

Chapter 4

The Thought of Zygmunt Bauman as a Key for Introducing a New Social Theory



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4.1 Introduction

Bauman has been a teacher for several generations of sociologists and certainly also for mine. In the academic world, it is not necessary to visit a teacher personally to identify him as a teacher. It is more than enough to have a long-distance relationship, with intense and frequent readings of his writings and interviews. I was privileged to meet Bauman in Milan in the summer of 2015, at the *Milanesiana*. After his intense and passionate lecture on the effects of globalization, I invited him to the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo. With great courtesy, he told me that he would think about it and that he knew our university. I did not want to insist; it seemed only right to respect such an intellectual who, despite his advanced age, had such a bright mind. Some in the audience were not as considerate, harassing him with requests for autographs and photographs. I found them irritating, but Bauman was unruffled, and always replied with elegant kindness.

From these traits we can see the greatness of the person he was, always available and cordial, in perfect harmony with his way of thinking and writing. Bauman changed the relationship between the intellectual and the public, thanks to his colloquial style—his ability to make complex concepts simple. Another great attribute of the Polish sociologist was his ability to intervene, effectively and incisively, in the fundamental problems of a globalized society.

Of course, he did this without ever renouncing to the Weberian authenticity, and without fear of taking a clear position. In a society under siege, the sociologist cannot ignore the sufferings of individuals and humanity; he cannot fail in his task of defending discarded lives—the poor, the elderly, and immigrants. And Bauman achieved this with creativity and sociological imagination. He changed our way of

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understanding sociology, creating the conditions for a new social theory, with an innovative language, method, and argument.

It is in this vein that, in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman, 1989), he overturned the usual interpretations of Nazism, revealing them to be the triumph of modernity, with the coldly rational use of technologies and the obfuscation of individual conscience in the name of a superior system.

His analysis of globalization is also original, because it concerns the effects thereof on individual lives, as well as ethical considerations rather than economic and financial dynamics. The concept of liquid society made Bauman famous far beyond the worlds of academia and science. This term refers to a society in which “the situations in which people act change before their ways of acting are even able to consolidate into habits and procedures, [...] the liquid character of life and that of society feed and reinforce one another” (Bauman, 2005, p. VII, *Author’s translation*). The Polish sociologist defines “creative destruction” as the typical way liquid life unfolds, because creation destroys other forms of life and human beings. The real issue at stake is temporary salvation from elimination or “ending up in the waste.”

Furthermore, the consumer society engenders a lack of satisfaction, which elicits an impulse for perpetual purchase of goods. The satisfaction of every need and desire is realized in such a way that it provokes new needs and new demands. In this pervasive mechanism, the individual appears to be in great difficulty, not least because he tries to solve problems on his own, whereas he or she actually requires the involvement and support of society. This is a ruthless yet realistic analysis of contemporary Western society, which, even with high levels of economic well-being, has not achieved true happiness.

4.2 Consumption and Work

According to Bauman, consumption is closely linked to destruction, because objects are either exploited physically until their complete annihilation, or they wear out, becoming unusable, losing charm and any ability to excite attraction or desire (Bauman, 2008). Moreover, people’s needs are unstable and insatiable, and lead to the immediate abandonment of consumption objects, in full harmony with the liquidity of their lifestyle context. The accumulation of goods is a heavy burden rather than a valuable load.

For Bauman, in the liquid-modern society, there is no space for planning and long-term investment. In other words, the deferment of pleasure is deprived from the gratification that it formerly had in terms of prudence and reasonableness. This scheme is functional in the mechanism of turbo capitalism production, since the consumerist economy is based on the replacement of goods, and its prosperity is directly proportional to the amount of money that is exchanged. Money passes from hand to hand every time that consumer products are carried to the landfill.

These phenomena should make us reflect on universal themes such as justice and solidarity. However, they also concern happiness, because every person should at least have the chance to be happy and to hope for a better future, for prosperity and freedom. But in an unfair reality, being happy is difficult, because—as was already argued by the ancients—it is impossible to achieve happiness to the detriment of another individual or many other individuals. There is no happiness without justice.

