

LIQUID
MODERNITY

Zygmunt Bauman

Liquid Modernity

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polity

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Foreword to the 2012 Edition

Liquid Modernity Revisited

When more than ten years ago I tried to unpack the meaning of the metaphor of ‘liquidity’ in its application to the form of life currently practised, one of the mysteries obtrusively haunting me and staunchly resisting resolution was the status of the liquid-modern human condition: was it an intimation, an early version, an augury or a portent of things to come? Or was it, rather, a temporary and transient – as well as an unfinished, incomplete and inconsistent – interim settlement; an interval between two distinct, yet viable and durable, complete and consistent answers to the challenges of human togetherness?

I have not thus far come anywhere near to a resolution of that quandary, but I am increasingly inclined to surmise that we presently find ourselves in a time of ‘interregnum’ – when the old ways of doing things no longer work, the old learned or inherited modes of life are no longer suitable for the current *conditio humana*, but when the new ways of tackling the challenges and new modes of life better suited to the new conditions have not as yet been invented, put in place and set in operation . . . We don’t yet know which of the extant forms and settings will need to be ‘liquidized’ and replaced, though none seems to be immune to criticism and all or almost all of them have at one time or another been earmarked for replacement.

Most importantly, unlike our ancestors, we don’t have a clear image of a ‘destination’ towards which we seem to be moving – which needs to be a model of *global* society, a global economy, global politics, a global jurisdiction . . . Instead, we react to the latest trouble, experimenting, groping in the dark. We try to

diminish carbon dioxide pollution by dismantling coal-fed power plants and replacing them with nuclear power plants, only to conjure up the spectres of Chernobyl and Fukushima to hover above us . . . We feel rather than know (and many of us refuse to acknowledge) that power (that is, the ability to do things) has been separated from politics (that is, the ability to decide which things need to be done and given priority), and so in addition to our confusion about ‘what to do’ we are now in the dark about ‘who is going to do it’. The sole agencies of collective purposive action bequeathed to us by our parents and grandparents, confined as they are to the boundaries of nation-states, are clearly inadequate, considering the global reach of our problems, and of their sources and consequences . . .

We remain of course as modern as we were before; but these ‘we’ who are modern have considerably grown in numbers in recent years. We may well say that by now all or almost all of us, in every or almost every part of the planet, have become modern. And that means that today, unlike a decade or two ago, every land on the planet, with only a few exceptions, is subject to the obsessive, compulsive, unstoppable change that is nowadays called ‘modernization’, and to everything that goes with it, including the continuous production of human redundancy, and the social tensions it is bound to cause.

Forms of modern life may differ in quite a few respects – but what unites them all is precisely their fragility, temporariness, vulnerability and inclination to constant change. To ‘be modern’ means to modernize – compulsively, obsessively; not so much just ‘to be’, let alone to keep its identity intact, but forever ‘becoming’, avoiding completion, staying underdefined. Each new structure which replaces the previous one as soon as it is declared old-fashioned and past its use-by date is only another momentary settlement – acknowledged as temporary and ‘until further notice’. Being always, at any stage and at all times, ‘post-something’ is also an undetachable feature of modernity. As time flows on, ‘modernity’ changes its forms in the manner of the legendary Proteus . . . What was some time ago dubbed (erroneously) ‘post-modernity’, and what I’ve chosen to call, more to the point, ‘liquid modernity’, is the growing conviction that change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty. A hundred years ago ‘to be modern’ meant to chase ‘the final state of perfection’ – now

it means an infinity of improvement, with no 'final state' in sight and none desired.

I did not think earlier and do not think now of the solidity versus liquidity conundrum as a dichotomy; I view those two conditions as a couple locked, inseparably, by a dialectical bond (the kind of bond François Lyotard probably had in mind when he observed that one can't be modern without being postmodern first . . .). After all, it was the quest for the solidity of things and states that most often triggered, kept in motion and guided their liquefaction; liquidity was not an adversary, but an effect of that quest for solidity, having no other parenthood, even when (or if) the parent might deny the legitimacy of the offspring. In turn, it was the formlessness of the oozing, leaking and flowing liquid that prompted the efforts at cooling, damping and moulding. If there is anything that permits a distinction between the 'solid' and 'liquid' phases of modernity (that is, arranging them in an order of succession), it is the change in both the manifest and the latent purposes behind the effort.

