ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

living on borrowed time

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Conversations with Citlali Rovirosa-Madrazo

Zygmunt Bauman

polity

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Introduction

The first great recession of the last century, following the 1929 stock market crash, resulted in rival political systems and institutions that shaped a polarized world, with antagonistic forces fighting to establish different visions of economic development and, indeed, different visions of hegemonic domination; only to throw us back into decay when another recession, originating in Wall Street, lashed with the force of a tsunami in 2008.

This time, however, more challenging and decisive factors that no other civilization had known before were brought into the equation: unprecedented environmental threats – with natural disasters attributed to climate change – unprecedented levels of world poverty and an increase in the numbers of 'surplus population'; extraordinary scientific and technological developments presenting our society with critical predicaments; and a decline in the moral and political systems that had given the institutions of modernity a degree of social cohesion and stability.

Based on the work of Zygmunt Bauman, this book considers in historical context the meaning of the first global financial crisis of our young century, establishing links and considering its causes, implications and some of the moral and political challenges ahead. What may be considered a 'final' passage in the decline of the political institutions of modernity is addressed in this book, which seeks to explore matters beyond the mere economic phenomena of the Wall Street crash.

Financial slumps occur in historical contexts, in specific economic, political and moral discursive formations. The two largest financial downturns to have taken place in the space of two centuries have been associated with the long drawn out transition from modernity and with major historical developments – from *fascism* and *totalitarianism* to *neoliberalism*, from the Holocaust, to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the decline of the *ethnocratic state* in Latin America[1] and the war in Iraq. Both recessions took place in the context of huge political, moral, technological and military developments, which cannot be understood without looking into the archives of history and the ideological and economic formations that produced them.

Crisis can present us with opportunities to both modify and reflect on our situation, opportunities to try to understand how we got to the place where we are now and what we can do, if at all, to change our direction. It can represent a genuine opportunity for the production of 'new knowledge' and the drawing of *new epistemological frontiers*, with implications for future lines of research and debate. If anything, this crisis should be a chance to step back and ask more questions, an occasion to review and challenge all our theoretical frameworks and explore some of our historical and mental caves with more appropriate analytical and epistemological tools, hoping that we can identify and learn from our historical candidness. It is not good enough to try to look at the immediate economic and financial causes and effects of the financial collapse of the autumn of 2008: a thorough check-up is in order; a review of the framework that shaped our approach to the economy, assessing at today's historical crossroads which institutions will survive, and which may indeed become redundant or 'extinct'.

The colossal crash of Wall Street in 2008, and the subsequent collapse of the banking sector were not going to signal the fall of capitalism, as Bauman sharply tells us in this book, and as the world leaders showed when they gathered at the G20 summit in Washington shortly after the Wall Street disaster and ratified their commitment to the dogma of the free market economy,[2] proceeding to transform the state into a gigantic insurance company issuing insurance policies for the banks and Wall Street. Indeed, as Bauman argues here, 'cooperation between state and market is, under capitalism, a rule; conflict between them, if it ever surfaces,

is an exception', and the latest developments only confirmed this rule.

The global financial downturn of 2008 and the inability or unwillingness of governments to regulate the financial and banking sectors – a characteristic feature of what Bauman regards as *liquid times*, sprang recession upon us, sending us into uncharted territories. In early 2009, the International Labour Organization estimated that global unemployment could increase to a staggering 50 million. The World Bank, in its economic forecast for 2009,[3] sentenced about 53 million people in developing countries to remain poor because of the world economic slowdown; in its report for the first quarter of 2009, it was estimated that the food and fuel price increases of 2008 had pushed another 130–150 million people into poverty and the global crisis was likely to keep 46 million more people below the 'absolute poverty line of $1.25 per day'. By February 2009, the biggest economic stimulus in US history was passed by the US Congress and it was considered a victory for President Barack Obama less than a month after he took office. The first month of Barack Obama's presidency included a banking bail-out worth at least $1.5 trillion (£1.02 trillion).[4] But these numbers did not match the scale of the problem at a global level. In its February 2009 report the World Bank stated that the economic downturn would reverse many of the gains made in reducing poverty in developing countries. And in Britain alone, the picture was hardly better, as a report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation showed when it indicated that 'although recession will not greatly affect child poverty numbers, it will worsen the profile of child poverty'. That report estimated that '2.3 million children in the UK alone will be in poverty by 2010, missing the 1.7 million target set in 1999.'[5] It was to be expected that the greatest casualties of the recession were bound to be the world's poorest, inside or outside the 'advanced economies': inevitably, the economic slump would undermine the plans agreed by the United Nations to reach the poverty reduction targets for 2015 set in the Millennium Development Goals back in 2000, at the UN Millennium Summit. Any progress towards reducing infant mortality, which could see 200,000–400,000 more children die a year if the crisis persists, would have to be delayed, as World Bank president, Robert Zoellick admitted. At the time this book was concluded, this was only the tip of the iceberg, with the International

