



The Individualized Society

Z. Bauman

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Liquid Modernity

Z. Bauman

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Bauman is of course best known as a sociologist and chronicler of our times rather than a political theorist. Nevertheless, his work is essential reading for those political theorists who feel that part of their task is to elaborate relevant and compelling normative critique — as opposed to normative critique *tout court*. Both books reviewed here develop a theme that will be familiar to seasoned Bauman readers, one that in turn has become a staple in debates in cultural and social theory. This is that ‘we’ have entered a second phase of modernity, what he refers to as ‘liquid modernity’ (as opposed to ‘late modernity’, ‘postmodernity’, ‘sur-modernity’ etc) to be distinguished from an earlier ‘solid’ phase characterized by ‘heaviness’, immobility, territoriality, relative stability. In this new phase, speed, mobility, liquidity and dynamism liberate capital, power, resources from the nation state thus bringing about that effect or process we now term ‘globalization’.

As a sociologist, what primarily interests Bauman is the change to the field of social and individual life rather than the political as such, though the impact on the latter is not difficult to discern in the analysis, nor one that will be unfamiliar to followers of the literature on globalization. What Bauman adds to the latter is, however, a concern for the feel and texture of modern life going well beyond the ‘death of the nation state’ thesis so beloved of critics of globalization. To sum up this concern, what troubles Bauman is the degree to which the scope and character of individual, corporate and social responsibility are being diminished daily. Under contemporary conditions it is now a virtue, for example, for companies to declare that they have ‘outsourced’ their labour, freed themselves from the obligation to provide benefits for their workforce (witness the current debacle over pensions in the UK), increased their capacity to shift capital around to evade taxes. Similarly, individuals are more isolated or atomized than ever before, and thus less inclined to regard themselves as obliged to help or contribute to the up-keep of others. What is at stake is, Bauman compellingly argues, nothing less than the rationale and future of the



welfare state and beyond that 'commodious living' more generally. If we cannot or will not relate at all to 'strangers' then the very fabric of sociality, never mind public life is threatened. What threatens is not 'Americanization' so much as a neo-liberal variant of the state of nature: precariousness, violence, ghettoization, and, for the majority, poverty, ill-health, enforced ignorance. So then what is to be done? What are the normative lessons to be drawn from what is an almost relentlessly bleak assessment of the trends and tendencies of 'liquid modernity'?

Bauman is characteristically thoughtful, but also guarded on such issues. One will not find here some suggested blueprint for change, not even a strategy for resistance. Indeed, if there is a criticism to be made of Bauman's analysis in this regard it is that he is disinclined to allow even the merest chink of light to pierce the black night of globalization. The efforts of radical movements and organizations to challenge the might of global forces are waved away in one sentence as too insignificant to consider. So too are the efforts of social democratic states and institutions to curb the worst excesses of corporate irresponsibility in the name of that sociality he wishes so deeply to defend. This in turn reflects I think the 'global' nature of the analysis he offers. If there is an agent responsible for this irresponsibility then it is, he argues, 'us'. We are the 'we' who compose the social and it is thus 'we' and our petty consumerist/narcissistic/individualistic ways that are ultimately to blame for corporate omnipotence. And yet, as Bauman's analysis makes clear, it is also 'we' who provide the solution in terms of reengaging and reinstating public space, recognizing our responsibility for others, recasting the social image in ways that permit different modalities of existence and enjoyment both individually and collectively. So far, however, Bauman sees little source of hope. The trends and tendencies he documents all of course point in the opposite direction: towards increased fragmentation, liquidity and in turn increased precariousness and fear. 'We' in turn can only hope that the gap Bauman perceives between the potential contained in individual thought and reflection to reimagine others spaces and ways of living and the desire to bring it about is less of a chasm than he appears to think. This as he recognizes is under current conditions a utopian project; but then it is Bauman himself who quotes Victor Hugo's dictum that 'utopia is tomorrow's truth'.

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