

# Modernity and Postmodernity in Zygmunt Bauman's Thoughts

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## Abstract

Zygmunt Bauman wrote tirelessly on the ever changing world that we live in, lucidly analysing our contemporary times in an intelligent and insightful manner in both oral and written discourses where the topics ranged from Holocaust reflections, modernity and postmodernity, urban and social liquidity and mobility, and utopia and dystopia, to mention but a few. In his astute observations Bauman paints an often sombre and depressing picture of society and the role we play in it. Writing at length on modernity and postmodernity (the latter dependent on the former for its existence), the Polish sociologist who was impressively prolific during his lengthy career at the University of Leeds presents us with a world in flux, one in which citizens likened to hunters lead an increasingly solitary and rootless existence in the name of staunch individualism while all along they seemingly push faster and increasingly desperately into an uncertain future. In Bauman's many accounts these members, or denizens, of the postmodern habitat lead an ambivalent existence in an apparent utopia that is far from as utopic as one would have hoped for. This article will discuss Bauman's views on modernity and postmodernity, social fluidity and identity-change, ultimately highlighting the importance of his works and the great legacy Bauman has left behind.

**Key Words:** Zygmunt Bauman, Fluid, Liquid, Modernity, Postmodernity

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## **Zygmunt Bauman'ın Düşüncesinde Modernite ve Postmodernite**

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### **Özet**

Zygmunt Bauman, içinde yaşadığımız mütemadiyen değişen dünya üzerine yorulmak nedir bilmeden kafa yordu. Mahirane ve ferasetli bir şekilde hem konuşarak hem de yazarak çağı anlaşıyor ve makul bir şekilde analiz etti. Ele aldığı konulardan bahsedecek olursak soykırım değerlendirmeleri, modernite ve postmodernite, kentsel ve toplumsal akışkanlık ve hareketlilik, ütopya ve distopya bunlardan sadece birkaç tanesidir. Bauman, basiretli gözlemlerinde topluma ve bizlerin toplumdaki rolüne ilişkin kasvetli ve üzücü bir tablo resmeder genellikle. Modernite ve postmoderniteyi enine boyuna ele almış olan Polonyalı sosyolog Univesity of Leeds'teki uzun kariyeri boyunca epey üretkendi. Bu çalışmalarında bireyin müphem bir gelecek tasavvuruyla gittikçe umutsuzluğa sürüklenen bir çaba içerisinde görüldüğünü söyler. Yaşadıkları dünya akışkandır. Kişiler o dünya içinde, sağlam bireysellik uğruna gittikçe yalnızlaşan ve yurtusuzlaşan bir varoluşa iteklenen vatandaşlar gibidirler. Burada avcı metaforundan bahseder. Bauman'ın çoğu anlatımında, postmodern habitatın bu üyeleri ya da vatandaşları, kişinin umabileceğinden epey uzakta olan bir ütopya da ikircikli bir varoluşa yönelirler. Bu makalede Bauman'ın modernite ve postmodernite, toplumsal akışkanlık ve kimlik değişimi konularını tartışacağım ve onun ardında bıraktığı muazzam mirasının ve çalışmalarının önemini vurgulayacağım.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Zygmunt Bauman, Akışkan, Modernite, Postmodernite

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Zygmunt Bauman was an impressively prolific writer and lucid thinker who boldly reflected on his contemporary times and environment and the world as it has changed through time; with a society that has gradually taken a step away from more solid -and perhaps also rigid -structures and the status quo, and is now instead becoming increasingly fluid and apparently in need of constant motion as we have transitioned ourselves from modernity to postmodernity and have now entered a global era where little is fixed or stable and social changes and redefined behaviours are embraced at a speed that seem to leave comparatively little time for reflection. Not dwelling in or on the past, postmodern and global citizens seem to have become primarily concerned with the present and with immediate future gains. They push into the future in a manner that often comes across as desperate, reluctant as they are to linger in the moment and constantly looking to reap the next pleasure. This so called utopia or what Bauman thinks of as a hunting utopia (“We are all hunters now, or told to be hunters and called or compelled to act as hunters do, on penalty of eviction from hunting”) (Bauman, 2007: 100) has become dystopic in the sense that while it may be held that no utopia lasts forever it may also be argued, as Bauman does, that;

