

An aerial photograph of a swimming pool with a blue grid pattern on the bottom. Several people are swimming in the pool. In the center, there is a rectangular area enclosed by a white net, where a person is splashing. The text "Liquid Life" and "ZYG MUNT BAUMAN" is overlaid on the image.

Liquid Life

ZYG MUNT BAUMAN

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Zygmunt Bauman

polity

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Introduction: On Living in a Liquid Modern World

In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed.
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *On Prudence*

‘Liquid life’ and ‘liquid modernity’ are intimately connected. ‘Liquid life’ is a kind of life that tends to be lived in a liquid modern society. ‘Liquid modern’ is a society in which the conditions under which its members act change faster than it takes the ways of acting to consolidate into habits and routines. Liquidity of life and that of society feed and reinvigorate each other. Liquid life, just like liquid modern society, cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long.

In a liquid modern society, individual achievements cannot be solidified into lasting possessions because, in no time, assets turn into liabilities and abilities into disabilities. Conditions of action and strategies designed to respond to them age quickly and become obsolete before the actors have a chance to learn them properly. Learning from experience in order to rely on strategies and tactical moves deployed successfully in the past is for that reason ill advised: past tests cannot take account of the rapid and mostly unpredicted (perhaps unpredictable) changes in circumstances. Extrapolating from past events to predict future trends becomes ever more risky and all too often misleading. Trustworthy calculations are increasingly difficult to make, while foolproof prognoses are all but unimaginable: most if not all variables in the

equations are unknown, whereas no estimates of their future trends can be treated as fully and truly reliable.

In short: liquid life is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty. The most acute and stubborn worries that haunt such a life are the fears of being caught napping, of failing to catch up with fast-moving events, of being left behind, of overlooking 'use by' dates, of being saddled with possessions that are no longer desirable, of missing the moment that calls for a change of tack before crossing the point of no return. Liquid life is a succession of new beginnings – yet precisely for that reason it is the swift and painless endings, without which new beginnings would be unthinkable, that tend to be its most challenging moments and most upsetting headaches. Among the arts of liquid modern living and the skills needed to practise them, getting rid of things takes precedence over their acquisition.

As the *Observer* cartoonist Andy Riley puts it, the annoyance is 'reading articles about the wonders of downshifting when you haven't even managed to upshift yet'.¹ One needs to hurry with the 'upshifting' if one wants to taste the delights of 'downshifting'. Getting the site ready for 'downshifting' bestows meaning on the 'upshifting' bit, and becomes its main purpose; it is by the relief brought by a smooth and painless 'downshifting' that the quality of 'upshifting' will be ultimately judged . . .

The briefing which the practitioners of liquid modern life need most (and are most often offered by the expert counsellors in the life arts) is not how to start or open, but how to finish or close. Another *Observer* columnist, with a tongue only halfway to his cheek, lists the updated rules for 'achieving closure' of partnerships (the episodes no doubt more difficult to 'close' than any other – yet the ones where the partners all too often wish and fight to close them, and so where there is unsurprisingly a particularly keen demand for expert help). The list starts from 'Remember bad stuff. Forget the good' and ends with 'Meet someone new', passing midway the command 'Delete all electronic correspondence'. Throughout, the emphasis falls on forgetting, deleting, dropping and replacing.

Perhaps the description of liquid modern life as a series of new *beginnings* is an inadvertent accessory to a conspiracy of sorts; by replicating a commonly shared illusion it helps to hide its most closely guarded (since shameful, if only residually so) secret.

Perhaps a more adequate way to narrate that life is to tell the story of successive *endings*. And perhaps the glory of the successfully lived liquid life would be better conveyed by the inconspicuousness of the graves that mark its progress than by the ostentation of gravestones that commemorate the contents of the tombs.

