after he left his native Poland and immigrated to England in the early 1970s. Working in the West, well before the “cultural turn” became a thing, in *Culture as Praxis* (1973) Bauman was taking inventory of what cultural analysis was and could be. And, in *Towards a Critical Sociology* (1976) he was more generally finding his footing in challenging sociological positivism from a position strongly engaged with the European critical tradition.

Hermeneutics and Social Science represents Bauman’s take in that period on the challenges that the historicity of human social life poses for the quest for true knowledge. In it, he considers how the epistemological problems were addressed by a series of social analysts – from Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Karl Mannheim, to phenomenologists Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Alfred Schutz, two of his then contemporaries who worked in the US – Talcott Parsons and Harold Garfinkel, and diverse other thinkers

who intersected with this broad range of scholars. The book is a something of a voodoo tour through a graveyard of failed efforts at grappling with the problem of hermeneutic validity, written by someone who intimately knows the tombstones. It ends with a nod to Foucault on how knowledge is circumscribed by the discursive communities in which it is put forward, followed by an embrace of Jürgen Habermas's dialogue of social science with society, a greater historical possibility under some (democratic) social conditions than others, that opens the way to objective knowledge: "Methodology of true interpretation – the major concern of hermeneutics," Bauman asserted, "is transformed into the theory of social structure which ideally facilitates unimpaired communication and genuine universalization of forms of life" (1978: 246).

To understand Bauman's logic of inquiry, that conclusion of *Hermeneutics and Social Science* is perhaps not the telling point. Rather, he tipped his hand in the book's first chapter. There, Professor Bauman rehearsed a series of seemingly irresolvable difficulties centered on the problem of relativism that hermeneutics must confront. Where lies the privilege of understanding – in actors themselves or in observers? What are observers to strive for – an "emic" determination of actors' meanings or an "etic" effort to place those meanings in some wider, even alien, interpretative context? Is meaning to be located in history or about history? And what about the reflexive problem of historicity – that any observer's attempt at understanding is necessarily confined by a particular time and place and the possibilities of interpretation that they entail? Bauman understood his account to be about "a debate still far from its end" (1978: 21). But he neither agreed to submit to the relativism of what Gadamer had called the "hermeneutic circle" nor did he claim magically to transcend the historical conditions of knowledge. Instead, Bauman invoked Johan Huizinga to raise the possibility that the critical understanding of history can itself be transformative of civilization. We do not escape the phenomenological conditions of social life: we live in the circle of interpretations, and we have no choice but to act within it. But the promise, under the sign of modernity, is that we can advance a universal (and therefore objective) social order through the reflexive production and contestation of emergent, self-forming narratives of who we are. "The hermeneutic circle," Bauman argued, "is the way in which history itself moves" (1978: 46).

Bauman's project outlives him. It cannot be reduced to formal methodology, but it does stake out a position that is simultaneously epistemological and ontological, thus methodological in a deep sense: pursuing knowledge of the social world, when reflexively engaged with that world, becomes constitutive of its possibilities. We make history, and develop societally, partly by way of shifting collective self-understandings. Bauman practiced a reflexively hermeneutic analysis by using widely available knowledge to empower us toward societal reformations of our world.

An exemplar of sociological analysis become societal principle of modernity, though not one that Bauman dwelled on to my knowledge, can be found in sociological systems theory. As championed by Talcott Parsons, systems theory does not hold much sway over sociologists today. Yet guided by Bauman's hermeneutic project, we might well want to acknowledge the degree to which, in the latter half of the twentieth century, sociological systems theory and a system-organized society were "co-produced" – to use the term of Sheila Jasanoff (2004). On the face of it, the

systems theory/society hybrid exemplifies Bauman's hermeneutic point, though not his vision of its potential import. True, Parsons seems to have envisioned systems theory as projecting a modern utopian horizon centered on universalism and equality. But since Parsons, the relentless "colonization" of lifeworlds by a mutually reinforcing web of increasingly integrated systems – ever more mediated via digital media – has given rise to a more dystopian diagnosis (Habermas 1987).

What possibilities, then, are revealed by the connection between Bauman's reflexive hermeneutic project and his scholarly analyses? No doubt his legacy will be debated in the years to come. Yet it is worth hazarding an early take. Clearly, Bauman distanced himself from communism as utopia when he came to understand its totalitarian dimensions in Poland, before he emigrated. And like Habermas (1987), he did not see the system as the solution. Indeed, railing against identity consumerism, Bauman had a bit more of the old-style critical theorist in him. But where are we to find an effort by Bauman to establish some positive societal imaginary, a self-understanding powerful enough to help us shape our world?