Monetary Fund warning that the entire world would have an economic growth rate close to zero into 2009, and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization alerting that world hunger had reached 1.02 billion.[6]

All these figures represented the broad picture in rather conservative numbers – if one is prepared, that is, to accept cold statistics and cold numbers as the best means of measuring and quantifying human misery, and 'human waste', but, as our conversations in the book show, there is more to this than simply numbers. The economic downturn, along with the subsequent plans of governments around the world to *collectivize* private financial debt, also revealed intricate linguistic constructions and complex discursive developments. Thus, in recent times, the language of rights has changed: *citizens* have become 'customers'; passengers and hospital patients have become 'clients'; *poverty* has become criminalized – as Bauman shows throughout his work – and 'extreme poverty' has become a 'pathological condition' rather than a reflection of structural injustice – a 'pathological dysfunction' of those who are poor, rather than the structural dysfunction of an economic system that generates and reproduces inequality;[7] and, more recently, *recession* itself has become regarded as an issue of 'national security', in the new language deployed by the new US National Intelligence.[8]

These financial developments and the crisis of the economic orthodoxy of the late twentieth century occurred as part of historical processes – including the rise and fall of the postwar Keynesian welfare state, the rise and fall of the nation-state, and democracy, all of which Bauman has examined in depth in various publications[9] and revisited in our conversations. There are, in Bauman's view, many instances in which our perceptions of both the state and its reality have changed, 'leading the consumer markets to slip into the role vacated by the state', a phenomenon that has become clearer since President Ronald Reagan in the US and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the UK imposed privatization and deregulation policies with catastrophic consequences worldwide, consequences which led up to the 2008 crash. Another example of these dramatic changes concerns the mutations of the welfare state: the defining purpose of the agencies created for dealing with poverty is no longer, says Bauman, keeping the poor in good shape. Indeed 'policing the poor' is the new task of the state

agencies that run 'something like a ghetto without walls, a camp without barbed wire (though densely packed with watch towers)'. Such are some of the themes we address herein as we embark upon an open, frank and interdisciplinary exchange, giving depth to the latest developments, rather than isolating them in a narrow and reductionist economic perspective.

Who is Zygmunt Bauman?

Like many other intellectuals from Eastern Europe, Bauman suffered under Nazi persecution and his family was forced to migrate to the Soviet Union in 1939, after Poland was invaded by Nazi forces. Having later escaped Stalinism and having returned to his native Poland, where he took up a position at Warsaw University, he became a victim of anti-Semitic purges in 1968 and was forced to migrate again, finding, in Britain, his permanent home, which he has since shared with his wife, the writer Janina Bauman. In 1971 he became a professor at Leeds University, where the substantial bulk of his research was produced, with astonishing results, until he formally retired in 1990, producing a prolific number of publications since.

Bauman experienced the polarization of a world divided between two conflicting visions of the way to tackle recession. At one extreme, the free market economy, leading US President Franklin D. Roosevelt to create the conditions in the early twentieth century for securing the hegemonic position of the US in the world; at the other extreme, fascism and totalitarianism – addressed in Bauman's early work[10] – leading to Hitler's and Stalin's atrocities, which shocked the world into shame and outrage, and which Bauman has considered with extraordinary eloquence and erudition in a number of publications.[11] Few academics of prominence have lived through and reflected on the horrors of these atrocities and two recessions, with the major political historical developments occurring between them.