The original cause of the solids melting was not resentment against solidity as such, but dissatisfaction with the degree of solidity of the extant and inherited solids: purely and simply, the bequeathed solids were found not to be solid enough (insufficiently resistant or immunized to change) by the standards of the order-obsessed and compulsively order-building modern powers. Subsequently, however (in our part of the world, to this day), solids came to be viewed and accepted as transient, 'until further notice' condensations of liquid magma; temporary settlements, rather than ultimate solutions. Flexibility has replaced solidity as the ideal condition to be pursued of things and affairs. All solids (including those that are momentarily desirable) are tolerated only in as far as they promise to remain easily and obediently fusible on demand. An adequate technology of melting down again must be in hand even before the effort starts of putting together a durable structure, firming it up and solidifying it. A reliable assurance of the right and ability to dismantle the constructed structure must be given before the job of construction starts in earnest. Fully 'biodegradable' structures, starting to disintegrate the moment they have been assembled, are nowadays the ideal, and most, if not all structures, must struggle to measure up to this standard.

To cut a long story short, if in its 'solid' phase the heart of modernity was in controlling and fixing the future, in the 'liquid' phase the prime concern moved to ensuring the future was not mortgaged, and to averting the threat of any pre-emptive exploitation of the still undisclosed, unknown and unknowable opportunities the future was hoped to and was bound to bring. Nietzsche's spokesman Zarathustra, in anticipation of this human condition, bewailed 'the loitering of the present moment' that threatens to make the Will – burdened with the thick and heavy deposits of its past accomplishments and misdeeds – 'gnash its teeth', groan and sag, crushed by their weight . . . The fear of things fixed too firmly to permit them being dismantled, things overstaying their welcome, things tying our hands and shackling our legs, the fear of following Faustus to hell because of that blunder he committed of wishing to arrest a beautiful moment and make it stay forever, was traced by Jean-Paul Sartre back to our visceral, extemporal and inborn resentment of touching slimy or viscous substances; and yet, symptomatically, that fear was only pinpointed as a prime mover of human history at the threshold of the liquid modern era. That fear, in fact, signalled modernity's imminent arrival. And we may view its appearance as a fully and truly paradigmatic watershed in history . . .

Of course, as I've stated so many times, the whole of modernity stands out from preceding epochs by its compulsive and obsessive modernizing – and modernizing means liquefaction, melting and smelting. But – but! Initially, the major preoccupation of the modern mind was not so much the technology of smelting (most of the apparently solid structures around seemingly melted from their own incapacity to hold out) as the design of the moulds into which the molten metal was to be poured and the technology of keeping it there. The modern mind was after perfection – and the state of perfection it hoped to reach meant in the last account an end to strain and hard work, as all further change could only be a change for the worse. Early on, change was viewed as a preliminary and interim measure, which it was hoped would lead to an age of stability and tranquillity – and so also to comfort and leisure. It was seen as a necessity confined to the time of transition from the old, rusty, partly rotten, crumbling and fissiparous, and otherwise unreliable and altogether inferior structures, frames and arrangements, to their made-to-order and ultimate, because

perfect, replacements – windproof, waterproof, and indeed history-proof . . . Change was, so to speak, a movement towards the splendid vision on the horizon: the vision of an order, or (to recall Talcott Parsons's crowning synthesis of modern pursuits) a 'self-equilibrating system', able to emerge victorious from every imaginable disturbance, stubbornly and irrevocably returning back to its settled state: an order resulting from a thorough and irrevocable 'skewing of probabilities' (maximizing the probability of some events, minimizing the likelihood of others). In the same way as accidents, contingencies, melting pots, ambiguity, ambivalence, fluidity and other banes and nightmares of order-builders, change was seen (and tackled) as a *temporary irritant* – and most certainly not undertaken for its own sake (it is the other way round nowadays: as Richard Sennett observed, perfectly viable organizations are now gutted just to prove their ongoing viability).