In a liquid modern society, the waste-disposal industry takes over the commanding positions in liquid life's economy. The survival of that society and the well-being of its members hang on the swiftness with which products are consigned to waste and the speed and efficiency of waste removal. In that society nothing may claim exemption from the universal rule of disposability, and nothing may be allowed to outstay its welcome. The steadfastness, stickiness, viscosity of things inanimate and animate alike are the most sinister and terminal of dangers, sources of the most frightening of fears and the targets of the most violent of assaults.

Life in a liquid modern society cannot stand still. It must modernize (read: go on stripping itself daily of attributes that are past their sell-by dates and go on dismantling/shedding the identities currently assembled/put on) – or perish. Nudged from behind by the horror of expiry, life in a liquid modern society no longer needs to be pulled forward by imagined wonders at the far end of modernizing labours. The need here is to run with all one's strength just to stay in the same place and away from the rubbish bin where the hindmost are doomed to land.

'Creative destruction' is the fashion in which liquid life proceeds, but what that term glosses over and passes by in silence is that what this creation destroys are other forms of life and so obliquely the humans who practise them. Life in the liquid modern society is a sinister version of the musical chairs game, played for real. The true stake in the race is (temporary) rescue from being excluded into the ranks of the destroyed and avoiding being consigned to waste. And with the competition turning global, the running must now be done round a global track.

The greatest chances of winning belong to the people who circulate close to the top of the global power pyramid, to whom space matters little and distance is not a bother; people at home in many places but in no one place in particular. They are as light, sprightly and volatile as the increasingly global and extraterritorial trade and finances that assisted at their birth and sustain their nomadic

existence. As Jacques Attali described them, ‘they do not own factories, lands, nor occupy administrative positions. Their wealth comes from a portable asset: their knowledge of the laws of the labyrinth.’ They ‘love to create, play and be on the move’. They live in a society ‘of volatile values, carefree about the future, egoistic and hedonistic’. They ‘take novelty as good tidings, precariousness as value, instability as imperative, hybridity as richness’.² In varying degrees, they all master and practise the art of ‘liquid life’: acceptance of disorientation, immunity to vertigo and adaptation to a state of dizziness, tolerance for an absence of itinerary and direction, and for an indefinite duration of travel.

They try hard, though with mixed success, to follow the pattern set by Bill Gates, that paragon of business success, whom Richard Sennett described as marked by ‘his willingness to destroy what he has made’ and his ‘tolerance for fragmentation’, as ‘someone who has the confidence to dwell in disorder, someone who flourishes in the midst of dislocation’ and someone positioning himself ‘in a network of possibilities’, rather than ‘paralysing’ himself in ‘one particular job’.³ Their ideal horizon is likely to be Eutropia, one of Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* whose inhabitants, the day they ‘feel the grip of weariness and no one can any longer bear his job, his relatives, his house and his life’, ‘move to the next city’ where ‘each will take a new job, a different wife, will see another landscape on opening the window, and will spend his time with different pastimes, friends, gossip’.⁴

Looseness of attachment and revocability of engagement are the precepts guiding everything in which they engage and to which they are attached. Presumably addressing such people, the anonymous columnist of the *Observer* who hides under the penname of the Barefoot Doctor counselled his readers to do everything they do ‘with grace’. Taking a hint from Lao-tzu, the oriental prophet of detachment and tranquillity, he described the life stance most likely to achieve that effect:

Flowing like water . . . you swiftly move along, never fighting the current, stopping long enough to become stagnant or clinging to the riverbank or rocks – the possessions, situations or people that pass through your life – not even trying to hold on to your opinions or world view, but simply sticking lightly yet intelligently to whatever presents itself as you pass by and then graciously letting it go without grasping . . .⁵

Faced with such players, the rest of the participants of the game – and particularly the involuntary ones among them, those who don't 'love' or cannot afford 'to be on the move' – stand little chance. Joining in the game is not a realistic choice for them – but neither have they the choice of not trying. Flitting between flowers in search of the most fragrant is not their option; they are stuck to places where flowers, fragrant or not, are rare – and so can only watch haplessly as the few that there are fade or rot. The suggestion to 'stick lightly to whatever presents itself' and 'graciously let it go' would sound at best like a cruel joke in their ears, but mostly like a heartless sneer.

