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Thinking in Dark Times: Assessing the Transdisciplinary Legacies of Zygmunt Bauman

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Abstract: In 2018, the Bauman Institute and the Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory & History (CentreCATH) both based at the University of Leeds (UK) initiated a transdisciplinary programme to assess the legacies of Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017), whose prolific writings we felt to be profoundly relevant to the multiple challenges of the twenty-first century. In this special issue of Thesis Eleven, we are marking just over three years since the death of Zygmunt Bauman by bringing together some of the contributions to that programme in order to revisit, elaborate, and crucially to extend his intellectual archive. Taking Bauman's revision of contemporary social realities as a point of departure, each of the participants in this special issue re-examine – critically but also generously – the many questions Bauman asked, tried to answer, and imbued on the way with new and sometimes shocking insights. This paper surveys those contributions by way of introducing the special issue.

Keywords: Humanities, Legacy, Social Sciences, Transdisciplinarity, Zygmunt Bauman

In 2018, the Bauman Institute¹ and the Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory & History (CentreCATH)² both based at the University of Leeds (UK) initiated a transdisciplinary programme to assess the legacies of Zygmunt Bauman (1925-2017), whose prolific writings were felt to be profoundly relevant to the multiple challenges we are facing in the twenty-first century. Working to bring Social Sciences and the Arts and Humanities into dialogue, our project was to explore some of the following questions: Based in both Gramscian and Arendtian traditions, how does Bauman's thought provide conceptual tools for thinking through our perplexity in our current 'dark times'? What is Bauman's place amongst other contemporary analysts of unpredictability, uncertainty and indecipherability – a condition he defined as liquid modernity? (Bauman, 2000). Can postcolonial, queer and feminist cultural analysis expand his otherwise indifferent yet pertinent socio-cultural analysis? What is the legacy of Bauman's concept of thinking sociologically for the arts and humanities characterized by thinking creatively or aesthetically?

Bauman's thought anticipated the increasing attention given to affective experience of the impact of unmanaged change in socio-economic, digital and political structures. Never explicitly acknowledging feminist, queer and postcolonial critiques, working from a largely Europeanist outlook, and burdened by a relentless pessimism that he disowned by arguing for disillusion as a political position (Bauman, 2004b; Davis, 2011; Dawson, 2012), his writings are, nonetheless, a vital resource for a renewed Arendtian project of 'thinking for dark times.' As a gravely political and an original cultural sociologist in the tradition of Gramsci, Bauman surveyed and scrutinized contemporary culture to identify and characterize trends in social experience and subjectivity as they were shaped by, and became symptomatic of, structural transformations of contemporary globalizing capitalism: relentless change, forced migration, precarity, social exclusion and increasing inequalities of access to life resources and security. Running through his work, and especially after 1989, is the analysis of the dark rationality of modernity that has altered the very conditions of social living and morality. He also defined a 'racism' of impoverishment, extending economic disadvantage to multiple life-worlds, which

has produced an epidemic of what he named ‘wasted lives’ – a contemporary horror of permanent exile to an almost non-human condition (Bauman, 2004a).

Born into a financially precarious lower middle class Jewish family in Poznan on 19 November 1925, Zygmunt Bauman and his family were forced to flee to the Soviet Union in 1939. He returned with the Polish army as it drove the German armies back to Berlin. Leaving the army, he lived and studied in Warsaw and from 1954 taught at the University of Warsaw. Driven out of his university professorial post in 1968 by the antisemitic turn of the Stalinist communist regime, he was again forced to flee, now stateless, from Poland to Israel with his family before settling in Yorkshire in 1971, where he took up a position as Professor of Sociology at the University of Leeds. He died in Leeds on 9 January 2017.

Writing mostly in English, and lecturing widely across Europe, Zygmunt Bauman became one of the most internationally recognized social and cultural theorists, impacting on studies of the Holocaust, postmodernity, ethics, mortality, consumerism, citizenship, and poverty while latterly reconceptualizing our present condition as liquid modernity. A prolific writer, lecturer, and interviewee, he was awarded major prizes for intellectual achievement: including, the Amalfi Prize (1992), the Adorno Prize (1998), the Vaclav Havel Prize (2006), the Prince of Asturias Award (2010), , and the highest award given by the Polish government for the arts, the Gloria Artis Medal, in 2012. When his death was announced it led to an astonishing public reaction in Latin America, with social media quickly documenting the esteem in which Bauman is held particularly by young people there involved in social and political movements.

Bauman initiated his radical analysis of modernity with *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity, and Intellectuals* (1987), before publishing the paradigm-shifting *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), where he argued that industrialised genocide was not an aberration, but a potentiality within the rationality of modernity that could not tolerate

ambivalence, a point more fully elaborated in the next book, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1991). His study of modernity, rationality and killing prompted subsequent reflections on morality and its fragility: *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies* (1992b), and a sustained engagement with the moral philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), *Life in Fragments: Essays on Postmodern Morality* (1995), and *Alone Again - Ethics After Certainty* (1996). Simultaneously, he was further developing his theory of postmodernity in *Intimations of Postmodernity* (1992a) and *Postmodernity and its Discontents* (1997). He also made a major intervention in political sociology with *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (1998a), *Globalisation* (1998b), and *In Search of Politics* (1999). Having concluded that the conceptualization of current socio-cultural processes as 'postmodern' had failed to grasp the morphology of a globalizing capitalism, in 2000 he announced his concept of *Liquid Modernity*, which was further elaborated through a series of publications and international lectures on love (2003), fear (2006), uncertainty (2007), culture (2011), surveillance (2012), morality (2013), and evil (2016).

