

REVIEW OF

Zygmunt Bauman's

***Liquid Fear***

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006. 188 pp. (paper)

ISBN 9780745636801

Zygmunt Bauman's

***Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty***

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007. 115 pp. (paper)

ISBN 0745639879

Zygmunt Bauman's

***Consuming Life***

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- 1- Zygmunt Bauman, born in Poland in 1925, is something of a phenomenon. He is arguably one of the most prolific and influential contemporary social theorists, and particularly in Europe enjoys something of a celebrity status. Bauman can be seen as one of the major social theorists living today.
- 2- The three books under review here are part of an impressive list of thirteen works Bauman has put out since ***Liquid Modernity*** (2000), in which he effectively engages the failures of the modern project, the inadequacy of postmodernity as an intellectual framework, inspired by an overriding concern with what we call the ultimate measure of a civilization: the way it treats its least fortunate inhabitants (or, in Bauman's terms: its 'strangers', its 'new poor', and its 'flawed consumers').
- 3- Bauman's confrontations with modernity – as the rational and bureaucratized world of modern civilization that he considers as providing the necessary condition for the Holocaust in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) – led him in these most recent writings to see contemporary society in terms of a 'liquid' modernity.
- 4- Zygmunt Bauman defines a 'liquid modern' society 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. A liquid modern society is one where uncertainty, flux, change, conflict, and revolution are the permanent conditions of everyday life. Bauman compellingly argues that this situation is neither modern nor post-modern, but rather that the categories of existence established and enabled by early, first, or solid modernity are disintegrating,

overlapping, and remixing. It is not as if we cannot draw meaningful distinctions between global and local anymore.

- 5- The same goes for other modern categories of everyday life, such as between work and non-work, between public and private, between conservative and progressive, or between mediated and non-mediated experiences. It is just that these and other key organizing characteristics and categories of modern life have lost their (presumed or perceived) intrinsic, commonly held or consensual meaning. In *Liquid Fear*, Bauman engages the status and meaning of fear in contemporary liquid modern life, and finds that the most menacing aspect of today's fears is that we do not know what the dangers besetting us are, nor are we empowered to tackle those threats once they surface. 'Fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear [...] "Fear" is the name we give to our uncertainty: to our ignorance of the threat and of what is to be done' (p. 2; italics in original). The most fearful in our societies, argues Bauman, are in fact those lacking direct personal experiences of threat – and thus all the more prone to let their imaginations run wild. The utter unpredictability and uncontrollability of a liquid modern life – where the answers to existential questions are determined by 'negative globalization' – makes contemporary, everyday life indeed a fearful existence. 'The most gruesome among the added fears is the fear of being incapable of averting or escaping the condition of being afraid' (p. 94).
- 6- One of Bauman's key arguments underscoring our impotence to effectively or collectively engage with the terrors of the global – worldwide uprooting and migration, global capital flight, outsourcing and offshoring, political and cultural exclusion, and terrorism – is the increasing frailty (liquidity) of human bonds amplified through the inevitable process towards individualized societies. 'The new individualism, the fading of human bonds and the wilting of solidarity, are all engraved on one side of a coin whose other side bears the stamp of globalization' (p. 146). Bauman keenly notes how much of contemporary politics (in Europe, the US, but also much of the Middle East) responds to the 'infuriatingly multivocal, confused and confusing world' (p. 113) with black-and-white world visions 'of one truth, one way, one life formula' (ibid.). In doing so, such religionization of politics and oversimplification of problems (by arguing away their root causes and consequences) offers 'a life free from doubt, and absolution from the vexing and harrowing necessity of making choices and taking responsibility' (p. 116).
- 7- So, how does Bauman take responsibility? For many years, he has abstained from predicting or prescribing actions to be taken and measures to be made. A first break with this tradition comes in this book in the form of his expectation of an 'unavoidable future not happening': 'unless bridled and tamed, our negative globalization [...] makes catastrophe inescapable' (p. 176–7).
- 8- In *Liquid Fear* we also catch a glimpse of his activist agenda when he writes that theory without practical applications should be avoided – a profoundly human and engaged sociology must start with 'clearing the site', and ultimately should assign two themes pride of place: first, rethinking should find a somehow acceptable balance between freedom and security; second, much in line with Rorty's work, Bauman calls for a rethinking effort of 'a hope that can make – will make, ought to make – the bold act of hoping possible' (p. 176).