if a life of continuing and continuous hunting is another utopia, it is – contrary to the utopias of the past – a utopia of no end. A bizarre utopia indeed, if measured by orthodox standards. Strange, unorthodox utopia it is – but utopia all the same, as it promises the same unattainable prize all utopias brandished, namely the ultimate and radical solution to human problems past, present and future, and the ultimate and radical cure for the sorrows and pains of human condition. It is unorthodox mainly for having moved the land of solutions and cures from the ‘far away’ into the ‘here and now’. Instead of living towards the utopia, hunters are offered a living inside the utopia (Bauman 2007: 108-109).

The utopia inhabited by restless citizens today, engaged in a hunt for an undefinable goal, is one of ultimate dissatisfaction as the utopia we have surrounded ourselves by is never quite fully achievable, being, as it is, governed by empty materialistic thinking and a strive for further immediate thrills and enjoyments. Or as Bauman would have it, “[t]he ‘short term’ has replaced the ‘long term’ and made of instantaneity its ultimate ideal” (Bauman, 2000: 125). Developing his ideas and opinions on his contemporary society in texts that often dwell on postmodern times following on a modernity that has moved from solid to gradually more liquid (a concept regularly use by Bauman), Bauman was benefitted by a long life which saw him witnessing how one social setup and perspective was replaced by another, as the world changed around him. Born in Poznań and of Jewish background (yet never sharing his father’s Zionist views) Bauman served in the Polish army as one of its youngest majors and was forced to escape the invading Nazi army at the breakout of the Second World War in 1939. Later taking on the role as a political instructor for the First Polish Army once his family had escaped his native Poland, and professionally engaged in

several major battles, Bauman would have gathered countless impressions, experienced situations and had encounters to draw from in his often very existential theories and discourses.

Renowned for his sombre yet rather cynical and astute observations, Bauman tirelessly expressed his thoughts in a great number of accounts, journals, books and speeches (discourses that have often been recorded for the after-world and that keep being valid long after the speaker himself is gone), providing us with insightfully realistic analyses until the very end. He took on the role as Lecturer at the University of Warsaw, later lectured also in Tel Aviv and Haifa and in 1971 was appointed Professor of Sociology at the University of Leeds (adding "Emeritus" to his academic title once he had officially retired from his post yet continuing to be as prolific as ever in writing and still participating in conferences and seminars where he was the focus of critical attention). In 2010 the above University also honoured Bauman by founding the Bauman Institute, again highlighting how influential Bauman has been and continues to be to thinkers and readers through time. Now gone, this particularly postmodern prophet leaves us with thoughts that echo across our world and throughout our times, and shape the way we ourselves look upon society and our role in it.

Bauman's final, extensive period of employment facilitated the publication of a number of greatly relevant texts that have had a great impact on the reader up until this day and that despite their often very heavy subject matter are, curiously and impressively, readily accessible. Bauman's texts seem to speak straight to us; they engage, convince and draw us in, and make sense to such an extent that it is often hard to disagree with his viewpoints (although some critics have noted that once they believed they had finally grasped Bauman's ideas and discourses, they realised they had misunderstood him) (Lindgren, 2017). In his important body of work Bauman comments on society through the ages and his diverse topics range from modernity and postmodernity, utopia and dystopia (the two often interlinked), the fluidity of love and the frailty of human bonds, rationality and its opposite, human fear and the Holocaust (he shares views with Hanna Arendt in his enlightening book *Modernity and the Holocaust* where he also draws from Adorno, and suggests that "the Holocaust could merely have uncovered another face of the same modern society whose other, more familiar, face we so admire") (Bauman 1989, p.7), as well as human ambivalence and a changed and challenged identity at a time when ambivalence and uncertainty seem to have become defining words. With reference to an email exchange between Bauman and Benedetto Vecchi published in *Identity* (2000), Bauman's perspective on the question of identity has been summarised thus:

We have moved from a solid to a liquid phase of modernity, in which nothing keeps its shape, and social forms are constantly changing at great speed, radically transforming the experience of being human (Cummings).

