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Hermeneutics contra Fundamentalism: Zygmunt Bauman's Method for Thinking in Dark Times

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Abstract:

Faced with a rise of populism seemingly in all corners of the globe, the need to facilitate meaningful communication between different world-views and to resist the closing down of dialogue is pressing. In this paper, I argue that Zygmunt Bauman's sociological method has always been concerned with this problem and that a better appreciation of his writings on hermeneutics provides us with a vital strategy for resisting fundamentalist thinking in today's dark times. To begin, I briefly explore the relationship between hermeneutics and fundamentalism before moving on to elaborate Bauman's method of sociological hermeneutics. In the final section of the paper, I assess the implications that Bauman's method has for the discipline of sociology at a time when the certainty of things is the most avid of dreams dreamed by people harassed and oppressed by the uncertainty of liquid modern life, apparently whatever the human consequences.

Keywords: Bauman, fundamentalism, hermeneutics, populism, sociology.

Introduction

In an interview with the Madrid-based newspaper, El País, Zygmunt Bauman explains that the current crisis of democracy is the result of a collapse of trust due to a widespread belief that our political leaders today "are not just corrupt or stupid, but inept" (Bauman and de Querol, 2016). As a consequence, the entire democratic system is under threat precisely "because it doesn't keep its promises".

Ah, de Querol presses, but surely the impressive 15M Inginados movement, the intensifying fight for Catalan independence, and countless other examples (loosely or otherwise) linked to the global Occupy movement – and each organised and sustained through social media networks – are a sign of democracy's good health? Not so, says Bauman. Describing social media as "a trap", he states:

> "The difference between a community and a network is that you belong to a community, but a network belongs to you. You feel in control. You can add friends if you wish, you can delete them if you wish […] But it is so easy to add or remove friends on the internet that people fail to learn the real social skills that you need when you go to the street, when you go to your workplace, where you finds lots of people who you need to enter into sensible interaction with" (Bauman and de Querol, 2016).

Bauman proceeds to warn that social media is " a trap" because it appears to broaden our experience of the world through establishing multiple connections with people all over the world, only to result – somewhat paradoxically – in a shrinking of our horizons as we turn away from those whose lifestyles and beliefs we find unpalatable. Social media, Bauman warns, allows people "to cut themselves a comfort zone where the only sounds they hear are the echoes of their own voice, where the only things they see are reflections of their own face".

Citing the example of Pope Francis giving a first interview following his papal election to a self-proclaimed atheist, the Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari, Bauman then captures in a single sentence

what I want to argue is the spritus movens of his sociological method: "real dialogue isn't about talking to people who believe the same things as you" (Bauman and de Querol, 2016).

The purpose of this article is not to establish the veracity of Bauman's account of social media and its role in the current crises of liberal democracy (Bauman, 2017a; Crouch, 2004; della Porta, 2013; Ranciere, 2014 [2005]), but rather to explore why Bauman sees it as "a trap". I want to argue that his response is consistent with a long-standing concern throughout his work to signal the multifarious ways in which fundamentalism – framed as a form of political practice (Sayyid, 1997) aimed at the closing down of dialogue in favour of the apparently unquestionable and universal truths of a 'decisionist' leader (Bauman and Kania, 2018: 95; see also Schmitt, 2005 [1922]) – can creep into everyday life. Bauman's hermeneutic method is invaluable precisely in resisting the closing down of dialogue in our own dark times.

There is a growing literature connecting these dark times with the rise of populism seemingly in all corners of the globe (Eatwell and Goodwin, 2018; Galston, 2018; Wejnert, 2014) – including, and with notable insight, amongst the recent pages of this journal (da Silva and Viera, 2018; Lara, 2018; López Maya, 2018; Morales, 2018)[1]. We learn that "[p]opulism is defined by its capacity to negotiate the old and new, claims to tradition manoeuvred together with dreams of ways forward. Populism talks back, and looks forward" (Beilharz, 2018: 101). And, as Beilharz (2018: 102) goes on to explain, these: "new dynamics, new modes of discourse, new styles of political performance" are facilitated by social media such that we also witness "newly revived forms of racism and misogyny [and] the newly violent forms of humour that seek to replace political correctness with shocking sarcasm".

Elsewhere, David Beer's (2016; 2018) important work on 'metric power' and the 'data gaze' argues that recent public debate surrounding the role of 'psychographics' in the election of Donald Trump; in the outcome of the referendum on membership of the European Union in Great Britain ('Brexit'); and, in any number of activities allegedly propagated by Putin's administration in Russia, have each left us

with the impression of skulking figures lurking in the shadows, seeking to use our freely-given social media data to control us and to drive our once open democracies perhaps ever-closer to authoritarianism.