Just as Hannah Arendt (1951) confronted mid-20th century totalitarianism as a political and social evil no longer to be thought in terms of the demonic, but in terms of the banality created by the thoughtless implementation of projects for domination at the price of humanity's condition as a political entity (Arendt, 1963), so too did Bauman turn his attention repeatedly to this question of what we do and why we do evil. Overlaying sociological probing into life processes with a conviction that remained deeply socialist in its critique of the systematic and increasing violence of contemporary capitalism, Bauman made Arendt's liberal project amenable to a deeper, socialist search for the common conditions of human life and politics. The initial title for the project at Leeds – *Thinking in Dark Times* – echoed Hannah Arendt's collection of essays published as *Men of Dark Times* (1968) and her identifying in the bureaucratic state the crime of thoughtlessness, which remains highly-relevant even as her interpretation of Eichmann as its epitome has been disputed by new

revelations through the Sassen tapes, David Cesarani's biography (Cesarani 2004) and Claude Lanzmann's *Last of the Unjust* (2015).

By initiating these reflections on the transdisciplinary legacies of Bauman's work, we are committed to something very different from hagiography. Thinkers do not leave monuments to be fetishistically studied with uncritical loyalty. Their work incites thought by opening new vistas, formulating productive concepts that can be interrogated to enable the deciphering of the opaque processes of historical change and the social conditions in which we live. Bauman wrote relentlessly, driven by the desire to speak to, and the necessity to think on behalf of, the world. His hermeneutic analysis of lived processes exemplified a new form of cultural sociology, working without any specific methodological tools that could be mindlessly picked up and applied by others, beyond a deeply felt urge to go on interpreting the world and to open up multiple spaces for dialogue. Quite deliberately, he sieved through the deposits of daily 'lived experience' for clues to what is happening in ways that no solely quantitative, or even qualitative, sociology alone could easily capture. Materials from advertisements, newspapers, and TV series through to the major works of philosophy and religion were his main resources, which he read, in a manner familiar to those in the arts and humanities, as symptoms, revealing patterns of meaning across time and culture, disclosing inconsistencies, and exposing the loci for discovering the quotidian experience of the deeper structures and social processes.

Our purpose as a group of scholars in different disciplines – all touched by his work in our different fields, as well as by the friendship he offered – is to ensure that the legacies of this phenomenal social thinker are critically explored and extended. This may not involve complete agreement. There were key areas of social and political urgencies that remained opaque to Bauman, namely feminist, queer, gender and postcolonial theory and practice. That does not mean, however, that these fields of practice and inquiry cannot make use of

Bauman's concepts and insights. Indeed, it is one of our projects to engage our own diverse fields from qualitative sociology to art history with Bauman's work.

To realize the transdisciplinary research project into the relevance of Bauman's key concepts for analyses of the contemporary socio-cultural conditions by forging dialogues between social sciences and arts/humanities, the Bauman Institute and Centre CATH organized a seminar series³ and held public lectures throughout the 2017/18 academic year. A follow-on Symposium was held at Leeds on 16 and 17 January 2019 to mark the second anniversary of his death. The transdisciplinary themes explored included: Modernity, Rationality, Ambivalence and Its Disasters; Bauman, Precarity and Security; Bauman, Difference and Cultural Analysis; Bauman's Roots/Routes, Jewish Studies and Othering; Postmodernity, Ethics and Mortality; Europe and the Postcolonial; Bauman and City Making; Bauman and Intellectuals; Bauman and the Socialist Legacy in Eastern Europe and Latin America; Bauman and the Gig Economy.

Several of the authors in this issue encountered each other at Leeds and some worked closely with Zygmunt Bauman. He appointed as lecturers to the Leeds department, fellow cultural sociologist, Janet Wolff, and the political sociologist, Antony Bryant. It was Janet Wolff who led a group of scholars at Leeds from Humanities and Arts to form the Centre for Cultural Studies at Leeds in 1985. She had tangentially been associated with the first such Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham when she was researching her doctorate in the sociology of hermeneutics at University of Birmingham. It was Zygmunt Bauman, as Professor of Sociology, who battled with the administration on behalf of this Centre, whose focus – cultural studies – appeared so puzzling to the university committees whose members stumbled over questions such as: What is culture? How can it be studied? Has the university not already got it covered with departments of English Literature or Art History? Is science a cultural form?