Two main phenomena mark the current socio-cultural context and have increasingly been interacting with each other: the processes of globalization at the macro-social level and the dynamics of individualization at the micro level. It should be noted that global reality, as its name suggests, invests in all parts of the world, albeit in radically different ways. On the other hand, the society of individuals is widespread, mostly in the “West”—a term implying those countries based on advanced Post-Fordist capitalism and post-modern culture, or in the mature phase of modernity.

Clarification is needed, because some aspects of the subjectivism typical of Western societies derive, as we will see, from a consumerist approach to social living. In other parts of the world, even those that are reaching considerable levels of growth, there are still significant imbalances, and most of the population must solve pressing and urgent problems. As a result, in some middle-income countries such as the BRIC group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), certain phenomena of subjectivism are related mainly to the expanding middle-to-higher classes, at least for the moment. Moreover, some characteristics of globalization call into question the economic welfare and future perspectives of the so-called developed countries, and gradually make their citizens insecure and anxious, for example, about the impact of the economic dimension on the world of production and labor, on the relationship between institutions and businesses, and on personal life and relationships.

Nowadays, even successful companies have been closed and moved to places where the cost of labor is lower. In this way, workers risk losing their jobs overnight, without being responsible for such loss, and with the company claiming no accountability, nor leaving workers any recourse. Formerly, it was possible to organize collective bargaining talks in which companies and trade unions, with the mediation of institutions, at least attempted to find a solution to problems of employment. Today, multinational companies are seldom willing to “discuss,” as they can easily release themselves from the pressures of both governments and trade unions, which defend only national interests. As a result, these institutions have lost their credibility, because they are no longer able to guarantee the rights of workers who find themselves unemployed after many years of work and who often struggle to acquire the new skills that would be required to find a new job. Markets are irregular and self-referential, and require stronger policy and new methods of intervention. The decisions are often taken at the international level, and in that context, mediation might be the answer. At the local level, there might be the opportunity of organizing retraining and professional education programs to support people who are excluded from the labor market.

In many economic sectors, the prevailing conviction is that the best way to manage cruel international competition involves the diffusion of flexible working. Leaving aside the debate about the effectiveness of flexible working conditions, here we underline its impact on people's lives, especially when it means precariousness and jobs of short duration—*very short*, one might add—which do not allow for any life planning, even in the medium term. Many factors make it difficult to plan anything regarding emotional life: firstly, the lack of job security; secondly, a real-estate market often inaccessible to younger generations not financially supported by their parents; and lastly, a pervasive lack of confidence in the likelihood of change. And even when economic conditions improve, at the age of 30 or 35 years, individuals already have established ways of thinking and living that are related to precariousness. It is very difficult to change this mentality. Moreover, as we will see, this is further nourished by the consumerist model and by a specific communication system.

In addition, personal savings, which represent an investment for the future, are threatened by international financial speculation. This can cause problems for the economies of many medium-sized countries as well as create a dangerous and worrying domino effect on all world markets. Unrelenting problematic factors then force the individual to live only for the present moment, without any specific prospects apart from insecurity, uncertainty, and vulnerability (Bauman, 2000).

Anguish and fear result, and are experienced mainly by people who have fewer socio-economic and cultural resources, who are forced to cling to their territory in order to have some hope for the future. In contrast, those who belong to the upper social classes and to the economic, financial, and cultural elite can take advantage of delocalization, playing freely in the global market and using the flows of capital, goods, knowledge, and ideas to their own advantage. In practical terms, social stratification holds the risk of further strengthening and widening the gap between those who have the proper tools to face the challenges of globalization and those who do not and are therefore destined to suffer its consequences.

4.3 Liquid Relationships

Current relationships are brief but intense, consumed in quick succession, according to the dictates of aesthetic space. This consumerist approach to relationships profoundly influences the psychology of individuals, who already have difficulties resulting from the loss of confidence they have in their abilities as a result of globalization. To be “deleted” or rejected by someone involves a loss of self-esteem, and for the most sensitive individuals, can also lead to a profound depressive crisis. The feeling that human beings are reduced to objects is certainly not pleasant, both at the social level and at the individual level, and this, in turn, reinforces feelings of insecurity, fear, and loneliness. It is not only jobs that are precarious, but also friendships and feelings; everything is tremendously liquid, according to Bauman (2000).