That modernist impulse to reduce the rich complexity and difference manifest in the human made world to a simple series of binary categories, which Bauman (1989; 1991) reveals with such unnerving power, is given renewed vigour as new forms of technology divide the world into stark opposites – 'like' / 'dislike', 'right' / 'wrong', 'truth' / 'fiction', 'us' / 'them', 'loyalist' / 'traitor'. As the Russian-Jewish cinematographer Albert Maysles is alleged to have remarked: "tyranny is the deliberate removal of nuance". A new literal-mindedness violently shuts down opposing views each day through social media channels, appearing to signal the popular (re)emergence of fundamentalist thinking. Neoliberalism giving way to illiberalism. In Spengler's (2015 [1918]) more reactionary terms, perhaps Winter is coming.

Warning us of this danger was a core focus of the last book published in Bauman's lifetime, Retrotopia (Bauman, 2017a). As I will argue throughout this paper, it is a warning that is at the heart of his entire sociological project. From being alarmed by a growing conservative inertia amongst young people in Poland in the 1960s (Bauman, 1962; 1964; 1965; 1966), through to his fin de siècle diagnosis of liquid modern societies as being saturated with multiple uncertainties (Bauman, 2000a; 2005; 2007) – writ large as already realised or impending economic, ecological and political catastrophes; writ small as acute ontological insecurities, including those topics of his many 'little books' such as morality (Bauman and Donskis, 2013), identity (Bauman, 2004a), love (Bauman, 2003), and community (2000b) – Bauman has consistently warned against the temptation to see the future as only a perilous space of disaster to be associated with either stasis or regression, never betterment.

The divorce of power from politics – such a repeated argument in the latter part of his career, understood as the emancipation of capital from the territorially-fixed controls of states – means that national politicians are no longer able to fulfil their traditional functions amidst the stupefying pace of (technologically-enabled) change. This political impotence creates a new legitimation crisis (Habermas,

1988 [1973]), which sees that same modern impulse to perfect society directed towards the only 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006 [1983]) left available to it – 'the past'. If the future is only to be feared, then let us face backwards, revel in nostalgic recreation and dare to utilise various degrees of palingenesis (Griffin, 1993; 2015)[2] to promise a vainglorious 'rebirth' for the nation. This is how the retrotopic imaginary seeks safety, in the comfort of perceived certainties long since gone. After all, wasn't life just so much better 'back then'? Across the political spectrum today, from the populist Right to the populist Left, the message is not quite back to the future; more onwards to the past!

In the paper that follows, the rise of populism and the role of social media provide the context to my deeper analysis of Bauman's method. My argument here is that Bauman's hermeneutic method, seen across the full breadth of his career, provides us with a vital and necessary strategy for resisting fundamentalist thinking in our own dark times. In the first section of the paper, I briefly explore the relationship between hermeneutics and fundamentalism, before moving on to elaborate in more detail Bauman's method of sociological hermeneutics. In the final section of the paper, I assess the implications that Bauman's method has for the discipline of sociology at a time when the certainty of things is the most avid of dreams dreamed by people harassed and oppressed by the uncertainty of liquid modern life[3], apparently whatever the human consequences.

Hermeneutics contra Fundamentalism

> "Are words able to change the world? Is telling the truth enough to ensure victory over the lie? Is reason capable of standing its own against prejudice and superstition? Is evil ever likely to surrender to the shining glory of goodness, or ugliness to the blinding splendours of beauty?" (Bauman, 2006: 161).

Whilst uneasy bedfellows in almost every other respect, hermeneutics and fundamentalism nevertheless share a primary concern with the meaning of text. Hermeneutics, for many centuries a sub-discipline of philology, and thus concerned with the historical and cultural contexts within which forms of human communication develop, was originally a method for scrutinising contending interpretations of sacred

texts. And in this, obviously, are contained all of the problems since fundamentalism regards the written word of sacred texts to be literally true, and universally so across both history and culture. Consequently, fundamentalism is unable and unwilling to tolerate other perspectives (Aldridge, 2013), refusing to engage in the task of interpretation, which it regards as equivalent to entering into 'a night of endless quibble, lit only by the stars of sophistry'[4].

