KEY CONTEMPORARY THINKERS

Zygmunt Bauman

Prophet of Postmodernity

Dennis Smith

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Dennis Smith

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Preface

This has been a very enjoyable book to write. Zygmunt Bauman's sustained exploration of the nature of modernity and postmodernity is one of the great intellectual journeys of our times. Zygmunt Bauman was generous with his encouragement and made it clear from the beginning that he would not try to influence what I wrote, or offer approval or otherwise of the interpretations I might come up with. It cannot be a comfortable experience to be subjected to someone else's interpretation of the meaning of your life and career. I want to thank Zygmunt Bauman for putting up with my impertinent attention.

While writing the book, I kept the following quotation by my desk as a constant reminder of the limits against which I was pressing:

> The text the author has produced acquires its own life. True – the text derives its meaning from the setting in which it has been conceived. In this setting, however, the author's intentions are just a factor among others; and surely the factor of which we know least. No less significant are those other constituents of the setting which the text absorbed, and those the text could absorb but did not: the absence is as vociferous as the presence.
>
> On the other hand the reader is no more free than the author in determining the meaning of the text … He understands as much as his knowledge allows him … If the author sends his signals from an island whose interior he has not and could not explore in full, the reader is a passenger who walks the deck of a sailing ship he does not navigate. The meaning is the instant of their encounter. (Zygmunt Bauman, *Hermeneutics and Social Science*, p. 229)

I have gained a lot from conversations with Ulrich Bielefeld of the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, with John Rex

of the Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations at Warwick University and with Richard Kilminster and Ian Varcoe, both of the School of Sociology and Social Policy at Leeds University. I owe thanks to others also. Janina Bauman was kind and tolerant when I rang or came to call. Val Riddell suggested the theme of this book but, sadly, did not live to see it published. Evelin Lindner gave me detailed and valuable comments on several chapters and has made the book a better one. Caroline Baggaley at Keele University has been a good friend. Tanya Smith has provided insight, wit and a sense of proportion. Aston Business School has a long-standing tradition of encouraging research in the social sciences and it is a pleasure to have the support of colleagues such as Henry Miller, Reiner Grundmann, John Smith and Helen Higson. The ‘invisible college’ of social scientists at Aston University crosses departmental boundaries and includes Sue Wright and Dieter Haselbach of the School of Languages and European Studies.

Presentations drawing upon the book’s argument at various stages of its development were given at Leeds University, Sheffield University (at the kind invitation of Sharon Macdonald), Aston Business School and the British Sociological Association’s Annual Conference at Glasgow. I have benefited from the comments of many colleagues and hope they find the final result interesting and worthwhile. If not, I do not expect them to share the blame.

Part I

Setting the Agenda

1

Living Without a Guidebook

Introduction

If you are new to the hotly raging debate about modernity and postmodernity, start by reading Zygmunt Bauman. He is one of the most interesting and influential commentators on these aspects of our human condition.

Zygmunt Bauman has brilliantly described humankind's trek through modernity during the past few centuries. He has also drawn a vivid map of the new world coming into being as modernity turns postmodern.

Bauman is part of the story he tells. He can be found on the map he draws. Born in 1925 in Poland and educated in Soviet Russia, Bauman fought with the Red Army against the Germans during World War II. He emigrated from Poland to the West in 1968. Since then he has published a new book every one or two years.

Critical perspectives

This book presents an overview of Bauman's work between the 1960s and the late 1990s, and it also provides a critical

perspective on that work. I have tried to get ‘behind’ the texts themselves in order to understand why they were produced and what they were intended to achieve.

Bauman wants to awaken people to their creative potential and to their moral responsibilities. That is not difficult to discover, since he is quite explicit about it. However, the way Bauman defines his objectives changes over the decades. So does the way he tries to achieve them. Bauman does not announce these alterations of definition and direction. They have to be reconstructed through the kind of critical analysis I have carried out in the first part of this book, where I trace the main outlines of Bauman’s life and career as a young refugee, a wartime soldier, a military bureaucrat, a revisionist intellectual and an émigré.