Zygmunt Bauman lived and worked in the aftermath of the first major recession of the last century. Reflecting on the big picture of the international financial and banking crisis at the dawn of the new century, he cautioned: 'The present-day "credit crunch" is not an outcome of the banks' failure; on the contrary it is *fruit of*

their outstanding success: Success in transforming a huge majority of men and women, old and young, into a race of debtors.' Bauman examined and understood the capitalist historical developments as few have done, which is why, in his reflection on the current crisis, and the collapsing institutions around it, he warns: 'The present "credit crunch" does not signal the end of capitalism; only the exhaustion of a successive grazing pasture . . .' But, for Bauman, there is no looking back: communism remains in Bauman's eyes 'a short cut to slavery'. There is more, however; Western democracy, he suggests in this book, is also at stake. If modern democracy was born out of the needs and ambitions of a *society of producers*, and if the ideas of 'self-determination' and 'self-government' were made to the measure of practices of production, the big question, says Bauman, is whether such ideas can survive the passage from a society of producers to one of consumers.

Bauman's international reputation and growing influence across the humanities have inspired, among many others, those who are interested in 'epistemological transgression' and the Eurocentric foundations of Western political thought.[12] While the writings of Bauman have become increasingly more prominent in the last decade, and his ideas have spread, the insights gained from these conversations are also likely to have implications for future research.

There are several areas in the social sciences that have been addressed by Bauman; his writings on law,[13] a number of essays and books on culture and art,[14] his analysis of modernity and postmodernity, being classed by some as a breakthrough,[15] particularly *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), but also his writings on ethics,[16] *Postmodernity and its Discontents*,[17] *In Search of Politics* (1999)[18] and, more recently, *Liquid Modernity* (2000).[19]

Bauman addresses some of the tragedies of our time that unfolded as a result of economic globalization,[20] and the legacy of 'human waste' and 'surplus population', as Bauman refers to the millions of migrants, unemployed and vagabonds in a society where humans are regarded as pariahs, only worthy of being seen as waste material. Society, says Bauman, 'can only be raised to the level of community as long as it effectively protects its members against the horrors of misery and indignity; that is, against the terrors of being excluded [and] being condemned to "social redun-

dancy" and otherwise consigned to [being] "human waste" '.[21] But it is not only the 'pariahs' who are part of the saga of 'surplus population' and 'human waste' – an issue we address in our conversations; the truth is, as Bauman suggests here, borrowing from Ehrlich's views on population: 'there are in fact too many rich people.'[22]

Bauman's innovative notion of *liquidity* is a metaphor to describe the notable social and political transformations in the mid and late twentieth century, represented by the disintegration or 'liquidation' of the institutions of modernity. In his framework, liquid modernity is 'post-Utopian', 'post-Fordist', 'post-National', and 'post-panoptical'.[23] Neoliberalism – both cause and effect of the nation-state crisis – played a decisive role, in Bauman's view, in the latest transitions of liquid capitalism, one of its features being 'the passage from a society of producers into a society of consumers', with the distinctive and dramatic addition of a transmutation into 'a race of debtors'; and with the new lamentable role of the state as 'an executor of market sovereignty'[24] in which 'the radical privatization of human fate goes along and apace with the radical deregulation of industry and finances'.[25]

In Bauman's view, our socially constructed communities, identities and institutions have become increasingly more precarious and more elusive,[26] giving way to 'liquid identities' in a world where the decline of the state and the blurring of national borders are irreversible.[27] 'Liquid times' also produced, in Bauman's framework, a discourse where the culture of citizens' rights (traditionally belonging to the welfare state and discourses of modernity) is downgraded into 'a culture of charity, humiliation and stigma',[28] a theme debated further in this book.

We learn from Bauman that *identity*, including gender identity, has a provisional and elusive nature;[29] this is probably the reason why orthodox feminism has not found fertile ground in his work, with only a few of the academics concerned with *feminist* theory having considered his writings.[30] But, most importantly, *identity* and *otherness* have become irrelevant in the sociological framework of the Polish author because, as Ilan Semo puts it, in Bauman's work *Difference* (singular, with a capital D) has evaporated like a mirage; there are only *differences* (plural, with a small d) and they change continuously.[31] This is also the reason why Bauman rejects Charles Taylor and other advocates of

'fashionable multiculturalism'.[32] In his view, perceiving 'identity and the nature of culture as like things, complete inside and clearly delineated on the outside' is a mistake.[33] However, his thoughts on identity take another turn in this book as we discuss the implications for the very meaning of humanity in the age of biotechnology and the latter's deployment of so-called 'post-humanity'.