Fundamentalism cannot abide uncertainty. It arises in its various forms with greater vigour when the traditional norms, values and beliefs of a society are seen to be increasingly under threat and subject to constant challenge (Bruce, 2000). Interpretation and reinterpretation of texts, therefore, can only breed uncertainty over meaning and thus ontological insecurity when confronted also with so many 'other' ways of conducting daily life. Whilst fundamentalism is sometimes erroneously understood as pertaining to a primordial surfeit of meaning, it is in fact a reaction to a deficit of meaning (Eisenstadt, 1999; Mishra, 2017)[5]. As a coping mechanism, Davie (2013) has suggested that fundamentalist communities create 'islands of certainty' within which the traditional ways of thinking and acting are preserved at all costs and shorn up against those changing social and cultural waves seen to exist in the turbulent waters beyond.

As both Armstrong (2000) and Almond, et. al. (2003) have shown, modern technology – including an intensifying use of social media, we can assume – is used to buttress those perceptions of anomic social conditions 'out there' (and, alas, soon to be also 'in here'), which are an accelerating threat to the comfort of traditional beliefs and values. As Bruce (2000) has shown, a primary trigger for fundamentalism is as a response to changing levels of trust within a society, with established organisations positioned as being untrustworthy due to having being 'captured' by evil, pernicious elites (who are often 'othered' also on ethno-religious grounds).

As Giddens (1999) has argued, therefore, fundamentalism can be diametrically opposed to a 'reflexive' cosmopolitanism that favours tolerance of others; adaptation of lifestyles, norms and values to fit changing social circumstances; as well as a refusal to submit to authority. Against global

cosmopolitanism, a growing preference of local traditions provides a fertile soil for the sowing of nationalism. A similar distinction can be found in Castells (1998), who describes two responses to the uncertainty of globalised social change in terms of assuming either 'project identities' (whereupon change is seized as a progressive opportunity to realise cosmopolitan change), or 'resistant identities' (whereupon change is rejected as a threat to the existing way of life, auguring a defensive retreat into fundamentalism). In a world of growing complexity, confusion and uncertainty, fundamentalism as a style of thought and political practice appeals because of its promise to provide unambiguous answers.

Hermeneutics cannot abide such certainty. As is well known, hermeneutics provides the basis for the 'interpretive' form of sociology associated with the German 'verstehen' tradition that informs the work of Simmel (1971) and Weber (1967 [1948]), as well as phenomenological sociology (Schutz, 1967a; 1967b) and the sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Mannheim, 1968 [1936])[6]. Crudely summarised for our purposes here, 'interpretive' sociology is concerned with what it is like to be a social actor of a particular kind and how the world reveals itself through their 'lived experience'.

The challenge it poses to all systems of social knowledge is that understanding can only ever be temporary, tied to a particular time and place, and so rather too contingent to pass the test established for unequivocal universalism. As Dilthey (2010) stressed, it is life (Leben) itself that provides us with the concepts and categories necessary for understanding, and so as life changes so too will our way of thinking about it. As such, it is the promethean reality of 'lived experience' (erlebnis) that must be the basis of human understanding, revealed through 'objectifications of life' in art, construction, literature, social institutions and behaviour.

Understanding such a dynamic social reality requires a process of endless interpretation and reinterpretation, such that human knowledge cannot be a bold linear step from ignorance to truth (Bleicher, 1982; Palmer, 1969; Searle, 1995). Rather, progress is made by building upon an ever greater volume of previous interpretations with understanding being a conversation between one historical era and another. Anathema to the fundamentalist impulse, hermeneutics implies that understanding means

precisely 'going in circles' and being content with the inconclusive nature of knowledge and the uncertainties (i.e. possibilities, opportunities) that this generates. Thus it is that Jürgen Habermas – more of whom later – ascribes political intent to fundamentalism by depicting it as a (religious) attitude that insists on the (political) imposition of its beliefs onto a larger community, regardless of the rational basis for those beliefs (Losonczi, 2016: 706). For Habermas, fundamentalism cannot grasp that the pre-modern legitimacy for making naive universal claims is over, something that hermeneutics teaches us and that Bauman knew only too well in the formation of this own sociological method.

Bauman's Method of Sociological Hermeneutics

In recent years, a number of books inviting a reassessment of Bauman's legacy have been published promising a more 'critical analysis', including suggestions for how sociology might move somehow 'beyond Bauman' (Best, 2013; Jacobsen, 2017; Rattansi, 2017). In so doing, each takes Bauman's work seriously and provides a useful reference point for anyone seeking a more robust examination of his ideas. These 'critical engagements' also share other common themes, such as highlighting Bauman's alleged eurocentrism and blindness to the importance of race and gender[7].