- 9- *Liquid Times* is a more accessible and lucidly written introduction to many of Bauman's favourite themes – such as the utter impotence of the nation-state when facing the problems caused by negative globalization, the ongoing uprooting and repotting of peoples all around the world, the outsourcing of any and all solutions to the market, and the devastating effects of the inevitable individualization of contemporary society. Bauman has written several of such smaller, engaging works over the years – examples are *Identity* (2004; with Benedetto Vecchi) and *Community* (2001) – that serve as excellent introductions to themes that he explores more in-depth elsewhere.
- 10- What makes *Liquid Times* particularly fascinating as a work on its own are the numerous references to the role (mass) media play in amplifying, accelerating or perhaps even causing some of the terrors in a liquid life. Save for one explicit (and damning) chapter on television in *Society Under Siege* (2002) Bauman, like so many other social theorists, tends to mention media only in passing, using under theorized media-related examples mainly to underscore other points. In *Liquid Times* he invokes the fear-producing effects of abundant police series such as *Law and Order* (p. 12–3); the uncritical reproduction of the fear-inducing discourse of the 'global wilderness' by 'the international media' (p. 15) and 'the mass media' (p. 77); and the function of internet access as a way for otherwise secluded, isolated and gated communities to connect and communicate with the rest of the world without the necessity to actually (physically) engage with it (p. 73–5). Valid though these concerns are, they remain rather underdeveloped and lack the contextual richness that otherwise characterizes Bauman's writings. This becomes especially clear when he passionately advocates Hans Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons' to promote mutual understanding, insofar it can be seen as the outcome of 'shared experience' (p. 91–2), without invoking the potentially conducive role media play herein. The notion that media – whether produced or consumed, or some combination thereof – primarily function as communicative tools, and that the same global mass media that provide cop shows and terror alerts also connect billions of people around the world should add inspiring ammunition to media and cultural studies application of Bauman's theses.
- 11- *Consuming Life* is the most 'difficult' book of these three new works – the one least accessible for a general academic audience. In this book, Bauman introduces the three foundational, ideal-typical elements of a consuming life: consumerism, the society of consumers, and consumerist culture. At the heart of his thesis is the ongoing transformation of consumers into commodities – that is, as products capable of catching the attention and attracting demand and customers on a global marketplace where 'they are, simultaneously, promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote' (p. 6). Bauman documents the passage from a society of producers – benchmarked by agricultural and factory mass labour, bureaucratization, and scientific management – to one of consumers, 'with the intermittently compulsive and willing individualization and self-referential character of its concerns, tasks, ways of handling the tasks and responsibilities for the effects of their handling' (p. 58). With the often repeated formula of 'no consumer unless a commodity' Bauman attacks the total surrender to the market of all local, global, collective and individual problems and their solutions from all sides, our identities as hapless consumers of increasingly differentiated, tailor-made or DIY commodities, and the way we have turned into commodities ourselves, requiring constant updating, remaking, marketing and promoting. This is a consumerist culture without imagination, without solidarity, without ethics other than those that serve personal interests and function on the level of individual

representation. At times, Bauman is relentless in his judgments – and thus this book perhaps must be read in the context of how he concludes *Liquid Fear*: as the description of unavoidable disaster offered in the hope that the future will prove him wrong.

- 12- What makes Bauman's work, much like that of other similar contemporary social theorists not trained in the study of media, relevant to the project of cultural studies, are the ways in which his observations, lucid commentaries and ethical calls to action can inspire us to rethink and articulate our motives and choices when studying people and their media. Ultimately, in today's emerging new media ecology, the study of media is the study of the human condition. These new books of Zygmunt Bauman may provide inspiring groundwork for teaching as well as studying the broader social implications of media in everyday life – all the more crucial as to Bauman, any social theory or sociology that is not explicitly grounded in human praxis ceases to be relevant.

Leia o texto atentamente e responda às questões abaixo. Há apenas uma alternativa certa por questão.

In paragraph 2, the expression *in which*, in the sentence *The three books under review here are part of an impressive list of thirteen works Bauman has put out since Liquid Modernity (2000), in which he effectively engages the failures of the modern project [...]*, refers to

R: *Liquid Modernity*.

In paragraph 4, we can infer that

R: *things have been moving faster than society can manage to turn them into habits*.

In paragraph 5, the word *menacing* in [...] *and finds that the most menacing aspect of today's fears is that we do not know what the dangers besetting us are [...]* means

R: *threatening*

In paragraph 5 when Baumann says 'Fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear [...]' he means when fear

R: *is not concentrated*.

In paragraph 6, when the author says that Bauman ‘*keenly notes how much of contemporary politics [...] responds to the ‘infuriatingly multivocal, confused and confusing world’ [...] with black-and-white world visions ‘of one truth, one way, one life formula’ [...]*’, he means that

R: the world still believes that that is the only way possible to solve atrocious problems.

In paragraph 7, **has abstained** in *For many years, he **has abstained** from predicting or prescribing actions to be taken [...]* means that Bauman

R: chose neither to predict nor prescribe anything.

The best translation for paragraph 9, *Liquid Times* is a more accessible and lucidly written introduction to many of Bauman’s favourite themes – such as the utter **impotence** of the nation-state when facing the problems caused by negative globalization, the ongoing uprooting and repotting of peoples all around the world, the outsourcing of any and all solutions to the market, and the devastating effects of the inevitable individualization of contemporary society is

R: *Tempos Líquidos* oferece uma introdução mais acessível e lucidamente escrita a muitos dos temas favoritos de Bauman – como a total impotência do estado-nação ao enfrentar os problemas causados por uma globalização negativa, pelo contínuo desenraizamento e realocação de povos em todo o mundo, pela terceirização de toda e qualquer solução de mercado e pelos efeitos devastadores da inevitável individualização da sociedade contemporânea.

In paragraph 10, the word **this** in *Valid though these concerns are, they remain rather underdeveloped [...]. **This** becomes especially clear when he passionately advocates [...]* refers, among other things, to

R: lack of contextual richness.

In paragraph 11, the author, discussing Bauman’s work, states that

R: a society of producers has become a society of consumers.

In paragraph 12, the author of the review mentions that Bauman’s work

R: is full of ethical and inspiring call to action.