In Bauman's later writing, 'liquid cities' whose citizens have been transformed into armies of consumers, are no longer 'cosmopolis' but fortress-like 'cities of fear'.[34] They confront us with the reality that we have become obsessed with security to the extent that we have 'normalized the state of emergency',[35] with the paradoxical result that borders between the state and civil society have also become blurred. Thus today's 'plot of fear' is no longer found only in the prospect of the state devouring a society (by means of a dictatorship), or in the society erupting in the state (by means of mass revolution), but in the very act of becoming the excluded and marginalized.[36] As Semo explains, in Bauman's analysis, governments today do not focus on the ability to produce consensus (cf. Gramsci) but on the cunning involved in restoring the motives of fear. Bauman again: 'if it were not for people fearing, it would be difficult to imagine the need for a state' . . . the state is a 'fear-management, fear-shuffling and fear-recycling plant'.

Bauman is in debt to Lyotard[37] as he is to Derrida.[38] Like them, he realizes the need to abandon the illusion of all grand narratives, including those regarding the 'elusive universality'.[39] Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) is present in Bauman's early work, including *Legislators and Interpreters* (1987), where Bauman, in line with other authors concerned with legal deconstruction,[40] insists that we live in an age of 'competing interpretations'. Thus the shift away from 'foundationalism', and the distancing from metanarratives, is not only a symptom of 'liquid times', but could, in fact, in a paradoxical way, be a healthy approach to understanding the *autopoietic* circle of law[41] and other tautological constructions. However, Bauman is critical of those who 'celebrate' postmodernity as a clear landmark beyond modernity, and warns of the risks of making postmodernity a grand narrative itself.

Another key concept gathered from reading Bauman's work, both in his early period[42] and in more recent times,[43] seems to be that of utopia. But as M. Jacobsen and R. Jacoby before him have

pointed out,[44] utopia has been neglected, when it has not been abandoned, by intellectuals and academics on the left. Utopia is in disrepute and one of the reasons for this, according to Bauman, is its stubborn link to modernity; thus in our conversations he remarks: 'it is only the pioneers of modernity who needed utopian images to drive them . . . "Teleology" is primarily a modern notion.' But in his early work he had written: 'The driving force behind the search for utopia is neither the theoretical nor the practical reason, neither cognitive, nor the moral interest, but the principle of hope.'[45] And he has not parted from this vision altogether, as our discussion here shows. Distancing from modernity does not necessarily mean giving up utopia, in the sense of hopefulness, in Bauman's writings. Drawing on the work of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas,[46] and his crucial notion of *being for the Other*, Bauman allows room for suggesting that *otherness* could play a part in utopia in the sense of hope – though he never really seems fully to subscribe to Levinas's yearnings.[47] In fact, more recently he has warned: '*the Other* may be a promise, but it is also a threat',[48] and he remains rather 'suspicious' of communitarian politics.[49] Ilan Semo puts it like this: 'if identity in Bauman is temporary substance, *the Other* is nothing but an invention, an anthropological construction inevitably anchored in some kind of ethnocentrism'.[50]

When, over a decade ago, Bauman had placed himself within the postmodern tradition ('postmodernity, one may say, is modernity without the illusions')[51] – a position he later abandoned in favour of the concept of 'liquidity' – ('modernity is refusing to accept its own truth')[52] – he was, in fact, anticipating more efficient epistemological tools to examine neoliberalism. At his age, Bauman's unyielding and prolific pen refuses to accept any possibility of surrendering in his battle against time, which, in many ways, is the race against the 'loose demons of economic globalization',[53] the creatures of neoliberalism and the stubborn remains of totalitarianism and fascism encompassed in this book.

Why Zygmunt Bauman?

If one could compare social theories or sociological theoretical thinkers to kitchen equipment, Zygmunt Bauman would be, without doubt, one of the sharpest knives. Like most blades,

however, his knife is doubled edged. Try mastering its use without cutting yourself and you will always end up with a sliced finger dripping red all over the onions – you never get to their core because there simply isn't one. French structuralists[54] and the Polish author have that in common: they can make the intricate layers of history and the saga of Western philosophy look like layered onions.

Bauman challenges communism as he challenges capitalism – perhaps another good reason for reading his work in times of recession. Bauman rebels against the church and Bauman rebels against the state – 'the inseparable Siamese twins', as he likes to call them – showing no signs of yearning for either.