The claim that Bauman is too eurocentric to have anything empirically-useful to say about the plight of the outsiders, the downtrodden, or those forced to migrate from their homes has always struck me as a curious charge to level at him. Not only does this run the risk of holding to a far more homogenised view of 'Europe' than Bauman ever did[8], but also rather misses the point that Bauman's own lived experience of forced migration and 'statelessness' is precisely what informed his faith in the supra-national adventure of Europe. Despite being so sharply critical of what Europe had so far managed to achieve, in promoting dialogue and understanding across borders and cultures, 'the idea of Europe' was worth hanging on to. After all, it is – he could hardly have been clearer – an 'unfinished' adventure (Bauman, 2004b).

Akin to his view of socialism (Bauman, 1976a), an 'active utopia' called Europe will be forever unachievable as a concrete, empirical reality to be materially realised in the here and now. But without

'the idea of Europe', just like without 'the idea of socialism', as a horizon towards which we continue to strive and to adventure, those in Europe – especially viewed from the standpoint of a 'post-Brexit' UK – run the risk of throwing out its many achievements along with its many self-evident failings. As I have argued elsewhere (Davis, 2011), Bauman's 'active utopia' is future-oriented in the positive sense that it serves to remind each of us that that future could be otherwise, that it could be better. I will return to this point later.

What also unites these critics is the more long-standing charge that Bauman has "no method". For example, in his review of Society Under Siege (Bauman 2002), Favell (2005: 343-344) describes Bauman's work there as 'disgraceful scholarship by any standards' and little more than 'flimsy, overwrought, speculative sociocommentary'. Indeed, Bauman's apparent refusal to deploy the methods of more empirically-minded social and political science has long been taken as his principal weakness. Especially here in the UK, although his theoretical ideas have been embraced by many, it was these methodological sensitivities that held Bauman firmly at the threshold of the sociological home for want of a more robust and evidence-based explanation of how he had arrived there[9].

Against this, I want to argue that the frustration felt amongst those critics who proclaim Bauman to be little more than a pessimistic agitator are missing an important methodological point. What seems to matter here is how each commentator identifies the door marked 'Entrance' into the vast library of Bauman's sociology (Tester, 2017). Like the character Daniel Sempere in Carlos Ruiz Zafón's Cemetery of Forgotten Books novels, the requirement to choose a single book to take away forever (and therefore, perhaps, to overlook dustier areas of the library) has seemingly led many to select Modernity and the Holocaust (1989) or Liquid Modernity (2000a) as more or less arbitrary starting points. Often upon a single text published after his formal retirement, critical assessments of Bauman's sixty-three year academic career are made to hang. In so doing, not only it is more difficult to grasp fully the meaning of Bauman's writing in the Holocaust book, or in his more popular 'liquid' phase, but also to overlook the methodological foundations of his earlier thought on culture, civilization and hermeneutic sociology as the epistemological keys to why Bauman works in the way he does.

Published in 1978, Hermeneutics and Social Science (Bauman, 1978) is the third act of a lesser-known 'trilogy' within Bauman's thinking that also includes, Culture as Praxis (1973a) and Towards A Critical Sociology (1976b). My claim is that the arguments rehearsed across these three books are indispensable to understanding adequately "Bauman's method" as they provide the foundations upon which all of his better-known insights are subsequently built. In the two earlier books, Bauman takes apart the French combination of positivism and functionalism developed by Comte (Lenzer, 2017 [1975]), Durkheim (Lukes, 1982) and Parsons (Parsons and Shils, 2017 [1951]) – somewhat unfairly lampooned as the 'Durksonian Consensus' – whom Bauman holds responsible for the false entrenchment of quantitative empirical research in sociology. His chief complaint is that positivism seeks to provide technically-useful knowledge for administrators in the service of the State and/or the Market for the express purposes of social control.

Inoculated against this version of sociology by his Polish tutors, Stanislaw Ossowski and Julian Hochfeld, and informing those early warnings about a growing conservatism amongst Polish youth, Bauman (1978) turns instead to the Germanic roots of the 'verstehen' tradition as expressed through the writings of Marx, Weber, Mannheim, Husserl, Heidegger, and Schutz, with Habermas a relatively minor but significant presence throughout. In this book, Bauman explores the challenge to positivist sociology represented by the idea that social reality is the product of all those complex processes by which social actors together interpret, reinterpret and so negotiate the meanings of particular actions and situations in daily life. Since human action depends upon how individuals and groups interpret the conditions within which they find themselves, including their disagreements over those conditions and how they then decide to act, singularly or collectively, it is only through a hermeneutic approach that understanding can be revealed. Hermeneutics thus belongs to those schools of thought that emphasize our (re)creation of the social world through the realm of ideas, demonstrating the keen influence of both Gramsci and Lukács on Bauman's work – as the late Keith Tester consistently argued (Bauman and Tester, 2001; Tester, 2002; 2004) – rather than our being conditioned and determined by that social world.