Nevertheless, 'stick lightly' they must, as 'possessions, situations and people' will keep slipping away and vanishing at a breathtaking speed whatever they do; whether they try to slow them down or not is neither here nor there. 'Let them go' they must (though, unlike Bill Gates, with hardly any pleasure), but whether they do it graciously or with a lot of wailing and teeth-gnashing is beside the point. They might be forgiven for suspecting some connection between that comely lightness and grace paraded by those who glide by and their own unchosen ugly torpidity and impotence to move.

Their indolence is, indeed, unchosen. Lightness and grace come together with freedom – freedom to move, freedom to choose, freedom to stop being what one already is and freedom to become what one is not yet. Those on the receiving side of the new planetary mobility don't have such freedom. They can count neither on the forbearance of those from whom they would rather keep their distance, nor on the tolerance of those to whom they would wish to be closer. For them, there are neither unguarded exits nor hospitably open entry gates. They *belong*: those to whom or with whom they belong view their belonging as their non-negotiable and incontrovertible *duty* (even if disguised as their inalienable *right*) – whereas those whom they would wish to join see their belonging rather as their similarly non-negotiable, irreversible and unredeemable *fate*. The first wouldn't let them go, whereas the second wouldn't let them in.

Between the start and the (unlikely ever to happen) arrival is a desert, a void, a wilderness, a yawning abyss into which only a few would muster the courage to leap of their own free will, unpushed. Centripetal and centrifugal, gravitational and repelling

forces combine to keep the restless in place and stop the discontented short of restlessness. Those hot-headed or desperate enough to try to defy the odds stacked against them risk the lot of outlaws and outcasts, and pay for their audacity in the hard currency of bodily misery and psychical trauma – a price which only a few would choose to pay of their own free will, unforced. Andrzej Szahaj, a most perceptive analyst of the highly uneven odds in contemporary identity games, goes as far as to suggest that the decision to leave the community of belonging is in quite numerous cases downright unimaginable; he goes on to remind his incredulous Western readers that in the remote past of Europe, for instance in ancient Greece, exile from the *polis* of belonging was viewed as the ultimate, indeed capital, punishment.⁶ At least the ancients were cool-headed and preferred straight talk. But the millions of *sans papiers*, stateless, refugees, exiles, asylum or bread-and-water seekers of our times, two millennia later, would have little difficulty in recognizing themselves in that talk.

At both extremes of the hierarchy (and in the main body of the pyramid locked between them in a double-bind) people are haunted by the problem of identity. At the top, the problem is to choose the best pattern from the many currently on offer, to assemble the separately sold parts of the kit, and to fasten them together neither too lightly (lest the unsightly, outdated and aged bits that are meant to be hidden underneath show through at the seams) nor too tightly (lest the patchwork resists being dismantled at short notice when the time for dismantling comes – as it surely will). At the bottom, the problem is to cling fast to the sole identity available and to hold its bits and parts together while fighting back the erosive forces and disruptive pressures, repairing the constantly crumbling walls and digging the trenches deeper. For all the others suspended between the extremes, the problem is a mixture of the two.

Taking a hint from Joseph Brodsky's profile of materially affluent yet spiritually impoverished and famished contemporaries, tired like the residents of Calvino's Eutropia of everything they have enjoyed thus far (like yoga, Buddhism, Zen, contemplation, Mao) and so beginning to dig (with the help of state-of-the-art technology, of course) into the mysteries of Sufism, kabbala or Sunnism

to beef up their flagging desire to desire, Andrzej Stasiuk, one of the most perceptive archivists of contemporary cultures and their discontents, develops a typology of the ‘spiritual lumpenproletariat’ and suggests that its ranks swell fast and that its torments trickle profusely down from the top, saturating ever thicker layers of the social pyramid.⁷

Those affected by the ‘spiritual lumpenproletarian’ virus live in the present and by the present. They live to survive (as long as possible) and to get satisfaction (as much of it as possible). Since the world is not their home ground and not their property (having relieved themselves of the burdens of heritage, they feel free but somehow disinherited – robbed of something, betrayed by someone), they see nothing wrong in exploiting it at will; exploitation feels like nothing more odious than stealing back the stolen.