Analysis of this kind asks ‘why *this* agenda?’ and ‘why this *change* of agenda?’ Our response to a specific text is altered if we are able to see it as part of a larger constellation of writing, especially if that larger constellation tells its own story. I say ‘tells its own story’ as if the process were unproblematic, a matter of simply downloading a file. In fact, it requires a concentrated effort of interpretation, in the course of which one has to keep the imagination under tight control, avoid unwarranted assumptions, try to avoid going too far beyond the evidence, but, at the same time, not ignore the evidence that exists.

These are, I assume, the working practices of a good detective, although I must say straightaway that I am not looking for a ‘conviction’. I am in broad sympathy with Zygmunt Bauman’s objectives. My curiosity comes out of fascination, not suspicion.

This first part of the book, ‘Setting the Agenda’, sets out my understanding of the long process that led from Bauman’s search for a ‘modern Marxism’ in the 1960s (Bauman 1969: 1) to his evocation of ‘postmodernity and its discontents’ in the 1990s (Bauman 1997). In the second

part of the book, entitled ‘The Road to Postmodernity’, I show how Bauman’s major works in English can be understood in the light of the interpretation developed in part I. In particular, I trace the genealogy of Bauman’s vision of modernity and postmodernity, and explore its intellectual content.

In the final part of the book, ‘Dialogue’, I appraise Bauman’s work from two other directions. I locate Bauman in the field of play occupied by critical theory and post-structuralism, examining the points of convergence and tension. In this context, I pay particular attention to Adorno, Habermas, Foucault and Lyotard. Finally, I debate the nature of modernity and postmodernity with Zygmunt Bauman in a correspondence that appears as the last chapter in the book.

This book exemplifies one of the methodological principles explored by Bauman. To borrow a passage from his *Thinking Sociologically*, my narrative

> goes in circles rather than developing in a straight line. Some topics return later, to be looked upon once again in the light of what we have discussed in the meantime. This is how all effort of understanding works. Each step in understanding makes a return to previous stages necessary. What we thought we understood in full reveals new question marks we previously failed to notice. The process may never end; but much may be gained in its course. (Bauman 1990b: 19)

So it is with this book about Bauman.

Sociology plus

Bauman is a sociologist. That means he is in the business of ‘viewing human actions as *elements of wider figurations*’ and seeing human actors as ‘locked together in a web of *mutual dependency*’. As a sociologist, he wants to

‘defamiliarize the familiar’ and make the world more amenable to individual and collective freedom. He realises very well that, when people are free to think and act for themselves, this ‘may be seen as having a destabilizing effect on the existing power relations’ (Bauman 1990b: 7, 15, 17; emphases in original).

Bauman’s sociology is intrinsically critical, dedicated to testing ‘common sense’ (p. 8): in other words, the unsystematic mixture of conventions and prejudices in terms of which we typically manage the routines of daily life. However, when Bauman has breached the barricade of ‘common sense’, which way does he march? This question could be asked of any critical sociologist – and most sociologists would say that their discipline is intrinsically critical.

At this point, it becomes relevant that Bauman is more than ‘just’ a sociologist. He is also a highly competent social philosopher, well versed in, for example, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Lévinas. More than that, Bauman has been a socialist for most of his life. In the late 1980s, his wife wrote that he was still ‘a sincere socialist … deep in his heart’ (J. Bauman 1988: 115). He retains a very strong commitment to equality, freedom and justice, although he now prefers to describe these as ‘western, Enlightenment values’ (Bauman 1992a: 225).

Finally, Bauman is not only a sociologist, a social philosopher and (in some sense, at least) a socialist. He is also an accomplished storyteller, a maker of historical narratives. A significant part of the power of Bauman’s work comes from the stories he relates. The structure and dynamic of these narratives tell readers where they are located in time and space. They also tell them the direction in which they are moving, or perhaps should be.[1]

Two narratives are central to Bauman’s early and later work, respectively: the narrative of progress towards a

socialist utopia; and the narrative of the transition from modernity to postmodernity. They both begin with the breakdown of a ‘traditional’ social order, have heroes or pioneers, and end by challenging the reader to take some action or make some choice.

I imagine that some readers will come to this book feeling rather puzzled about the meaning of the terms ‘modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’. If their meaning is not problematic for you, then you would do well to skip the next two sections. However, if you remain puzzled, or if you are simply curious about the way I understand these ideas, then read on, aware that I am aiming these passages at ‘beginners’.