Bauman (1978) offers four methodological insights for sociology through his encounters with the 'verstehen' tradition. First, that the structure of social reality is too complex for observation alone to provide us with an accurate understanding. The sociologist must be courageous and be prepared to interpret social reality in order to reach deeper levels of understanding. Second, that there must be a strong separation between the sociological vocation and the natural / physical sciences, in both method and the subject matter of enquiry. Third, that a general proposition of hermeneutics presupposes the unity of humanity and that it is this that makes interpretation possible.

This is a fundamental insight into Bauman as a humanist thinker (Satterwhite, 1992). It is also where we begin to understand better Bauman's positioning of hermeneutics contra fundamentalism, in that there is more that unites us than ought to divide us. Different cultures and historical periods will have different values. They will interpret the world differently based upon varieties of 'lived experience'. All such differences must be included into our collective understanding of the world because – and this is the key point, connecting to the Arendtian theme of 'dark times' – Bauman argues that there is an underlying human condition that remains constant and upon which we can strive for the shared creation of a world that is meaningful for all (whatever the specific contexts within which that meaning reveals itself).

Finally, Bauman introduces the idea of the 'hermeneutic circle' which remains one of the keys to unlocking the entirety of his sociological project – and one that is missed too often by his contemporary critics. The 'hermeneutic circle' (Bauman, 1978: 17) implies that understanding is not – as the positivists and empiricists would have it – a linear progression from vulnerable to less vulnerable forms of knowledge, but rather understanding is in its very essence circuitous. That is, for Bauman, understanding consists of an endless recapitulation and reassessment of extant forms of thought in the hope of gradual discovery, whilst always remaining open to further interpretations and future scrutiny, striving for better understanding. Everything is open to reinterpretation and nothing is ever finally decided upon now and forever.

Given this, Bauman asks: "… can meaning ever be conclusive, final, ultimately borne out once and for all?" (Bauman, 1978: 226). His answer, not to everyone's liking, is that all knowledge – all claims to knowing the truth, to knowing what is 'right' and 'wrong' – is context-dependent and therefore 'relational'. The great lesson he takes from Heidegger, Schutz, and the ethnomethodologists[10] is to recognise that everyday communal agreements depend upon reaching a consensus of views; they do not depend upon the truthfulness of that consensus.

In other words, in any negotiation over the correct way to interpret the human made world, it is possible that nobody may be wrong, and that everybody may be right, based upon the particular relationship between their lived experience and their understanding. In striving to prove once and for all that one side is right, and that one is wrong – to repeat, in proclaiming universal truths and in reducing the complexity of the human world to binary distinctions of 'right' / 'wrong', 'us / them', 'loyalist / traitor' – fundamentalism misinterprets the very nature of human understanding.

Truth as 'Active Utopia'

The idea that 'truth' is context-dependent has been a source of deep existential anxiety throughout human history, as people from countless times and cultures have feverishly sought the theoretical refutation or methodological neutralization of this claim in the hope of eliminating uncertainty. Getting us closer to the idea of Bauman's method as a refutation of fundamentalism, he says that we can begin to understand this desire to eliminate the context-dependent nature of knowledge "… not so much in the intrinsic superiority of context-free over context-bound understanding, as in the urge for control" (Bauman, 1978: 230 – my emphasis):

> "Only if I can be sure that what I have grasped is from now on immutable and immune to contingencies of fate, can my knowledge give me the feeling of genuine mastery over the object. The real trouble, therefore (the real reason of our anxiety) is not the endemic structure of theoretical understanding, but the practical lack of control over the life situation which a most

> perfect interpretation will still be helpless to redress […] Objective understanding appears, so to speak, as a substitute for practical control over the situation…" (Bauman, 1978: 231 – original emphasis).

In revealing the 'anthropological strangeness' of a given community, 'outsiders' expose precisely that 'practical lack of control over the life situation' so craved by those 'insiders' seduced by fundamentalist thinking. In disrupting established truths deemed crucial to the ontological security of 'insiders', the gaze of 'outsiders' splits reality "into a multitude of facts" that can be no longer considered 'pristine' (Bauman, 1978: 221)[11]. As such, echoing Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]), it is for 'dirtying' the purity of daily life amongst the 'insiders' that calls for the 'outsiders' to be removed or expunged grow ever louder amongst those demanding 'practical control'. Facts don't matter very much in such circumstances (no amount of empirical data showing the contribution of outsiders is deemed to pass the test of validity); what matters is a maintaining a consensus amongst the 'insider' community and upon which fundamentalism thrives[12].