Flattened into a perpetual present and filled to the brim with survival-and-gratification concerns (it is gratification to survive, the purpose of survival being more gratification), the world inhabited by ‘spiritual lumpenproletarians’ leaves no room for worries about anything other than what can be, at least in principle, consumed and relished on the spot, here and now.

Eternity is the obvious outcast. Not infinity, though; as long as it lasts, the present may be stretched beyond any limit and accommodate as much as once was hoped to be experienced only in the fullness of time (in Stasiuk’s words, ‘it is highly probable that the quantity of digital, celluloid and analogue beings met in the course of a bodily life comes close to the volume which eternal life and resurrection of the flesh could offer’). Thanks to the hoped-for infinity of mundane experiences yet to come, eternity may not be missed; its loss may not even be noticed.

Speed, not duration, matters. With the right speed, one can consume the whole of eternity inside the continuous present of earthly life. Or this at least is what the ‘spiritual lumpenproletarians’ try, and hope, to achieve. The trick is to compress eternity so that it may fit, whole, into the timespan of individual life. The quandary of a mortal life in an immortal universe has been finally resolved: one can now stop worrying about things eternal and lose nothing of eternity’s wonders – indeed one can exhaust whatever eternity could possibly offer, all in the timespan of one mortal life. One cannot perhaps take the time-lid off mortal life; but one can (or at least try to) remove all limits from the volume of

satisfactions to be experienced before reaching that other, irremovable limit.

In a bygone world in which time moved much slower and resisted acceleration, people tried to bridge the agonizing gap between the poverty of a short and mortal life and the infinite wealth of the eternal universe by hopes of reincarnation or resurrection. In our world that knows or admits of no limits to acceleration, such hopes may well be discarded. If only one moves quickly enough and does not stop to look back and count the gains and losses, one can go on squeezing into the timespan of mortal life ever more lives; perhaps as many as eternity could supply. What else, if not to act on that belief, are the unstoppable, compulsive and obsessive reconditioning, refurbishment, recycling, overhaul and reconstitution of identity for? 'Identity', after all, is (just as the reincarnation and resurrection of olden times used to be) about the possibility of 'being born again' – of stopping being what one is and turning into someone one is not yet.

The good news is that this replacement of worries about eternity with an identity-recycling bustle comes complete with patented and ready-to-use DIY tools that promise to make the job fast and effective while needing no special skills and calling for little if any difficult and awkward labour. Self-sacrifice and self-immolation, unbearably long and unrelenting self-drilling and self-taming, waiting for gratification that feels interminable and practising virtues that seem to exceed endurance – all those exorbitant costs of past therapies – are no longer required. New and improved diets, fitness gadgets, changes of wallpaper, parquets put where carpets used to lie (or vice versa), replacements of a mini with an SUV (or the other way round), a T-shirt with a blouse and monochromatic with richly colour-saturated sofa covers or dresses, sizes of breasts moved up or down, sneakers changed, brands of booze and daily routines adapted to the latest fashion and a strikingly novel vocabulary adopted in which to couch public confessions of intimate soul-stirrings . . . these will do nicely. And, as a last resort, on the vexingly far horizon loom the wonders of gene overhaul. Whatever happens, there is no need to despair. If all those magic wands prove not to be enough or, despite all their user-friendliness, are found too cumbersome or too slow, there are drugs promising an instant, even if brief, visit

to eternity (hopefully with other drugs guaranteeing a return ticket).