But the individual seems to be embedded in this mechanism that he is unable to control, and extreme individualism prevents him from finding a way out. Neglecting individual interests in order to increase the power of the group and sacrificing present happiness for future happiness do not appear to be attractive or sensible prospects.

Every missed opportunity is a lost opportunity, and this becomes something unforgivable, not easily excusable, and even less defensible (Bauman, 2008). Thus the aesthetic dimension prevails despite its obvious limitations, and the individual fails to find a remedy for his anxieties apart from being dominated by desires and emotions. Increasingly focused on himself, he becomes pre-social on the one hand, because he lives in the moment without involvement or responsibility, and a-historical on the other, because he focuses on the emotional intensity of the moment, regardless of what might have happened before.

Without the protection of society, tradition, and relations, the general Ego is likely to fall victim to its own fragility, as stressed by Beck, who points out that the do-it-yourself biography is simultaneously a “risk biography” and a “hazard biography”: it is a state of permanent danger that can degenerate very quickly into a biography of bankruptcy (Beck, 1994). And the feeling of failure cannot be allayed by money and consumption, because the individual is affected in the deepest part of his being; he feels he has failed at life, at producing something valuable, at living—rather than just existing. Existential questions emerge, despite the consumerist spiral and precisely because of it; the individual can meet his own desires and whims, but focuses on the present, forced to look for new emotions in order not to feel excluded and to remain afloat. He has been socialized since he was a child to think that consumption is the true engine of the economy, the most important social right and obligation.

Thus he behaves accordingly, then is regularly disappointed by the continuous chase for and abandonment of sensations, people, activities, and interests. At a certain point, the sense of emptiness becomes unbearable and happiness seems remote, despite the obsessive search for novelty that consumed the individual until that very moment. The paradox is revealed: the excessive individualism, adopted and “taught” by the consumer society, makes the individual less free than he thinks himself to be; he is at the mercy of uncertainty and insecurity. The individual becomes aware of his frailty and stops his aimless race for a moment, searching for alternatives to a situation that no longer holds his fascination, at least not as it did before.

He then desires to have more stable bonds again; to rediscover the pleasures of faithful and sincere friendship; to reconsider the function of social life. Sometimes there is also an attempt to recover, in some way, the “solidity” of an ethical concept or religious view of life and of the world. Essentially, the individual attempts to find his identity—which has been fragmented and weakened—through relationships and in the dimension of community.

This renewed attention to otherness, however, is difficult to find in daily life, because people, companies, and institutions are enveloped by the dynamics discussed above. It is, however, not so simple to make a turnaround and to meet other people who share the same needs and have the same courage to show their

vulnerability. Hope is thus directed towards free time, when people are more likely to abandon their weekday habits and seek greater authenticity in their behavior and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, free time, holiday, and tourism represent for the individual the *κέρπος*, the time deemed most appropriate for finding a response to the needs of expressiveness and sense, so that the individual can move closer to a happier life (Corvo, 2011).

The effort of individuals in their search for social bonds and community may also consolidate into social groups showing “tribal” traits, characterized by a high degree of uniformity with respect to a topic, product, or “passion” (Maffesoli, 1995). Marketing has understood this trend, and increasingly deals with new market niches, since such individuals are prone to having strong loyalty to a product or a tourist destination, and can belong to several communities at the same time. The “tribes” that feed the market are very different—from lovers of detective stories, thrillers, and mysteries, to enthusiasts of modeling, sports, and music, to collectors of various objects, as well as lovers of virtual games—and all are in search of a sense of belonging to a reality and are willing to spend time and money to obtain it.

It is interesting to note that often the members of these “tribes” only share that specific interest and a yearning for belonging. There are no other common points: the *transversality* of social class, age, lifestyle, and way of thinking is a common feature, but it does not create barriers to meetings and relationships; instead it frequently constitutes one of the most appreciated aspects. It may be supposed that compared to the membership of other groups, i.e., those considered “strong” because they are founded on elements of politics, religion, or values, “tribes” are more vulnerable or perceived as being less important. However, they can play a significant role in the rediscovery of personal identity, since the “passions” that hold these groups together are chosen freely by the individual, while being shared effectively with others in the context of a group.