For Bauman, sociology's substitute for practical control was manifest in the positivist and functionalist methods of the 'Durksonian Consensus'. In striving, first, to being granted access to the Academy of Sciences, and second, to being taken seriously once admitted within its courtrooms, sociology faced a challenge unknown to the world of natural scientists. Put bluntly, sociology had to deal with an object of study that (thankfully!) argued back and that wilfully resisted all attempts to be controlled. So far as it was ever going to be possible, Bauman (1978: 234 – original emphasis) explained: "The truth of sociology has to be negotiated in the same way the ordinary agreement is". And yet, the crucial point in Bauman's conclusion to the book is that, in spite of these difficulties, sociologists must nevertheless retain the 'idea of truth', both its existence and the possibility of finally accessing it.

Returning to his ideas of socialism and Europe as 'active utopias' discussed earlier, I argue that the 'idea of truth' functions in the same way in his hermeneutic method[13]. They are impossible horizons,

never to be reached but towards which we must always strive. They are not empirical realities to be realised in practice.

> "Socialism shares with all other utopias the unpleasant quality of retaining its fertility only in so far as it resides in the realm of the possible. The moment it is proclaimed as accomplished, as empirical reality, it loses its creative power; far from inflaming human imagination, it puts on the agenda in turn an acute demand for a new horizon, distant enough to transcend and relativise its own limitations" (Bauman, 1976a: 36).

And so it is with Bauman's particular 'idea of truth'. Not only would there be no science at all were it not for the ubiquitous presence of the 'idea of truth' animating all scientific activity, but also because 'truth' itself is crucial as "… the guiding principle of the on-going rational discussion that results, maybe only every once in a while, in rationally-substantiated agreement" (Bauman, 1978: 239). Truth with regards to human societies is therefore unachievable as a state of sociological knowledge in the here and now. It is a gift of the simpler natural sciences – blessed with objects of study devoid of their own will – to be able to speak in terms of universal truths. Once we are told that the truth about humanity has been achieved – a universal, certain truth never again to be open to question – then what we have is not truth, but fundamentalism. But the 'idea of truth', the horizon of truth, remains indispensable for knowledge of human societies to exist at all.

Recalling Habermas's (1972; see also, Harrington, 2001) distinction between 'technical-' and 'practical-interests', Bauman (1978: 241) says at the end of Hermeneutics and Social Science: "If empirical-analytical sciences facilitate technical control over processes of work, hermeneutic sciences assist in the practice of communication and the effort of reaching agreement". As Matt Dawson (2015; 2016) has argued, Bauman's particular method of 'applied sociological hermeneutics' serves the practice of communication primarily in its negative capacity, as the 'method of criticism', exposing those conditions of communication that may lead to an invalid, untrue consensus (Bauman, 1978: 239-241).

These epistemological foundations in hermeneutics – more common in the European version of sociology understood as part of a wider 'human sciences' (Geisteswissenschaften) than in the more empiricist 'Anglophone' traditions of America, Australia and Great Britain – can help us to understand why Bauman would argue so consistently for a form of sociology that privileges the facilitation of communication outside of sociology's professional community, over and above making empirical claims to truth within it.

This is why, following retirement, Bauman became far more interested in communicating with an engaged and interested public than with other academics[14]. Especially since the mid-1990s, Bauman's frequent use of 'popular language'; his referencing of all forms of culture ('objectifications of life') in order to try to connect with people in the reality of their own daily lives; as well as his growing preference for shifting the format of his published works from academic monographs to shorter and more accessible books, and then to conversations on topics of contemporary concern, can be seen differently in the light of his hermeneutic method. Rather than a symptom of 'disgraceful scholarship', Bauman's later work is better understood as taking the task of 'public sociology' (Burawoy, 2005a; 2005b; see also Aidnik, 2015) seriously and in a manner consistent with hermeneutics.

This method would directly inform his work a decade later on the more well-known 'modern trilogy'[15] (Bauman, 1987; 1989; 1991; see also Beilharz, 2000; Davis, 2008; Smith, 1999), especially his writing on the role of intellectuals in modernity and postmodernity and the differing roles that they were then – as now – being invited to perform. That 'modern trilogy', perhaps too often taken as the starting point for reading Bauman, looked at another way, has to be seen as rather the end point of his work on hermeneutics as sociological method.

Bauman's writings on modernity reveal the dangers of any 'blueprint' for society that promises quick and simple solutions delivered by charismatic leaders in dark times – from Nazism and Soviet-Communism to twenty-first century populism. Borrowing Castoriadis's (1997 [1975]; see also,

Andrews, 2017) vision of an 'autonomous society', Bauman (2000b: 80) states that a truly democratic society is a 'chaos seeking form'. It is precisely the absence of universal truths, guaranteed meanings, and clear rules of action and consequence that are the conditions sine qua non of the truly autonomous individual and the truly democratic society.