For me, the answer is to be found in Bauman's account of "liquid modernity." His description in the second edition of the *Handbook of Cultural Sociology* is succinct but evocative:

What makes modernity "liquid" is the unstoppably accelerating "modernization" through which – just like other liquids – no forms of social life are able to retain their shapes for long. "Melting of solids," an endemic and defining feature of *all* modern forms of life, continues, but melted solids are no longer intended, as before, to be replaced by "new and improved," "more solid" solids, no longer hoped to be immune to further melting (Bauman, forthcoming 2018).

It might be objected that this account is derivative, just as his *Hermeneutics and Social Science* might be read as a rehashing of how a series of great thinkers had struggled with the problem of meaning, capped by Bauman with an inconclusive but optimistic twist on Huizinga and Habermas. Even if we credited this reading of *Hermeneutics and Social Science* (and I do not), it simply would place Bauman in the good company of some of the most distinguished social theorists of the last century, scholars who have synthesized the work of earlier great theorists, embedding earlier ideas within novel terminology.

Bauman's account of liquid modernity is subject to a similar critique. There is no shortage of sociological characterizations of the social formation that displaced and reordered industrially organized society. Marxian late capitalism, Alain Touraine's and Daniel Bell's post-industrial society, the information society, post-fordism, postmodernity, multiple modernities: just listing the alternative names proposed since the 1960s suggests that characterizing modern times in the wake of automation, deindustrialization, and the increasing centrality of knowledge production became something of an armchair blood sport among social scientists.

There is much to learn from various of the analyses, and from the debate itself. But I find Bauman's account of liquid modernity to stand out among some very good company. The reasons trace to his hermeneutic

methodology and his analysis, which in my view derives from that methodology. In the first place, “liquid modernity” avoids the objectivist model of temporality that offers up false problematics of periodization. Even though Jean-François Lyotard (1987) used the term, he argued that supposedly “post-” modernity isn’t really post-anything: it is part and parcel of modernity, a continuation under changing auspices.

Conversely, precisely because the auspices and the character of the social formation have changed markedly, the temporally sequential characterization begs the question: what exactly are the novel dynamics that characterize the new era as something distinctive, rather than “post-”? To be sure, a variety of analyses, including the best of the periodization-bound approaches, identify significant developments. But “liquid modernity” is important, not only for finessing periodization, but also because it posits a societal imaginary of a new basic condition of social life – one that cannot simply be reduced, in one direction or another, to material substructure or non-material superstructure, neither to social structure versus culture, nor to external causes on the one hand versus the agency of actors on the other.

Liquidity strikes me as an emergent fundamental quality of the social that transcends all the analytic dichotomies. It bears comparison to Beck’s “risk.” Each refers to a basic quality of social life. From the latter twentieth century onward, each becomes ever more widely important in disparate realms of social life. But they are different. Risk, wherever it becomes dominant, forces a calculation of odds. It operates within, shifts the character of, and spreads the influence of the rationalistic means-end register of action. Liquidity, in contrast, is a fundamental social possibility that can become a (dis-) organizing feature within any sphere of social life. “Melting” is a *general* condition, not the spread of a particular one. And here is to be found the broadly methodological connection to Bauman’s 1978 treatise on the problem of meaning and interpretation.

In *Hermeneutics and Social Science*, recall, Bauman ended up arguing that whether the problem of obtaining objective knowledge in social science could ever be resolved, existentially, we are stuck in a condition of historical relativity. But that very condition offers the opportunity for social knowledge to expand civilizational understanding. With the march of globalization, civilizational understanding could, in theory, become human self-understanding writ large. Bauman’s liquid modernity is more than simply a characterization of a new era, driven by one or another technological, material, or cultural shift as prime mover. Rather, it amounts to a hermeneutic description of a quality of social life that can come to pass across the gamut of social domains and fields, a quality that both connects us to our highly structured modern forebears and differentiates our world from theirs. In Bauman’s account we are left with the structures and imaginaries of modernity, but they no longer take solid form, and they cannot be re-stabilized into some novel and enduring configuration. With this account, we can envision a self-understanding of our moment, not as “post-” but as a new condition under which we participate in, and make, history.

My efforts to figure Bauman out intellectually have been aided by the three “scribbled” pieces that Z. sent to me on December 8, 2016 to integrate “as you wish” in his revised handbook chapter. Two of them (Bauman, 2016a,

2016b) have been published elsewhere in slightly different form than what he sent to me. Written after the Brexit vote in the UK and the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency, they deepen our understanding of his intellectual vision and offer us an important guide to understanding what lies ahead.