Max Silverman joined the Centre upon his arrival at Leeds in Modern Languages and, with Bryan Cheyette in English, taught one of the first modules on the cultural memory of the Holocaust for our new MA in Cultural Studies, just as Bauman's major book *Modernity of the Holocaust* had appeared in 1989. Following Janet Wolff as Director of the Centre for Cultural Studies from 1989-2001, Griselda moved on to direct the Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History (CentreCATH) founded in 2001. Later, Mark founded and has directed the Bauman Institute at Leeds since 2010. Zygmunt Bauman never failed to give his support to each of these scholarly ventures, speaking at any conference or indeed any one-off occasion to which he was invited. It is hard to convey to those who never met him the extent to which Zygmunt Bauman represented the kind of intellectual, teacher and presence which so radically counters the current processes of neoliberalization of education. All of those whose paths crossed Zygmunt Bauman's were profoundly marked by the model and the practice he represented to us⁴.

In this issue of *Thesis Eleven*, we are marking just over three years since the death of Zygmunt Bauman, an event that caused personal grief to his second wife, Aleksandra Kania, to his daughters, Anya, Lydia, and Irena, and to his grandchildren as well as his many friends and intellectual collaborators. In one of the Sadler seminars, we focussed on Zygmunt's often overlooked but important thesis on culture in *Mortality, Immortality and Other Life Strategies*, (1992). It is not, in fact, a book about death and dying. Its thesis is that what we call 'culture' – the making of things, thinking and creative activities – represents a human response to, and in effect, an acknowledgement of, the unthinkable – mortality. Making something which has the potential to last and to be preserved, reread or constantly visited – to be immortal – represents our attempt to live with the fact of human death. In this context, we can think about mortality and immortality in terms of an immense legacy. Legacy is not, however, a simple, unmediated transmission. It presents a challenge to understand a historical thinker, whose personal and intellectual biography, explored sociologically and historically, reveals the impress of the major historical and sociological events of 20th-century Europe upon one

intellectual's formation and project. It also enables us to learn from the practice of thinking, writing and persisting in dark times with a vision that we must make things better.

Without direction, fluid and in a state of suspension – this is today's world according to Zygmunt Bauman, the sociologist who preferred to identify himself as 'a chronicler' of contemporary reality. In the dark – and some would say crooked – mirror we find in his work, the world appears an insecure and mercurial place. Today, we find critical inspiration in the telling diagnoses of Bauman's cultural hermeneutics. His extensive writings are more apt and prescient than ever. In this world of relentless flux – liquid modernity affecting every aspect of social and subjective experience, ethics, political imagination and resistance – Bauman's ideas offer an island of resolute engagement and thought. Our project aims to revisit, elaborate, and crucially to extend this intellectual and political archive. Taking Bauman's revision of contemporary social realities as a point of departure, each of the participants in this issue of Thesis Eleven re-examine – critically but also generously, in order to go on – the many questions Bauman asked, tried to answer, and imbued on the way with new and sometimes shocking insights.

As we project beyond this first outcome of our long-term project, we wish to close our Introduction in that hermeneutic spirit of 'keeping the conversation going' by indicating the questions and themes we are proposing for a conference to come in September 2020⁵:

- What does Bauman's concept of 'thinking sociologically' offer to the arts and humanities for thinking creatively/aesthetically?
- What are his contributions to the key issues of Sicherheit (security, stability and certainty), notably in relation to digital modernity and the gig-economy?
- How could his work articulate with current research into the sociology, subjectivity and politics of space, no-place and placelessness?

- Bauman's work is clearly marked by Central Europe's history of Nazi horror and Communist terror. Do we also see traces of contemporaneous feminist, queer, and postcolonial movements and socio-cultural theorizations? What can these projects glean from Bauman's work?
- How can these perspectives be aligned with his contributions to concepts of the social-political in the tradition of Antonio Gramsci and of the human in the wake of Hannah Arendt?
- What are the politics and ethics of being a public intellectual and a writer for a public readership?
- What responses does his major sociological project call for in our moment?
- Does liquid modernity pose a deadly threat to the unfinished project of democracy?
- What of the economic questions latent within his analysis of globalised consumerism and the plight of those without the resources to navigate the flows of liquid life?

As well as:

- *Memories of Democracy/ Memories of Socialism*: articulations of the public sphere, citizenship, responsibility and obligation;
- *International Perspectives on Bauman's work from Latin America, Eastern Europe, Mediterranean Europe*;
- *Cultural Theory and analysis in the wake of Bauman's sociological imagination*: language, concepts, thought-models, narratives of social change, address, reading;
- *The Other, the Stranger, the Exile, the Refugee, the Vagabond, the Tourist, and Wasted Life*;
- *Insecurity, Precarity and Uncertainty*: social, cultural, subjective dimensions;
- *Consequences of interregnum*: 'decline of the West', 'end of world' panic, and the current emergence of 'retotopias' versus looking forward to 'cosmo-politically integrated humanity'.

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Notes

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² The Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History (CentreCATH), School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds (UK). Visit: <http://www.centrecath.leeds.ac.uk/>

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⁴ For a wonderful account of this, see Beilharz, P. (forthcoming).

⁵ This international conference, to be held in Leeds, will also mark the tenth anniversary of the Bauman Institute. Details and call for papers were released in the Fall 2019.