What is modernity?

Everyone knows that if something is ‘modern’ it is up to date, in tune with the latest ideas, more advanced than previous versions. That applies, most obviously, to things like cameras, cars and high-tech kitchen equipment. These modern items are desired and bought by modern people. They are made and distributed by modern organizations, most of which are trying to design something even more modern for next year or the year after that.

The modern world is permanently on fast forward. Modernity means constant change. Many terms in this paragraph would have made no sense to anyone in 1975. Go to your lap-top or palm-top computer. Use it to get on to the Internet. Access a search engine. Now find some web-sites dealing with the idea of modernity. Surf between them. Follow the links. Find out when in history men and women started describing themselves as modern people living in a modern age.

You will discover that the idea of modernity, of living in the ‘modern age’, began in Europe sometime during the late sixteenth century. It implied a contrast with other ‘ages’ that

were not modern, epochs that had gone before, that were out of date, whose moment had passed. Europeans began to see history as divided into three epochs: ancient, medieval and modern. The Greeks and Romans did not know they were ‘ancient’. Medieval knights did not realize they were in the ‘middle’ of history. But we, like our sixteenth-century ancestors, ‘know’ we are modern.

In the modern age, three powerful forces have come into play. The first is the modern national state. The state has dug its roots deep into the soil of society and sucked up resources in the form of tax revenues. States have used tax income to build up their muscle power (more soldiers, more bureaucrats, more display) and used that muscle power to defend, develop and, in some cases, terrorize the populations they control.

The second powerful force is modern science. Scientists and engineers have explored the properties of the environment and tried to discover the operating principles of matter. They have developed tools for manipulating the natural world, asserting greater human influence over it. Weapons have become more deadly, medicines more effective, engines more powerful. Systems of transport and communications have penetrated into the world’s furthest recesses.

The third great force is capitalism – the systematic pursuit of profit. Traders and manufacturers have pushed and shoved local communities into producing for the market. They have cut their way through the thicket of habit and custom to bring labour, skills, energy sources and raw materials into new money-making relationships. Capitalism has drawn the whole population into activities that feed into the creation of mobile wealth – resources that can be used to engineer still further change.

At the heart of modernity is a struggle for betterment: being better, doing better, getting better. The competition

takes place at several levels: between individuals, families, cities, empires, governments and companies, for example. Any group prevented from taking part in the contest on equal terms (due to discrimination, disability, oppression or imprisonment) feels extremely discontented.

The ‘modern’ assumption is that everybody has a right to take part in the struggle for betterment. Or, rather, every group claims that right for its own members. They may wish to deny the same right to certain other groups whom they regard as ‘inhuman’ or ‘uncivilized’.

An aspect of the struggle within modernity is the contest between ideologies. These idea-systems compete to justify the different demands and restrictions imposed upon the masses by bureaucrats, bosses and experts. At the heart of all these ideologies of modernity is the promise of a better earthly existence to come.

One powerful ideology inspired by the progress of science is the ethos of planning: the idea that experts can manipulate the world to produce desirable outcomes by using their scientific knowledge in a rational way. Another, opposing, ideology also draws inspiration from a scientific source. This is social Darwinism, the notion that social competition, however nasty, tends to favour those fittest to survive. The assumption is that we all benefit from this in the long run.

Social Darwinism is sometimes interwoven with the *laissez-faire* ideology of the market. This approach argues that an invisible hand ensures that, even though people pursue their own selfish interests as buyers and sellers, the total amount of useful wealth within society tends to increase and, again, we all benefit from this in the fullness of time.

Both *laissez-faire* and social Darwinism were powerful in the nineteenth century, although their influence remained powerful in the twentieth. During the past seventy-five

years, other ideologies have become prominent. Democracy gained a powerful global advocate when the United States came out of its long period of isolation, especially during and after World War II.

Democracy has often been interlinked with Keynesian welfarism. This is the idea that the state can manage capitalism in such a way that the people enjoy full employment as well as social rights such as education, health care and pensions.[2] The modern national state has also been the focus of other ideologies, notably fascism and communism. Each of these two systems claims that state power can be used to make society perfect.