Broadly, Zygmunt Bauman regarded Brexit and Trump as manifestations of what he had dubbed, in his then still forthcoming (2017) book, a “retrotopian tendency” – a response, perhaps, to the dislocations and confusions of liquid modernity. Brexit and Trump offered voters in their respective countries a rare shot. In Brexit, “you could use your single vote for ‘leave’ to release your frustration and anger against all the establishment in one go.” And in the US, sizable numbers of voters across the political spectrum rejected the entire political establishment with which they were “frustrated for failing, systematically and routinely, to deliver on its promises.” For such voters, “Trump offered the first credible, indeed unique, occasion for wholesale condemnation of the entire political system” (Bauman, forthcoming 2018; cf. Bauman, 2016a).

Both in the UK and the US, and potentially in reverberations across the EU, Bauman held, “What we are currently witnessing ... is a thorough re-hashing of allegedly untouchable, indeed defining principles of ‘democracy,’” such that its defining features

will fall out of public favor and become stripped of significance, replaced explicitly or in fact by consolidation of power in an authoritarian or even dictatorial model. Symptoms multiply of a tendency to pull power down from the nebulous, unreachable, and impenetrable elitist heights into a quasi-direct communication between the strong leader at the top and the pulverised and eminently fluid and fissiparous aggregate of supporters/subjects, equipped with “social websites” serving as apparently wide open and widely accessible gates to the public arena and to new media forms of indoctrination (Bauman, forthcoming 2018; cf. Bauman, 2016a).

Migration, once controlled by states, in the liquid era has become decentralized, “much more subject to grassroots processes and influences than subject to top-down regulation.” It is this development, perhaps more than any other, that has unleashed the pressures toward “retrotopia,” the search for community ostensibly to be found in a more solid, less liquid past.

There is an unmistakable pessimism, even bitterness, in Bauman's last vision. If his analysis is correct, however, there is no turning back. Liquidity cannot be undone any more than other world-historical shifts in the character of the social that preceded it. We are stuck living with the differences spawned by migrations and quests for identity under liquid circumstances. Bauman's hope is that we can approach these challenges with tolerance or even more. But that hope is undermined by identity projects on all sides, even those putatively calling for acceptance of difference. Under these conditions, there emerge widespread withdrawals into internet subworlds where “DIY ‘comfort zones,’ ‘echo chambers,’ or ‘halls of mirrors’ are much more effective at creating and sustaining separation than the most refined technologies of ‘gated communities’ or

state-installed frontier walls, barbed wires, ingenuous passport-and-visas arrangements, and heavily armed border patrols” (Bauman, forthcoming 2018). It would be auspicious, Bauman wrote, if we could all recognize what Ulrich Beck affirmed, that we are *already* inevitably living in a “cosmopolitan situation,” but just have not yet achieved widespread “cosmopolitan awareness.” This development, were it to happen, would begin to approach Zygmunt Bauman’s idealized global interpretive community, “embracing this time – for the first time in human history – the *whole* of humanity.” Unfortunately, such a development would require a “narrowing of the ‘cultural lag’ stretching between the novel condition of the world and increasingly outdated consciousness of its population (particularly its opinion-making elite).” And “to become a realistic proposition, this process would require nothing less than an uphill struggle to renegotiate and replace the thousands-years old, deeply ingrained human mode of being-in-the-world” (Bauman, forthcoming 2018).

In *Hermeneutics and Social Science*, Professor Bauman argued, “The hermeneutic circle is the way in which history itself moves” (1978: 46). History is thus open-ended. Bauman has left us clear and important guidance about the challenges of our historical moment, challenges as formidable in new ways as those of fascism in the 1930s. His ideas themselves are liquid, and gaining his perspective will help us continue to understand, and remake, the world.

As for Z., clearly he already sensed the end of his life in the wake of his “recent heart failure,” as he had emailed me on 8 December 2016. I last heard from him on 19 December 2019, the day I emailed two versions of the chapter I updated for him after receiving the three pieces he had ‘scribbled.’ “Wow, dear John,” he replied, “this time none of the two documents wishes to open on my dinosaur [computer]....” When I sent replacement files, he came back, “No improvement, alas... Neither in my health, nor in my dinosaur’s workability....” His friend and colleague Peter Beilharz in Australia had checked in with him on 10 December 2016. Bauman’s response to Peter: “Immortals are all sitting (eating, sleeping?) in *l’Academie Française*.” Today, Z. must certainly be among them. No longer a material presence, Bauman himself has become liquid.

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