The most respected and influential minds among nineteenth-century economists expected economic growth to go on 'until such time as all human needs are met', and no longer – and then to be replaced by a 'stable economy', reproducing itself year by year with the same volume and content. The problem of 'living with difference' was also viewed as a temporary discomfort: the confusingly variegated world, continually thrown out of joint by clashes of difference and battles between apparently irreconcilable opposites, was to end up in the peaceful, uniform, monotonous tranquillity of a classlessness thoroughly cleansed of conflicts and antagonisms – with the help of a (revolutionary) 'war to end all wars', or of (evolutionary) adaptation and assimilation. The two hot-headed youngsters from Rhineland, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, watched with admiration as the capitalist furnace did the melting job that needed to be performed to usher us into just this kind of stable, trouble-free society. Baudelaire praised his favourite 'modern painter', Constantin Guys, for spying eternity inside a fleeting moment. In short, modernization then was a road with an *a priori* fixed, preordained finishing line; a movement destined to work itself out of a job.

It still took some time to discover or to decree that modernity without compulsive and obsessive modernization is no less an oxymoron than a wind that does not blow, or a river that does not flow . . . The modern form of life moved from the job of melting inferior solids that were not solid enough to the job of

melting solids as such, unviable because of their excessive solidity. Perhaps it had performed this kind of job from the start (wise after the fact, we are now convinced that it did) – but its spokesmen would have hotly protested had that been suggested to them in the times of James Mill, Baudelaire or, for that matter, the authors of the Communist Manifesto. At the threshold of the twentieth century, Eduard Bernstein was shouted down by the Establishment Chorus of social democracy, and angrily excommunicated by the Socialist Establishment's Areopagus, when he dared to suggest that 'the goal is nothing, the movement is everything'. There was an essential axiological difference between Baudelaire and Marinetti, separated by a few decades – despite their apparently shared topic. And this precisely was the difference that made the difference . . .

Modernity was triggered by the horrifying signs and prospects of durable things falling apart, and of a whirlwind of transient ephemera filling the vacancy. But hardly two centuries later, the relation of superiority/inferiority between the values of durability and transience has been reversed. In a drastic turnaround, it is now the facility with which things can be turned upside down, disposed of and abandoned that is valued most – alongside bonds easy to untie, obligations easy to revoke, and rules of the game that last no longer than the game currently being played, and sometimes not as long as that. And we are all thrown into an unstoppable hunt for novelty.

The advent of 'liquid modernity', as Martin Jay justly insists, is anything but globally synchronized. In different parts of the planet, the passage to the 'liquid stage', like any other passage in history, occurs on different dates and proceeds at a different pace. What is also crucially important is that each time it takes place in a different setting – since the sheer presence on the global scene of players who have already completed the passage excludes the possibility of their itineraries being copied and reiterated (I'd suggest that the 'latecomers' tend on the whole to telescope and condense the trajectories of the pattern-setters, with sometimes disastrous and gory results). China is currently preoccupied with the challenges and tasks of the 'primitive accumulation of capital', known to generate an enormous volume of social dislocations, turbulence and discontent – as well as to result in extreme social polarization. Primitive accumulation is not a setting hospitable to any kind of

freedom – whether of the producer or consumer variety. The course things are taking is bound to shock its victims and collateral casualties, and produce potentially explosive social tensions which have to be suppressed by the up-and-coming entrepreneurs and merchants, with the help of a powerful and merciless, coercive state dictatorship. Pinochet in Chile, Syngman Rhee in South Korea, Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore, Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan, as well the present-day rulers of China, were or are dictators (Aristotle would call them ‘tyrants’) in everything but the self-adopted names of their offices; but they presided or preside over outstanding expansion and a fast-rising power of markets. All these countries would not be acclaimed as epitomes of ‘economic miracles’ today had it not been for the protracted dictatorship of the state. And, we may add, it’s no coincidence that they have turned into such epitomes, and that they are now head-over-heels engrossed in the chase after an exquisitely ‘liquid modern’, consumerist form of life. Let me also add that the earlier ‘economic miracles’ in postwar Japan and Germany could to a considerable extent be explained by the presence of foreign occupation forces, which took over the coercive/oppressive functions of state powers from the native political institutions, while effectively evading all and any control by the democratic institutions of the occupied countries.