Every ideology assigns a particular role to each of the 'big players': in other words, the state, science, capitalism and the people themselves. For example, communism and fascism both give leading roles to the state and science, while *laissez-faire* emphasizes the capitalist market. In all cases, the 'winners' are, supposedly, the people. This entity is presented sometimes as a hive of busily interacting individuals (workers, consumers or citizens), sometimes as a united body (a *Volk*, a 'nation' or a proletariat).

During the past century, men and women have been trained to see modernity through the rose-coloured spectacles provided by ideologies of this kind. The job of making these spectacles, keeping them well polished and ensuring that they are worn properly has fallen to the ranks of the intellectuals, in government, in education and in the media. They have been the priests of modernity.

What is postmodernity?

One of the notable features of Western culture *in the present phase of modernity* is the widespread use of the idea of postmodernity by intellectuals. Talk about postmodernity does not mean that modernity has ended. It

is more accurate to say that postmodernity is a key idea employed by intellectuals trying to cope with the impact of four massive changes in the ‘big picture’ of modernity during the last three decades of the twentieth century.

Firstly, national states have been cut down to size. They have become much less ambitious in the claims they make about their capacity to reshape society. During the 1980s, the US federal government and many European governments abandoned Keynesian welfare strategies. When the Soviet Union broke up during the early 1990s, this brought the twentieth century’s most sustained and ambitious experiment in state-sponsored modernization to an end. Opponents of the ethos of planning argued that this finally destroyed the claims of that ideology.

Secondly, awareness of risk has increased. People in the West are being forced to stop expecting that a caring state will protect them from cradle to grave. They must live with a high level of risk and make what arrangements they can to cope. The old safety nets have been torn to bits. The family is an increasingly unstable institution. The welfare state cannot meet the demands placed upon it. Most frightening of all, science has shown its dangerous side.

We use science and technology to drive the world faster, to squeeze more out of nature, to give us a better life. But we do not feel in control. The level of risk is spiralling upward. The explosion in the Soviet nuclear plant at Chernobyl, the discovery of the hole in the ozone layer, the scare over British beef and BSE, the shock of AIDS and our failure to find a cure for this disease: all these happenings have combined to popularize a very pessimistic thesis. This has three parts. Science is just as likely to produce bad outcomes as good outcomes. The risk of science threatening life and health is high and difficult to predict. Finally, bureaucrats and officials are likely to disguise or underestimate the level of risk.

Thirdly, capitalism has become global. Large-scale businesses have cut themselves free from the close links with national states that Keynesian welfarism required. Multinational companies conduct their operations across national borders. They can shift their investments from country to country depending on which government offers them the best deal. They are intrinsically unreliable as long-term partners for states trying to manage particular national economies. In fact, the very idea of a ‘national economy’ has become an anachronism.

Fourthly, European imperialism has come to an end. In 1900, cities such as London, Paris, Brussels, Amsterdam, Vienna and Moscow were not just political or commercial capitals of their respective countries. They were all the headquarters of vast multinational or multiethnic empires, both within Europe and beyond. This vast imperial structure has sunk like the *Titanic*. The iceberg it struck was the United States, an ex-colony of the British empire which grew more powerful than its old master. America’s interventions in World War I and World War II were decisive and had fatal results for European imperialism.

The European empires sank below the waves in an uneven way. Some were more buoyant than others and broke surface again, briefly. World War I swept away the Austrio-Hungarian empire of the Hapsburgs and its arch rival the Ottoman empire. The Russian and German empires were also broken up. However, by the early 1940s a multiethnic German empire had been re-established under Hitler.

Further decline was precipitated by World War II. The Allied victory destroyed Hitler’s German empire. The war also led to the final disintegration of the British and French empires. However, after the war Stalin rebuilt the Russian empire in Eastern Europe. The final phase began in 1989. The break-up of the Soviet bloc was the last great decolonization movement in modern European history.

These four changes – the shrinking of the national state, the spiralling of risk, the globalization of capital and the collapse of European imperialism – add up to a large-scale restructuring of the architecture of modernity. New rules and conventions are taking shape only very gradually. We are still adapting our expectations, learning appropriate strategies for survival.