And as if that was not enough, he also seems defiant about science – or, more precisely, while he retains his trust and respect for it, he appears to be suspicious of its love affair with the market. In many ways 'liquid capitalism' seems to have managed to put science at the service of profit, so 'rebelling' is not out of order. Though Bauman knows where he stands epistemologically ('Popper solved that issue for me, pointing out that the amazing creative potential of science lies in its power of refutation, not in the power of its proofs'),[55] he also appears to be alerting us to the paradoxes of science and technology in the same spirit as Georg Simmel – who influenced him greatly – last century: inevitably 'the control over nature which technology offers us is paid for by our enslavement to it'.[56] Thus signs of paradigmatic crisis are not confined to the realm of the political state and its 'wobbly institutions'; they appear to reach as far as our perceptions of the scientific institutions. Here our conversations suggest that a new debate and new research are needed on the relationship between the humanities and the scientific institutions, particularly the biological sciences,[57] because the problem of economic deregulation has also, in many ways, affected the scientific community. In fact, one thing that we learnt from the 2008 crisis was that we now seem to 'owe' the last bastion of our humanity, and indeed its very name and dignity, to powerful emerging industries: genetic engineering and biotechnology's new commodities such as DNA decoding, genome patenting and their 'post-human', 'trans-human' 'neo-human' market.[58] As in the case of the financial market, in the genetics market certain experimental procedures do not seem to have been closely regulated, in spite of existing and compelling

guidelines and recommendations by the international community.[59] The reach of the existing regulatory bodies tends to extend only to publicly funded research, leaving the private sector largely unregulated. It is not for nothing that biotechnology-related companies shine out from Wall Street's electronic listings, with nearly 25 per cent of Wall Street shares allegedly belonging to biotechnology companies, as Spanish biologist M. S. Dominguez[60] notes: biotechnology is not just another industry and, when underregulated, there is a potential risk of undermining the extraordinary achievements in medical and scientific research and overshadowing science's historical role – notwithstanding which, Bauman has not fully lost faith in it. But, as Bauman notes in this book, 'Engineering human affairs is not, of course, the genomists' invention. The intention to engineer (indeed create "new man") accompanied the modern order from its inception)' and, as Bauman seems to be suggesting in our conversations, this is one of the biggest challenges of our times. But the question as to whether or not it is time to speak of 'liquid science' is open to future debate.

As for Bauman's perception of the church and the state, the 'historical twins', prospects are grim: the state and the church have something in common, their power to exploit and their ability to act as *fear managers*, as Bauman avers in this publication. Big Brother – the 'secular eye' that watches over us, just as the religious eye once did (and still does) – has grown into a robust surveillance industry, both competing against and supporting the weakening state in its role as a 'fear manager'.[61] Fear management is a card played well by both the state and religion and it is imperative that we should understand the rules of this game if we want to gain perspective in our perception of society today; Bauman's analytical approach allows us to do this.

In a very paradoxical sense, moral responsibility is Bauman's sole motive for writing: he is a non-religious man who writes for an ethical reader, a social thinker who dismisses the idea of a supranatural being, and yet a man whose compassion, moral integrity and moral commitment to humanity would provoke the envy of any dogmatic, religious or secular man. Any reader of faith who is ready for an honest confrontation will benefit from reading Zygmunt Bauman because there is, in a paradoxical way, a language of profound compassion. Likewise, readers of strong political affiliations and dogmatic views must brace themselves

for a painful confrontation with the walls and fortifications of history. This is precisely the kind of exercise we need to be able to understand if we are to grasp what has happened in the economic arena in recent times.

Both reading and conversing with Bauman is highly addictive, not least because of his elegant sense of humour and irony. Debating with him, however, is like entering a dark cave with him, and losing him within seconds, realizing that he has taken different tunnels and realizing that there are no visible beams of light at the tunnel's edge, no clear-cut paths to follow – resort to humour if you can, otherwise settle for crying. Bauman invites us to read history, law, economics, culture and politics from a different perspective, conveys an understanding of the painfulness of the journey, and reminds us that we are not the sole victims of today's financial crisis, created by capitalism and those wedded to it. It is uncertain whether in the era of President Obama, and the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008, our societies – trapped by the illusions of economic globalization, and often portrayed in this book with Rosa Luxemburg's celebrated metaphor of a 'snake devouring itself' – will finally perish. It will, subsequently be revealed whether or not our attitudes to nature and our attitudes to our own species can change: will the self-devouring snake plunge its sharp fangs into our own children and our only planet, before it finally goes for the head? The answer may, perhaps, lie in every one of us, in our ability to challenge Bauman's 'liquid creatures' and our ability and desire to search for our true humanity, as the Polish author exhorts us to do in his compelling writings.

Citlali Rovirosa-Madrazo

Part One