In a nutshell, if the freedom visualized by the Enlightenment and demanded and promised by Marx was made to the measure of the ‘ideal producer’, market-promoted freedom is designed with the ‘ideal consumer’ in mind; neither of the two is ‘more genuine’, more realistic or more viable than the other – they are just different, focusing attention on different factors of freedom: to recall Isaiah Berlin, on ‘negative’ freedom (‘freedom from’), and ‘positive’ freedom (‘freedom to’). Both visions present freedom as an ‘enabling’ condition, a condition enhancing the subject’s capacity – but enabling them to do what, and stretching which capacity? Once you attempt in earnest to open those questions to empirical scrutiny, you’ll inevitably discover sooner or later that both visions – producer-oriented and consumer-oriented – herald powerful odds standing in the way of their implementation in practice, and that the odds in question are in no way external to the programmes that the visions imply. On the contrary, those ‘disabling’ factors are, bewilderingly, the very conditions

considered indispensable for putting the programme of ‘enabling’ into operation; and so having one without the other seems to be an idle dream and a doomed effort.

This is, though, a socio-political problem, not a metaphysical issue. An ideal and flawless freedom, ‘complete freedom’, enabling without disabling, is an oxymoron in metaphysics, just as it appears to be an unreachable goal in social life; if for no other reason than for the fact that – being inherently and inescapably a *social* relation – the thrust for freedom cannot but be a divisive force and any concrete application is certain to be essentially contested. Like so many ideals and values, freedom is perpetually in statu nascendi, never achieved but (or rather, for that very reason) constantly aimed at and fought for, and as a result an immense driving force in the never-ending experimentation called history.

The ‘liquidity’ of our plight is caused primarily by what is summarily dubbed ‘deregulation’: the separation of power (that means, the ability to do things) from politics (that means, the ability to decide which things are to be done) and the resulting absence or weakness of agency, or in other words the inadequacy of tools to the tasks; and also caused by the ‘polycentrism’ of action on a planet integrated by a dense web of interdependencies. To put it bluntly, under conditions of ‘liquidity’ everything could happen yet nothing can be done with confidence and certainty. Uncertainty results, combining feelings of ignorance (meaning the impossibility of knowing what is going to happen), impotence (meaning the impossibility of stopping it from happening) and an elusive and diffuse, poorly specified and difficult to locate fear; fear without an anchor and desperately seeking one. Living under liquid modern conditions can be compared to walking in a minefield: everyone knows an explosion might happen at any moment and in any place, but no one knows when the moment will come and where the place will be. On a globalized planet, that condition is universal – no one is exempt and no one is insured against its consequences. Locally caused explosions reverberate throughout the planet. Much needs to be done to find an exit from this situation, but remarrying power and politics, after the divorce, is undoubtedly a condition *sine qua non* of what one is inclined nowadays to think of as a ‘resolidification’.

Another issue that has moved further to the fore since the first edition of *Liquid Modernity* is the unstoppably rising volume of

‘uprooted’ people – migrants, refugees, exiles, asylum seekers: people on the move and without permanent abode. ‘Europe needs immigrants’ was the blunt statement of Massimo D’Alema, currently president of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies, in *Le Monde* of 10 May 2011 – in direct dispute with ‘the two most active European pyromaniacs’, Berlusconi and Sarkozy. The calculation to support that postulate could hardly be simpler: there are today 333 million Europeans, but the present (and still falling) average birth rate means the number would shrink to 242 million over the next 40 years. To fill that gap, at least 30 million newcomers will be needed – otherwise our European economy will collapse, together with our cherished standard of living. ‘Immigrants are an asset, not a danger,’ D’Alema concludes. And so, too, is the process of cultural *métissage* (‘hybridization’), which the influx of newcomers is bound to trigger; a mixing of cultural inspirations is a source of enrichment and an engine of creativity – for European civilization as much as for any other. All the same, only a thin line separates enrichment from a loss of cultural identity; for cohabitation between autochthons and allochthons to be prevented from eroding cultural heritages, it therefore needs to be based on respecting the principles underlying the European ‘social contract’ . . . The point is, by *both* sides!