The key ‘load-bearing’ structures are no longer national states. Institution building is going on at a higher level, the level of multinational and transnational corporations, international agreements such as the North American Free Trade Area, and supra-state bodies such as the European Union.

The ideological repertoire cultivated by intellectuals during the twentieth century has lost its power to convince or energize the population. This applies above all to ideologies that gave a large role to the planning function of the national state. People do not want to lose their democratic right to vote, but they do not have very high expectations of government.

Europe is the big loser in this game of global restructuring. Five hundred years of European global pre-eminence have come to an end. It was over by 1945. The cost of American military support for the United Kingdom and France was the dismantling of the old empires, making room for ‘Coca-Cola capitalism’. This was an offer the European allies could not refuse. During the quarter of a century following the end of World War II, the United States enjoyed global near-hegemony.

It was only very slowly that the profound implications of the loss of empire began to penetrate the European consciousness. Europeans lived in a kind of imperial afterglow until the early 1970s. Then the oil shock came. It showed that the days were over when cheap energy would be delivered without fail to the West by subordinate Third

World governments. The 1970s delivered a series of humiliations to the West, culminating in President Carter's deep embarrassment over the American hostages taken by the new revolutionary government of Iran.

Ironically, by helping to end European imperialism, the United Staets has made itself the chief target of African and Asian politicians who need a hate figure to blame for the misery and discontent of their people. Much of the fury directed against the United States in the Third World is the discharge of centuries of frustration brewed up under European rule. With so much attention directed at 'American imperialism', it has been easy to forget the much longer period of European rule that preceded it; even easier to forget that European culture and politics have themselves been deeply influenced by Europe's long centuries of privileged existence.

For centuries, Europeans were 'the masters'. It has not been easy for them to cope with their dethronement and adjust to their loss. Acknowledging the sense of loss is difficult to do. Guilt and embarrassment swamp all other feelings. Nostalgia for the old days is Europe's 'love that dare not speak its name'.

During the past three decades, intellectual life in Europe has registered an intense, subterranean feeling of bereavement and emptiness. The prefix 'post' has become a much used syllable: postmodern, postindustrial, postcolonial, post-Enlightenment, poststructural and so on. The repeated use of this word expresses a deep sense that a momentous change has occurred. Whenever 'post' is employed in this way it carries a hidden force drawn from the West's biblical tradition, either a negative force, as in Adam and Eve's loss of innocence *after* the Fall, or a positive force as in humankind's redemption *after* the Messiah's arrival on earth.

The idea of the ‘postmodern’ has been floating around the cultural ether on both sides of the Atlantic since the 1970s and can be traced back even earlier.[3] The term is sometimes applied to exciting experimental work in the arts, using the fragmentation of old forms as an opportunity to make daring experiments. However, it is from the distinctive European experience that the word ‘postmodernity’ gets its strong connotations of disillusionment, disappointment and even despair.

The logic is simple, powerful and devastating. Europe played the leading role in making the modern world. However, that continent no longer has the leading part in running that world. As a result, West Europeans experience a ‘postmodern’ existence at the end of the millennium. The world is still modern, but ‘their’ modern world has gone.

Europe’s intellectuals have certainly experienced a decline in their circumstances as a social group. The shrinking of the state has reduced their employment opportunities and weakened their job rights. The discrediting of experts has undermined their prestige. For some, the European Union has provided a new focus. It is a project with reassuring overtones of the nation-state.

However, Europe’s public sphere, the arena of political debate, is weak and fragmented. Furthermore, Europe is multicultural and multilingual. Intellectuals have no stable base within this polity. There is no pan-European education system that will transmit their ideas to a pan-European public. Intellectual debates do not cross national boundaries very easily. Habermas, Foucault and a few others may be read throughout Europe, but do their commentators (in French, English, German, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Czech and so on) ever read each other?[4]

The crumbling of Europe’s empires and the collapse of belief in socialism and Keynesian welfarism created a large political and ideological vacuum. The European Union, post-

Maastricht treaty, now occupies some of that space, both political and ideological. A large share has also been taken by ethnic nationalism. Privatization has cut away large chunks of the remaining political space, taking major services out of government's hands. Intellectuals, especially in Europe, have been traumatized by these changes. In large measure, they are being pushed aside. Governments pay less attention to them. So do citizens and consumers.