4.4 Desire for Happiness

According to the authoritative economist Layard (2005), the seven major factors that affect human happiness are: family and relationships, economic situation, work, community and friends, health, personal freedom, and personal values. Family and private life are therefore more important than any other factor that influences a person’s happiness. In fact, research carried out in different parts of the world confirms that separation from one’s partner is the most important cause of unhappiness—more than unemployment or health problems.

Economists point out that the relational sphere is fundamental to the happiness of human beings, which shows that the possession of material goods might give immediate satisfaction, yet provides limited satisfaction over time. Thus people tend to seek continuous and increasingly intense pleasures in order to maintain the same level of well-being, so that their “subjective” happiness (the self-assessment

of one's own happiness) remains constant, even if and while their "objective" happiness is increasing.

Socio-cultural constraints cause people to focus their attention on consumerist elements, so a large amount of time is dedicated to the pursuit of monetary goals to the detriment of familial life and health; as a result, subjective well-being is low in comparison to the desired level. Obviously, a reorientation of time management in favor of family life and health would increase subjective well-being.

General research in the economic sector seems to confirm that the secret to happiness for men and women of our time lies in the ability to resist the attraction of consumption and aesthetics, and to prioritize relations and feelings. An individual who lives in harmony with himself and others is also able to enhance his abilities and to succeed in the professional field. Stress, anxiety, and depression, which are caused by an unsatisfactory private life, can reduce the potentialities of an individual, causing a dangerous regressive spiral.

In the last few centuries, philosophers, novelists, poets, and scholars have tried to describe the nature and form of happiness, taking inspiration from scientific disciplines and artistic intuition. The ancients were able to capture the essential aspects of happiness in a very lucid and clear way, and contemporary scholars have entered the debate, drawing on the contributions of human and social sciences. Virtue, knowledge, science, reason, friendship, and wisdom are some of the ways to achieve happiness, according to classical culture. From a sociological perspective, a lot of attention has been paid to the role of feelings in social dynamics, underlining the importance of factors that had not been included in the explanation of mass phenomena for far too long. Recently, many authors have dealt with happiness; for example, Bauman seems to have successfully identified the needs of individuals in a global and hyper-consumerist society, elucidating their ideas, using different methods and approaches.

In his analysis, Bauman (2002) identifies four different meanings of happiness:

1. *Objective happiness*: used when we are talking about the condition of another person. We tend to correlate the state of the world and the state of the soul (Good Luck)
2. *Happiness as a subjective experience*: the idea that happiness refers to feelings, emotions, sensations, and states of mind (Pleasure)
3. *Happiness as balanced life*: based on harmony and focused only on things worthy of being wished for, and which it would be convenient to try (Satisfaction)
4. *Happiness as the whole of life*, in its totality: characterized by moments of intense happiness, but also by moments of suffering and frustration (Good Life).

Bauman then relates his ideas to Seneca, who explains, in *De Brevitate Vitae*, the distinction between true happiness and presumed, false, or misleading happiness. True happiness brings pleasure to the happy man but not all pleasures make a man happy (wisdom). Seneca states that if a person wishes to obtain happiness, he cannot trust the advice of the average man on the street. The essential cause of human misery is the incurable transience of human existence, the imminence of the end. And what man evokes in his dream of happiness is Time standing still. Seneca

emphasizes virtue and wisdom, stating that happiness corresponds to freedom from the fear of death.

According to Bauman, if we asked ourselves to explain people's actions, most of us would reply that they are driven by the search for happiness. In the past, this was not taken for granted: suffering and joy were the real and inevitable destiny of man, and the problem was not how to run from or eliminate suffering, but rather how to reconcile with it. More recently, the problem has become how to transform happiness from a state of rare privilege, a reward for the righteous man, to a universal right of mankind (such as is mentioned in the American Declaration of Independence). This means that individuals are entitled to complain if their need for happiness is ignored, and can rebel if it is not assured. We are involved, therefore, in a perpetual search for a better life than the one we are living a life preferable to that which we have already experienced.