In terms of Bauman's many modernist reflections, his thoughts are crystalized in writing in one of his main texts *Liquid Modernity* (2000). He here introduces some of his interrelated key concepts to the viewer: fluidity or liquidity, as well as the process of liquefaction (Bauman called this the "solidity-liquidity conundrum" and explained that "it was the quest for the solidity of things and states that most of the time triggered, kept in motion and guided those things' and states' liquefaction") ("Interview with Zygmunt Bauman," 2010). The idea of a liquid modernity is in Raymond L.M. Lee's interpretation of Bauman's work defined as

a rapidly changing order that undermines all notions of durability. It implies a sense of rootlessness to all forms of social construction. In the field of development, such a concept challenges the meaning of modernization as an effort to establish long lasting structures. By applying this concept to development, it is possible to address the nuances of social change in terms of the interplay between the solid and liquid aspects of modernization (Lee, 2005).

This increased liquidity that affects social structures, interpersonal relationships and personal preferences, has led to a society in flux and motion. It is also a society governed by ambivalence. In this regard, Bauman himself did not shy away from the classification of being an "ambivalent outsider" ("Interview with Zygmunt Bauman," 2010). In the just cited 2010 interview with the Polish-born sociologist, he reflected on his long life journey (or what he called an "uncannily long life itinerary") and when asked to comment on what it meant to be an ambivalent outsider he retorted, as always, with a dose of intelligent irony; clarifying that despite having moved within academic circles throughout most of his lengthy career he never felt that he quite belonged to the world of Academia in the more traditional sense of the word:

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).

The same online interview with Bauman also touches on his very descriptive idea of "walking on quicksand." If modernity was a time of ambivalence and it led to citizens (who in the era to follow would be called "denizens" of a "postmodern habitat" with a "rootless and inconclusive existence" (Smith 1999: 155) stuck in the machinery of rapid change and directly impacted by modernity's "melting powers" (Bauman 2000: 6) - with traditional family structures beginning to fall apart and being replaced by alternative ways of defining family as a term, with commercialism as a driving force and a preference for

individualism and personal freedom above the collective - then postmodernity takes individualism to an ever greater extreme. Rather than a positive trend, this strive to break away from the group often leads to individuals at loss in their individuality, who ultimately lead a lonely existence in order to adhere to a can-do-it-alone, hunter mentality.

Having written extensively on both the time of modernity and postmodernity, Bauman paints a picture of society and an ever more globalised world that is often bleak and depressing, even frightening. And all along his comments and observations are lucid and perceptive, reflective of a highly analytical, brilliant mind. Works published in the past three decades include *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (1997), *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (1998), the already cited *Liquid Modernity* (2000), the brief account *Identity* (2000), *Society under Siege* (2002), *City of Fears, City of Hopes, Liquid Love* (both 2003), his three sequential, globally concerned *Liquid Life* (2005), *Liquid Fear* (2006), and *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (2007), as well as the highly engrossing *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (2011). In these accounts and others, Bauman perfectly encapsulates the essence of postmodernity and globalization and highlights how these movements or conditions impact on cities, societies, and people. Always acutely aware of the double-edged sword that is the globalizing movement, Bauman views the often disillusioned postmodern individual as a product of an ever more fragmentary process equalled to "the human condition that arrives *after* people stop believing in the big promises made by modern ideologies" (Smith 1999: 15).

In texts and interviews Bauman speaks of a society in flux, one defined by its modern and also postmodern elements. In his mind,

'[li]quid life' and 'liquid modernity' are intimately connected. 'Liquid life' is a kind of life that tends to be lived in a liquid modern society. 'Liquid modern' is 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 2005: 1).