How can such respect be secured, though, if recognition of the social and civil rights of ‘new Europeans’ is so stingily and haltingly offered, and proceeds at such a sluggish pace? Immigrants, for instance, currently contribute 11 per cent to Italian GNP, but they have no right to vote in Italian elections. In addition, no one can be truly certain about how many newcomers there are with no papers or with counterfeit documents who actively contribute to the national product and thus to the nation’s well-being. ‘How can the European Union’, asks D’Alema all but rhetorically, ‘permit such a situation, in which political, economic and social rights are denied to a substantial part of the population, without undermining our democratic principles?’ And since, again in principle, citizens’ duties come in a package deal with citizens’ rights, can the newcomers seriously be expected to embrace, respect, support and defend those ‘principles underlying the European social contract’? Our politicians muster electoral support by blaming immigrants for their genuine or putative reluctance to ‘integrate’ with the standards of the autochthon, while doing all they can, and

promising to do still more, to put those standards beyond the allochthons' reach. On the way, they discredit or erode the very standards they claim to be protecting against foreign invasion . . .

The big question, a quandary likely to determine the future of Europe more than any other, is which of the two contending 'facts of the matter' will eventually (yet without too much delay) come out on top: the life-saving role played by immigrants in a fast ageing Europe, a role few if any politicians so far dare to embroider on their banners, or the power-abetted and power-assisted rise in xenophobic sentiments eagerly recycled into electoral capital?

After their dazzling victory in the provincial elections in Baden-Württemberg in March 2011, replacing the Social Democrats as the alternative to Christian Democrats and for the first time in the history of the Bundesrepublik putting one of their own, Winfried Kretschmann, at the head of a provincial government, the German Greens, and notably Daniel Cohn-Bendit, are beginning to ponder the possibility of the German Chancellery turning green as soon as 2013. But who will make that history in their name? Cohn-Bendit has little doubt: Cem Özdemir, their current sharp-minded and clear-headed, dynamic, widely admired and revered co-leader, re-elected a few months ago by 88 per cent of the votes. Until his eighteenth birthday, Özdemir held a Turkish passport; then he, a young man already deeply engaged in German and European politics, selected German citizenship because of the harassment to which Turkish nationals were bound to be exposed whenever they tried to enter the United Kingdom or hop over the border to neighbouring France. One wonders: Who in present-day Europe are the advance messengers of Europe's future? Europe's most active pair of pyromaniacs, or Daniel Cohn-Bendit?

This is not, however, the last in the list of worries which are bound to hound our liquid modern form of life, as we are increasingly aware. As Martin Heidegger reminded us, all of us, human beings, live towards death – and we can't chase that knowledge away from our minds however hard we try. But a rising number of our thoughtful contemporaries keep reminding the rest of us that the human species to which we all belong is aiming towards extinction – drawing all or most of the other living species, in the manner of Melville's Captain Ahab, into perdition; though thus far they have failed to make us absorb that knowledge however hard they try.

The most recent announcement of the International Energy Agency – that world production of petrol peaked in 2006 and is bound to glide downwards at a time when unprecedented numbers of energy-famished consumers in countries like China, India or Brazil are entering the petrol market – failed to arouse public concern, let alone sound the alert, whether among political elites, men of business or opinion-making circles, and passed virtually unnoticed.

‘Social inequalities would have made the inventors of the modern project blush with shame’: so Michel Rocard, Dominique Bourg and Floran Augagneur conclude in their co-authored article ‘The human species, endangered’, in *Le Monde* of 3 April 2011. In the era of the Enlightenment, in the lifetimes of Francis Bacon, Descartes or even Hegel, there was no place on earth where the standard of living was more than twice as high as in its poorest region. Today, the richest country, Qatar, boasts an income per head 428 times higher than the poorest, Zimbabwe. And, let us never forget, these are all comparisons between averages – bringing to mind the proverbial recipe for the hare-and-horse pâté: take one hare and one horse . . .

The stubborn persistence of poverty on a planet in the throes of economic-growth fundamentalism is enough to make thinking people pause and reflect on the collateral casualties of progress-in-operation. The deepening precipice separating the poor and prospectless from the well-off, sanguine and boisterous – a precipice of a depth already exceeding the ability of any but the most muscular and least scrupulous hikers to climb – is another obvious reason for grave concern. As the authors of the quoted article warn, the prime victim of deepening inequality will be democracy, as the increasingly scarce, rare and inaccessible paraphernalia of survival and an acceptable life become the objects of a cut-throat war between the provided-for and the unaided needy.