Against the modern frame of the legislating intellectual, the postmodern interpreters knew only too well that they were not final arbiters on truth, on the 'right' or 'wrong' way to proceed in relation to a given social problem (Bauman, 1987). Instead, they could offer only (re)interpretations of the social world, exposing its contingencies, its power relationships, the latent functions of institutions and the ideologies informing them. Rather than seeking to proclaim scientific authority, through expounding truth-claims based upon empirical-analytical methods of study, they ought to aim instead at the facilitation of communication between different world-views that would otherwise not encounter each other. As Bauman explained in a fascinating interview with Simon Dawes:

> "To be sure, dialogue (not to mention the polylogue) is a difficult art. It means engaging conversationalists with an intention to jointly clarify the issues, rather than to have them one's own way; to multiply voices, rather than reducing their number; to widen the set of possibilities, rather than aiming at a wholesale consensus […] to jointly pursue understanding, instead of aiming at the others' defeat; and all in all being animated by the wish to keep the conversation going, rather than by the desire to grind it to a halt". (Dawes, 2011: 143).

This art of facilitating communication could not be more opposed to those tenets of fundamentalist thinking outlined above and about which Bauman so consistently warned us. This is also why he saw our accelerating use of social media as "a trap".

Liquid Modern Intellectuals and the Case for General Sociology

Although written a decade before the public arrival of the internet, Bauman's hermeneutic method allowed him to note that the challenge ahead for society was already one of too much communication. Amidst the crescendo of voices clamouring to be heard over each other, the challenge would be to facilitate meaningful conversation in pursuit of "mutually-enriching cultural exchange" between peoples at a time when new forms of technology were reconfiguring communication, because ours is:

> "… a world overflown with messages, messages with meanings which are in no way clear and carry no evidently preferable interpretation […] In a world of noise, communication is the main problem" (Bauman, 1987a: 163).

Today, that communication is too often reduced to a series of truncated messages punched out by distant individuals on various interconnected social media sites. In the growing absence of face-to-face encounters, which Bauman (1993; 1995) qua Levinas (1985) always maintained was the primary basis of ethical responsibility to the Other, it is perhaps little wonder that he would come to see today's mounting preference for screen-to-screen communication with countless 'faceless' others as the basis for further adiaphorisation and 'interpassivity' (Davis, 2013). As he explained to de Querol, "people fail to learn the real social skills that you need" when other people are there to be disliked and deleted at will without apparent consequence. This democratic paradox of internet-enabled discussion appears to be shared by Habermas[16]:

> "The Internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers. However, computer-mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal democratic merits only for a special context: It can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion. In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics" (Habermas, 2006: 423 – my emphasis).

In a dialectical reversal worthy of Adorno and Horkheimer (1997 [1944]), what is promised turns into its opposite. A technology promising greater democratic communication ends up creating only "a huge number of isolated issue publics" who "cut themselves a comfort zone where the only sounds they hear are the echoes of their own voice, where the only things they see are reflections of their own face". And this matters precisely because, contra the creation of fundamentalist 'islands of certainty', "real dialogue isn't about talking to people who believe the same things as you".

In one of the most methodologically important passages that Bauman ever wrote, he states in Hermeneutics and Social Science that:

> "… one can achieve understanding of alien forms of life not by immersing oneself in their specific uniqueness or re-living them as if 'from inside', but by following an exactly opposite strategy: by spotting the general in the particular, by enlarging both the alien and one's own experience so as to construct a larger system in which each 'makes sense' to the other" (Bauman, 1978: 218 – my emphasis).

Spotting the general in the particular through a method of sociological hermeneutics, Bauman believes, may offer us 'the best chance of survival' in a liquid society flooded with the private troubles of so many individuals that we struggle to recognise the commonality of our fate. And here I believe there is a crucial message for the sociologists of liquid times.

Whether via intensifying institutional and funding pressures to specialise, or just to plead our case (yet again) in the countless campus courtrooms demanding evidence of technically-useful knowledge in the service of the State and/or the Market, might we in time come to acknowledge this as a 'particularistic turn' within sociology? In seeking to understand each other's statements only by reference to the particularities of individual social position, are we running the risk of missing important commonalities

that exist across multiple 'lived experiences', and so also the underlying human condition that could provide a general basis for solidarity against our commonality of fate?