Again, in Bauman's work this social liquidity applies to both modernity and postmodernity, as the two periods or movements are ultimately interrelated. Bauman defines the "time of postmodernity" as an "unfinished" and also "unfinishable ... project of modernity" (Bauman & Tester 2001: 75). In doing so he highlights how postmodernity is simultaneously a reaction to a previous era and a movement that, again, depends on the one it rebels against for its existence. Bauman's arguments can be directly used to interpret our, particularly, urban environment and existence. This liquid, or fluid, society where individuals enjoy greater independence may well have allowed for more liberal and liberalising trends. Yet at the same time this very lack of *finishability*, paired with an individual lack of a clear direction in a society of constant movement and action, triggers

certain nostalgia amongst postmodern citizens with regard to how they view the past (the same can, in the case of a country like Spain, be said about contemporary citizens in relation to their not too distant pre-democratic past, which despite being stifling in many ways was a time period that people slowly and reluctantly became familiar with - to the extent that some members of especially the older generation would have found it hard to fully embrace democratic times where liberty and liberalization now at times seem to reign supreme). We live in a time of the never standing still and experience a sense of loss not only with regard to the past, but are at the same time we ourselves lost in a current era of increased emotional detachment between people as well as increased materialism in the name of technological breakthroughs and innovations. In these often bewildering and troubled global times we are ultimately strangers not only to each other but also to ourselves.

Hence why Bauman's thoughts are so easily grasped and comprehended, depending on how one chooses to interpret them. As we ourselves are at times those very individuals he refers to in his always highly current texts, it is easy to get carried away and absorbed by his discourses. If more traditional theorists sometimes express themselves in a rather detached and often perhaps even convoluted manner, Bauman does not. His thoughts are readily transported to the page and clearly expressed. They engage and worry all at once and no stone is left unturned by this man who was relentless in his scrutiny of the world and our times. Active until the very end, and appropriately - given our current society in increased turmoil where in the West comparatively recent national elections have led to a world in upheaval; one subjected to fragmenting processes and where terrorism instills fear in people across Europe - one of Bauman's last books is entitled *Strangers at Our Door* (2016). In this comparatively brief account, or collection of essays, Bauman details the history of European migration and the waves of migration through Europe throughout time, particularly in light of the current "crisis of humanity" or "migration panic" ("Book Review: 'Strangers at Our Door' by Zygmunt Bauman", 2016) that now holds Europe in a tight grip. Focussing his analysis on the current increasing appearance of right-wing parties and "fearmongering" tactics on the part of governments and separatist groups, Bauman reminds us of the

blatant historical forgetfulness with which we encounter refugees from war and people seeking a better life - advancement and progress being, after all, *the* legitimising promises of capitalism's very existence ("Book Review: 'Strangers at Our Door' by Zygmunt Bauman", 2016).

Bauman's book *Retrotopia* (published posthumously in 2017), in turn reflects the sociologist's previous concerns with utopia and dystopia, which, as highlighted earlier, are more often than not two sides of the same coin. The pleasure-driven strive towards a

utopia or a utopic condition amongst postmodern citizens today has, more often than not, a darker backside where individualistic thinking can lead to a corresponding breakdown in communication, and incomprehension between people. Possibly hoping for a different era to replace the one of which we form a part, yet remaining doubtful in his perspectives and outlook on our contemporary society, in 2013 this Postmodern Prophet spoke about the end of one world order yet the lack of another to replace it, in the recorded lecture *Living in Times of Interregnum* given at the University of Trento (the same topic was the focus of a lecture in which Bauman addressed also Stockholm youths, at the tender age of 86).

Expressing himself with bravado on virtually all aspects of (post)modern life, Bauman has left us with thoughts and insights that influence the way we exist in and look upon the world and the process of globalization that defines it. As the world seems to move faster and faster, Bauman may have physically left the rat-race behind. Nevertheless, his thoughts linger and continue to teach and enlighten us as we keep pushing into often very troubling times; times in which citizens and societies are adopting fluid identities in order to cope with constant changes and with social and political unpredictability.

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