

# Identity



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*Identity*

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# *Identity*

Conversations with  
Benedetto Vecchi

ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

polity

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First published in 2004 by Polity Press.

Polity Press  
65 Bridge Street  
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press  
350 Main Street  
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Bauman, Zygmunt.

Identity: conversations with Benedetto Vecchi / Zygmunt Bauman.

p. cm. – (Themes for the 21st century)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7456-3308-0 (alk. paper) – ISBN 0-7456-3309-9 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Identity. I. Vecchi, Benedetto. II. Title. III. Series.

BD236 .B39 2004

302.5'4-dc22

2003020403

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Plantin

by Kolam Information Services Pvt. Ltd., Pondicherry, India.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by MPG Books, Bodmin, Cornwall

For further information on Polity, visit our website: [www.polity.co.uk](http://www.polity.co.uk)

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# *Introduction*

## *Benedetto Vecchi*

In all his writings Zygmunt Bauman manages to unsettle our fundamental beliefs, and this book of interviews on the question of identity is no exception. The interviews were somewhat out of the ordinary in that they were not conducted with a tape recorder, and interviewer and interviewee never came face to face. E-mail was the chosen instrument for our dialogue, and it imposed a somewhat fragmentary rhythm to our exchange of questions and answers. In the absence of the time pressure associated with a head-to-head, our long-distance dialogue was marked by many pauses for reflection, requests for clarification, and minor deviations into matters we had not originally intended to explore. Every reply from Bauman only served to increase my sense of bewilderment. As the material he provided began to build up, I became increasingly aware that I had entered a much larger continent than I had previously expected and one whose maps were almost useless when it came to finding directions. This should come as no surprise, because Zygmunt Bauman is not like other sociologists or 'social scientists'. His reflections are work-in-progress, and he is never content with defining or 'conceptualizing' an event, but rather aims to

establish connections with social phenomena or manifestations of the public ethos that seem far removed from the initial object of the investigation, and to comment on those phenomena and manifestations. The following pages will be more than sufficient to demonstrate this roving nature of his reflections, which makes it impossible to establish his intellectual influences or his membership of any particular school of thought.

Zygmunt Bauman has often been defined as an eclectic sociologist, and he would certainly take no offence at such a definition. Nevertheless the methodology he brings to bear on a subject aims above all to 'reveal' the myriad connections between the object under investigation and other manifestations of life in human society. Indeed, this sociologist of Polish origin finds it essential to gather the 'truth' of every feeling, lifestyle and collective behaviour. This is only possible if you analyse the social, cultural and political context in which a particular phenomenon exists as well as the phenomenon itself. Hence the roving nature of his thoughts throughout his works which study subjects ranging from the crisis in public debate in *In Search of Politics* (1999) to the changing role of intellectuals in a society based on attention-seeking in *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Postmodernity and Intellectuals* (1987). His intellect is, in fact, both restive and rigorous; it is true to the present, but careful to acknowledge its genealogy, or rather genealogies.

On this occasion, the subject was identity, a subject that is by its very nature elusive and ambivalent. Bauman faced up to the challenge and performed a double somersault: he reread the history of modern sociology in the light of the obsession and importance with which current public debate treats identity, and reached the conclusion that it is better not to look for reassuring responses in the 'established texts' of critical thought. *Liquid Modernity* (2000)

projects us into a world in which everything is elusive, where the anguish, pain and insecurity caused by 'living in society' require a patient and ongoing examination of reality and how individuals are 'placed' within it. Any attempt to placate the inconstancy and precariousness of the plans men and women make for their lives and thus explain this sense of disorientation by parading past certainties and established texts would be as futile as attempting to empty the ocean with a bucket.

We have here an intellectual who considers the principle of responsibility to be the first act of any involvement in public life. For a sociologist this means perceiving sociology not as a discipline 'separate' from other fields of knowledge, but as providing the analytical tool to establish a lively interaction between it and philosophy, social psychology and narrative. We should not, therefore, find it strange if the documents on which he tests his penchant for 'short-circuiting' mass culture and high culture include articles from leading newspapers, advertising slogans and Søren Kierkegaard's philosophical reflections on Don Giovanni.

Although he is not keen to speak about his own life, it needs to be said that Zygmunt Bauman was born in 1925 into a Jewish family in Poland. Having escaped to the Soviet Union at the beginning of the Second World War, he joined the Polish army allied to the Red Army, and in it he fought Nazism. In his book *Conversations with Bauman* (2001) he tells us that he commenced his studies and degree in sociology on his return to Warsaw, and that his first teachers were Stanislaw Ossowski and Julian Hochfeld, two Polish intellectuals little known outside Poland but fundamental to his intellectual formation. Above all they gave him the ability 'to look the world in the face' without recourse to preconceived ideologies. If you ask Bauman, who became a leading figure in the Warsaw 'school of sociology', to describe the difficulties

experienced during the 1950s and 1960s, he does so without any hostility to those who opposed his work. Indeed, he uses his subtle irony to compare the arduous academic freedom in Poland with European and American academic conformism. He is equally discreet about his role in the 'Polish October' of 1956, when he took part in the powerful reform movement that challenged the leading role of Polish United Workers' Party and the country's subjugation to Moscow's will. This experience marked Bauman and prepared him for his showdown with the official ideology of Soviet Marxism in which the works of Antonio Gramsci were to play their part. He started to make frequent trips abroad. He took a year's sabbatical at the London School of Economics, and attended many conferences in almost all Europe's great universities. Then came 1968, which was to prove a turning-point in his life. Bauman, who supported the fledgling Polish students' movement, had his works banned by the Communist Party when anti-Semitism was used to repress students and university teachers who demanded an end to single-party rule in the name of 'liberty, justice and equality'.

After he had been prevented from teaching, Zygmunt Bauman moved to England, where he still lives. In almost all his books, and particularly in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), he expresses his enormous gratitude to Janina, his wife and life companion, to whom he is very close both emotionally and intellectually. She is perhaps one of the most important intellectual figures in Bauman's reflections first on 'solid modernity' and later on 'liquid modernity'.

His intellectual life in England, where he teaches at Leeds University, has been intensely productive. I have already referred to some of the works, but taken as a whole it is quite clear that with the publication of *Post-modern Ethics* (1993), Bauman started to concentrate on