Liquid life is consuming life. It casts the world and all its animate and inanimate fragments as objects of consumption: that is, objects that lose their usefulness (and so their lustre, attraction, seductive power and worth) in the course of being used. It shapes the judging and evaluating of all the animate and inanimate fragments of the world after the pattern of objects of consumption.

Objects of consumption have a limited expectation of useful life and once the limit has been passed they are unfit for consumption; since 'being good for consumption' is the sole feature that defines their function, they are then unfit altogether – useless. Once unfit, they ought to be removed from the site of consuming life (consigned to biodegradation, incinerated, transferred into the care of waste-disposal companies) to clear it for other, still unused objects of consumption.

To save yourself from the embarrassment of lagging behind, of being stuck with something no one else would be seen with, of being caught napping, of missing the train of progress instead of riding it, you must remember that it is in the nature of things to call for vigilance, not loyalty. In the liquid modern world, loyalty is a cause of shame, not pride. Link to your internet provider first thing in the morning, and you will be reminded of that sober truth by the main item on the list of daily news: 'Ashamed of your Mobile? Is your phone so old that you're embarrassed to answer it? Upgrade to one you can be proud of.' The flipside of the commandment 'to upgrade' to a state-of-consumer-correctness mobile is, of course, the prohibition any longer to be seen holding the one to which you upgraded last time.

Waste is the staple and arguably the most profuse product of the liquid modern society of consumers; among consumer society's industries waste production is the most massive and the most immune to crisis. That makes waste disposal one of the two major challenges liquid life has to confront and tackle. The other major challenge is the threat of being consigned to waste. In a world filled with consumers and the objects of their consumption, life is hovering uneasily between the joys of consumption and the horrors of the rubbish heap. Life may be at all times a living-towards-death, but in a liquid modern society living-towards-the-

refuse dump may be a more immediate and more energy-and-labour-consuming prospect and concern of the living.

For the denizen of the liquid modern society, every supper – unlike that referred to by Hamlet in his reply to the King’s inquiry about Polonius’s whereabouts – is an occasion ‘where he eats’ *and* ‘where he is eaten’.⁸ No longer is there a disjunction between the two acts. ‘And’ has replaced the ‘either–or’. In the society of consumers, no one can escape being an object of consumption – and not just consumption by maggots, and not only at the far end of consuming life. Hamlet in liquid modern times would probably modify Shakespeare’s Hamlet’s rule, denying the maggots’ privileged role in the consumption of the consumers. He would perhaps start, like the original Hamlet, stating that ‘we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves . . .’ – but then conclude: ‘to fat other creatures’.

‘Consumers’ and ‘objects of consumption’ are the conceptual poles of a continuum along which all members of the society of consumers are plotted and along which they move, to and fro, daily. Some may be cast most of the time particularly near to the commodities’ pole – but no consumer can be fully and truly insured against falling into its close, too close for comfort, proximity. Only as commodities, only if they are able to demonstrate their own use-value, can consumers gain access to consuming life. In liquid life, the distinction between consumers and objects of consumption is all too often momentary and ephemeral, and always conditional. We may say that role reversal is the rule here, though even that statement distorts the realities of liquid life, in which the two roles intertwine, blend and merge.

It is not clear which of the two factors (attractions of the ‘consumer’ pole, or the repulsion of the ‘waste’ pole) is the more powerful moving force of liquid life. No doubt both factors cooperate in shaping the daily logic and – bit by bit, episode by episode – the itinerary of that life. Fear adds strength to desire. However attentively it focuses on its immediate objects, desire cannot help but remain aware – consciously, half-consciously or subconsciously – of that other awesome stake hanging on its vigour, determination and resourcefulness. However intensely concentrated on the *object* of desire, the eye of the consumer cannot but glance sideways at the commodity value of the desiring *subject*. Liquid life means constant self-scrutiny, self-critique and