And there is yet another, no less grave reason for alarm. The rising levels of opulence translate as rising levels of consumption; enrichment, after all, is a value worth coveting in so far as it helps to improve the quality of life, but in the vernacular of the planet-wide congregation of the Church of Economic Growth the meaning of ‘making life better’, or just rendering it somewhat less unsatisfactory, means to ‘consume more’. For the faithful of that fundamentalist church, all roads to redemption, salvation, divine and

secular grace, and immediate and eternal happiness alike, lead through shops. And the more tightly packed the shops' shelves waiting for the seekers of happiness to clear them out, the emptier is the earth, the sole container and supplier of the resources – raw materials and energy – needed to refill them: a truth reiterated and reconfirmed day in, day out by science, yet according to recent research bluntly denied in 53 per cent of the space devoted by the American press to the issue of 'sustainability', while the remainder neglects it or passes it by in silence.

What is passed by in a deafening, numbing and incapacitating silence is Tim Jackson's warning in his book *Prosperity without Growth*, published already two years ago, that by the end of this century 'our children and grandchildren will face a hostile climate, depleted resources, the destruction of habitats, the decimation of species, food scarcities, mass migration and almost inevitably war'. Our debt-driven consumption, zealously abetted, assisted and boosted by the powers that be, 'is unsustainable ecologically, problematic socially, and unstable economically'. Jackson has several other chilling observations, among them that in a social setting like ours, where the richest fifth of the world gets 74 per cent of annual planetary income while the poorest fifth has to settle for 2 per cent, the common ploy of justifying the devastation perpetuated by policies of economic growth by citing the noble need to put paid to poverty is clearly sheer hypocrisy and an offence to reason – this, too, has been almost universally ignored by the most popular (and effective) channels of information; or relegated, at best, to pages or times known to host and accommodate voices reconciled and habituated to their plight of crying in wilderness.

Jeremy Leggett (in the *Guardian* of 23 January 2010) follows Jackson's hints and suggests that a lasting (as opposed to doomed or downright suicidal) prosperity needs to be sought 'outside the conventional trappings of affluence' (and, let me add, outside the vicious circle of stuff-and-energy use/misuse/abuse): inside relationships, families, neighbourhoods, communities, meanings of life, and an admittedly misty and recondite area of 'vocations in a functional society that places value on the future'. Jackson himself opens his case with a sober admission that the questioning of economic growth is deemed to be an act of 'lunatics, idealists and revolutionaries', risking, fearing and expecting, not without

reason, to fall into one or all three of those categories assigned by the apostles and addicts of the grow-or-perish ideology.

Elinor Ostrom's book *Governing the Commons* (1990) is ten times older than Jackson's, but already we could read there that the arduously promoted belief that people are naturally inclined to act for short-term profit and follow the principle of 'each man for himself and the devil take the hindmost' does not stand up to the facts of the matter. From her study of locally active small-scale businesses, Ostrom derives quite a different conclusion: 'people in community' tend to reach decisions that are 'not just for profit'. In conversation with Fran Korten last March she referred to honest and sincere communication inside communities, shaming and honouring, respecting the commons and open pastures, and other waste-free stratagems consuming virtually no energy, as quite plausible, almost instinctual human responses to life's challenges – none of them particularly propitious to economic growth, but all of them friendly to the sustainability of the planet and its inhabitants.

It is high time to start wondering: Are those forms of life-in-common, known to most of us solely from ethnographic reports sent back from the few remaining niches of bygone 'outdated and backward' times, irrevocably things of the past? Or is, perhaps, the truth of an alternative view of history (and so also of an alternative understanding of 'progress') about to out: that far from being an irreversible dash forward, with no retreat conceivable, the episode of chasing happiness through shops was, is and will prove to be for all practical intents and purposes a one-off detour, intrinsically and inevitably temporary?

The jury, as they say, is still out. But it is high time for a verdict. The longer the jury stays out, the greater the likelihood that they will be forced out of their meeting room because they have run short of refreshments . . .

June 2011

Foreword

On Being Light and Liquid

Interruption, incoherence, surprise are the ordinary conditions of our life. They have even become real needs for many people, whose minds are no longer fed . . . by anything but sudden changes and constantly renewed stimuli . . . We can no longer bear anything that lasts. We no longer know how to make boredom bear fruit.

So the whole question comes down to this: can the human mind master what the human mind has made?