Nowadays, the focus is not on the social relations of the network, but on the ease with which relationships can be demolished; they are as easy to break up as they are to establish. Similarly, it can be said that the economy of consumption is at its best when it is able to reduce the period between use and waste. According to Bauman, this also affects interpersonal relationships: the yearning for attraction consists of the yearning for the beginning of a new attraction. It is difficult to create and maintain an ideal life of happiness in an unstable and changing world, one that is so incurably uncertain. The ideal horizon of happiness is no longer the long term, and in concrete terms, relationships are based on doubtful and uncertain feelings. Thus they become a never-ending source of anxiety—the sort of anxiety that curbs zest and vitality. For this reason, nobody can feel safe, and everybody lives in fear (Bauman, 2002).

4.5 From Consumer Society to Sustainability?

According to Bauman, solidarity is different from tolerance: tolerance implies a feeling of superiority to our fellow man, to whom we decide to grant our patronizing acceptance. Solidarity, on the other hand, is what counteracts solitude and the feeling of abandonment; it is not having to rely on one's own strengths alone. It is the yearning to feel like a part of something bigger—to fight for a common cause. Bauman writes that solidarity, far from being a worthless yearning, is actually the driver of change: no one knows, though, if this change is feasible or can ever be achieved (Bauman, 2006).

Bauman wonders what the long-term consequences of a brand new social movement (the very one that is developing before our eyes) would be. We are witnessing an unequivocal alternative: either a new chapter in the history of our planet is beginning, or we are just looking at a big carnival. In fact, we know, says Bauman, what the meaning of carnival is: we need to gather all our forces to get rid of—however fleetingly—all the oppressive rules and routines that surround us, so that everything can simply go back to its previous condition (Bauman, 2007).

The question we must pose, then, is how likely it is that solidarity will establish itself here and now in our society, and what we should do to ensure that solidarity is even possible. Bauman argues that the sociologist Richard Sennett tried to formulate a redefinition of Humanism to fit our century, and his response was threefold: he speaks about the necessity for a current-day humanist, of *informal and open cooperation*. Informal, because rules must spring out of the dialogue itself; open, because without predetermined expectations, it is open to whoever wants to partake. Finally, Sennett speaks of cooperation, because we must abandon the dream of seeing ourselves as winners facing a loser. Collaboration enriches everyone, and you can verify for yourself whether this collaboration works or does not (Bauman, 2011).

This is the hope and invitation of Bauman—not an insignificant one, given the importance of its implications. According to him, the situation is way worse than what is perceived by public opinion. The long-term future is being decided in our era, and will affect the next few decades, or even a lifetime (Bauman, 2008).

We are facing a pressing need to guide a process of change; to fulfill the arduous task of reconciling well-being, human progress, and the sustainability of our life on the planet. Will we be able to move from a society of consumption to a society of sustainability? Zygmunt Bauman replies that we need to do it, and that the problem is not whether this is possible, but that the starting point—the consumer society—is incapable of helping us reach this goal. Obviously, however, we do not have any other springboard from which to start. Bauman writes that although he would welcome the emergence of a solution to these problems, he does not anticipate this happening as yet. The society of consumption is hostile to sustainability: people are consuming too much, depleting natural resources, and the crisis of debt is precisely the consequence of the orgy of consumption. Avoiding spending more than we can afford is advice that every grandmother would give. Unfortunately, people seem to have forgotten every alternative system to the model of consumption for escaping this crisis. The only answer that we are offered is the need for growth of the gross domestic product (GDP), so that we can continue to consume more. According to Bauman, however, we must find the route to human happiness in ways that do not imply excessive consumption—the only thing we seem able to do. We should, instead, aim for mutual assistance, because it is the only thing that can make us feel safer (Bauman, 2007).

From a reading of the most important books of Zygmunt Bauman, it is clear that creativity and innovation were foremost in his thought and social activities. We believe that the Polish sociologist represents a fundamental reference for a new idea of sociology—one that could change its paradigms, languages, and methods, and (while respecting scientific discipline) address or engage with the problems of humanity. In particular, it is essential to realize that sustainability could transform lifestyles and consumer behavior. It is therefore eagerly hoped that there will be scholars who will take up pursuit of Bauman's sociological perspectives.

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