These changes have been felt less intensely by intellectuals in the United States for several reasons. Ideologies that gave a large planning function to the state made fewer inroads there in the early and mid-twentieth century, so their decline is less disturbing. American intellectuals are much more used to surviving in a social climate dominated by the interests of business. Veblen's *The Higher Learning in America* (1918) still provides valuable insights on this question. Liberal critics of capitalism such as Robert Park, Louis Wirth and other members of the Chicago school of sociology were more familiar than their European counterparts with the need to cultivate public opinion.[5]

Finally, the emergence of global capitalism has confirmed, not undermined, the position of American business as the leading force in world affairs. Indirectly, this sustains the authority and prestige of the American government and its 'think tanks' staffed by university professors. In the long term, the United States' position of leadership will probably be challenged by Asian capitalism, but at the turn of the millennium this time had not yet arrived.

However, let us return to the troubled plight of European intellectuals. What is their function in these new conditions of restructured modernity at the turn of the millennium? Who is their audience? If they do not wish to become business consultants, television entertainers, nationalist spokespersons, feminist campaigners or Eurocrats – all

plausible strategies – whom will they seek to influence? What will they tell them? There is no clear answer, no consensus on the main outlines of a critical perspective that challenges the prevailing political mood and offers a viable alternative. There is a deep uncertainty about which way to turn. All this has been poured into the debate on postmodernity.

The outpouring of scholarly work on postmodernity and the whole 'post' family (post-Fordism, postindustrialism, postemotionalism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, postpositivism and so on) is like a loud chorus of distress coming from birds forced out of their nests by the uprooting of a giant tree. There is no dominant melody within the cacophony. It is difficult for anyone listening to these discordant outpourings to work out an overall message. Charles Lemert catches the mood of general confusion in the title of his recent book: *Postmodernism Is Not What You Think* (1997).

Two dispassionate reviews of the literature published in the early 1990s both found the air thick with contention. Margaret Rose (1991) observed 'very wide differences of philosophy between many of those now using the same term'. The following year, Barry Smart reported 'major differences over the conceptualisation of the postmodern, and the associated question of its relationship to the project of modernity' (1992: 180). He warned against 'an unqualified endorsement of the polymorphous perversities sometimes associated with manifestations of the postmodern' (p. 182).

Rose tried to find order in the field. However, the kind of order she found is mind-boggling in its complexity. In a typical passage, Rose argued that

> many of the more recent concepts of post-modernism may be placed in the ... categories of 'deconstructionist', 'double-coded' and 'ideal' post-modernisms. Within these

> categories, deconstructionist post-modernism may be said to have criticised modernist value systems of various kinds (for Hassan, the old canons of modernism; for Lyotard, the ‘metanarratives’ of modernity – of capitalism, progress and consensus; for Jameson the ‘culture of capital’; for Burgin, Greenberg’s valorisation of high modernist art; or for Fekete that which he terms the ‘modern’ ‘fact-value’ distinction), as well as other rival forms of post-modernism which they have seen to be antipathetic to theirs. Further to this, and in opposition to many of the deconstructionist theories outlined above, Charles Jencks’s theory of post-modernism as a double-coding of modernism with other codes has presented the post-modern as both incorporating and transforming modernism, while ideal post-modernisms such as Fuller’s have expressed dissatisfaction with both the above sets of theories and looked to the future establishment of values which are both ‘post’ the ‘modern’ and all earlier theories dubbed post-modern. (1991: 176)[6]

This summary reads like a report filed by a war correspondent in the Balkans. In that respect, it gives the right impression. There is no consensus on the nature of postmodernity.

Before moving on, I should emphasize that the last two sections have described my own understanding of modernity and postmodernity as distinct from Zygmunt Bauman’s views on this matter. However, it is now time to turn to Bauman.

Why Bauman is worth reading

To recapitulate, the centre of gravity within modernity shifted in the twentieth century. In Europe this felt like an earthquake, one that gave massive jolts to the continent during the first and second world wars, then delivered a