Paul Valéry

‘Fluidity’ is the quality of liquids and gases. What distinguishes both of them from solids, as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* authoritatively informs us, is that they ‘cannot sustain a tangential, or shearing, force when at rest’ and so undergo ‘a continuous change in shape when subjected to such a stress’.

This continuous and irrecoverable change of position of one part of the material relative to another part when under shear stress constitutes flow, a characteristic property of fluids. In contrast, the shearing forces within a solid, held in a twisted or flexed position, are maintained, the solid undergoes no flow and can spring back to its original shape.

Liquids, one variety of fluids, owe these remarkable qualities to the fact that their ‘molecules are preserved in an orderly array over only a few molecular diameters’; while ‘the wide variety of behaviour exhibited by solids is a direct result of the type of bonding that holds the atoms of the solid together and of the structural

arrangements of the atoms'. 'Bonding', in turn, is a term that signifies the stability of solids – the resistance they put up 'against separation of the atoms'.

So much for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – in what reads like a bid to deploy 'fluidity' as the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era.

What all these features of fluids amount to, in simple language, is that liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape. Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time. While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance, of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but 'for a moment'. In a sense, solids cancel time; for liquids, on the contrary, it is mostly time that matters. When describing solids, one may ignore time altogether; in describing fluids, to leave time out of account would be a grievous mistake. Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture.

Fluids travel easily. They 'flow', 'spill', 'run out', 'splash', 'pour over', 'leak', 'flood', 'spray', 'drip', 'seep', 'ooze'; unlike solids, they are not easily stopped – they pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through others still. From the meeting with solids they emerge unscathed, while the solids they have met, if they stay solid, are changed – get moist or drenched. The extraordinary mobility of fluids is what associates them with the idea of 'lightness'. There are liquids which, cubic inch for cubic inch, are heavier than many solids, but we are inclined nonetheless to visualize them all as lighter, less 'weighty' than everything solid. We associate 'lightness' or 'weightlessness' with mobility and inconstancy: we know from practice that the lighter we travel the easier and faster we move.

These are reasons to consider 'fluidity' or 'liquidity' as fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways *novel*, phase in the history of modernity.

I readily agree that such a proposition may give a pause to anyone at home in the 'modernity discourse' and familiar with the vocabulary commonly used to narrate modern history. Was not modernity a process of 'liquefaction' from the start? Was not 'melt-

ing the solids' its major pastime and prime accomplishment all along? In other words, has modernity not been 'fluid' since its inception?

These and similar objections are well justified, and will seem more so once we recall that the famous phrase 'melting the solids', when coined a century and a half ago by the authors of *The Communist Manifesto*, referred to the treatment which the self-confident and exuberant modern spirit awarded the society it found much too stagnant for its taste and much too resistant to shift and mould for its ambitions – since it was frozen in its habitual ways. If the 'spirit' was 'modern', it was so indeed in so far as it was determined that reality should be emancipated from the 'dead hand' of its own history – and this could only be done by melting the solids (that is, by definition, dissolving whatever persists over time and is negligent of its passage or immune to its flow). That intention called in turn for the 'profaning of the sacred': for disavowing and dethroning the past, and first and foremost 'tradition' – to wit, the sediment and residue of the past in the present; it thereby called for the smashing of the protective armour forged of the beliefs and loyalties which allowed the solids to resist the 'liquefaction'.

Let us remember, however, that all this was to be done not in order to do away with the solids once and for all and make the brave new world free of them for ever, but to clear the site for *new and improved solids*; to replace the inherited set of deficient and defective solids with another set, which was much improved and preferably perfect, and for that reason no longer alterable. When reading de Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime*, one might wonder in addition to what extent the 'found solids' were resented, condemned and earmarked for liquefaction for the reason that they were already rusty, mushy, coming apart at the seams and altogether unreliable. Modern times found the pre-modern solids in a fairly advanced state of disintegration; and one of the most powerful motives behind the urge to melt them was the wish to discover or invent solids of – for a change – *lasting* solidity, a solidity which one could trust and rely upon and which would make the world predictable and therefore manageable.

The first solids to be melted and the first sacreds to be profaned were traditional loyalties, customary rights and obligations which bound hands and feet, hindered moves and cramped the enterprise.