In its sweeping breadth, Bauman's way of doing sociology teaches us that there is much to be gained not only from the vital quantitative and qualitative methods dutifully and correctly applied by professional sociologists, but also from making time to embark upon the hermeneutic task of seeking out the general in the particular in order to develop a rich polylogue aimed at developing commonality of experiences, interpretations, and understanding. Bauman's method can help us in those important sociological tasks of turning particular private troubles into general public issues and of striving for collective solutions to our shared problems.

In close, at a time when the certainty of things is demanded by all those individuals harassed and oppressed by the uncertainty of liquid modern life, perhaps the task before us is deliberately to keep the world indeterminate and uncertain (Tester, 2018: 114; Davis, 2008: 162ff) in order to resist the arguments of tyrants promising to sweep away the mess of liberal democracies with authoritarian brooms. If we follow the line of argument developed in Bauman's earlier work – if we follow, let us call it what it is, "Bauman's method" – then the role of liquid modern intellectuals just might be to embrace his sociological hermeneutics as a vital strategy in the fight against fundamentalism.

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Notes

[1] The reader is correct that a full consideration is not given to the important differences between populism, authoritarianism and fundamentalism. For my purposes here, the latter is taken as a form of political practice and style of thought, present by degrees within both of the former, which aims at the closing down of dialogue in pursuit of greater certainty.

[2] I extend my thanks to Roger D. Griffin for the seminar he led at the Bauman Institute all the way back on 18 March 2015, during which myself and others learned a great deal on his theory of 'palingenetic myth' and its significance for understanding populism and authoritarian nationalism. It was a fascinating discussion that has stayed with me.

[3] The full quote runs: "The 'certainty' of things that are important to life happening or not is the most avid of dreams dreamed by people harassed and oppressed by their uncertainty (though that certainty might also be, as William Pitt the Younger observed already in 1783, 'the plea for every infringement of human freedom' and 'the argument of tyrants')" (Bauman and Kania, 2018: 96).

[4] The phrasing here is obviously borrowed from Michael Oakeshott (1962: 39), writing in a different context about the relationship between freedom and conservatism: "What is a free society? And with this question (proposed abstractly) the door opens upon a night of endless quibble, lit only by the stars of sophistry".

[5] I'm grateful to Jack Palmer for this observation.

[6] Of course, interpretive sociology has had its share of critics. At the same time that Simmel, Weber and others were taking the verstehen tradition out of philosophy and philology and putting it into the heart of sociological method, the logical positivists associated with the Vienna Circle were heard to claim that hermeneutics was of no more importance than "a good cup of coffee" for reviving the flagging scientist (see Neurath, 1973 [1931]). Many still share this view. For an excellent account of this often fierce debate, see Outhwaite (1986).

[7] For various responses to these claims, see Pollock, Cheyette and Dawson in this issue of Thesis Eleven. See also, Branaman (2007), Mestrovic (2010) and Weaver (2013).

[8] For a fuller discussion, see Dawson in this issue of Thesis Eleven and Outhwaite (2010).

[9] I'm grateful to my colleague Adrian Favell for pressing me on this question during the Sadler Seminar series. He asked why it mattered so much to insist that Bauman was a sociologist. Then, as now, my response is that the effort being expelled here is surely in the other direction – that so many appear steadfast in their insistence that he isn't.

[10] Bauman was fiercely critical of ethnomethodology for an over-individualization that (in his view) failed to appreciate the power structures restraining men and women freely to define and redefine the meaning of their situation. See Bauman (1972; 1973b); see also Tester (2018). For recent criticisms of Bauman's position, see Brooker (2017) and Morriss and Smith (2017).

[11] See Cheyette in this issue of Thesis Eleven.

[12] Drawing upon his recent book, Nervous States, there is an excellent paper by Will Davies (2019) that elaborates this point in the UK's 'Brexit' context. Since uncertainty is now so total, certainty (i.e. self-belief) has been transformed into a curious kind of commodity. If things turn out badly post-Brexit, this will not be due to a wilful ignorance of facts; rather, it will be because we simply didn't believe hard enough.

[13] I trust it is clear to the reader that I am not claiming here that Socialism or Europe ought to be equated with Truth in any way other than the particular function these ideas serve within Bauman's sociology. My point here is methodological, not political (although Bauman's own lifelong commitment to socialism is of course well-known).

[14] See Brzezinski, et. al. in this issue of Thesis Eleven.

[15] It has always struck me as curious that the other two books published in this period – namely Freedom (Bauman, 1988) and Thinking Sociologically (Bauman, 1990) – are so often overlooked, somewhat wrongly in my view. In providing a considered engagement with Foucauldian and Eliasian perspectives (1988) and in setting out his vision for what sociology is and ought to be (1990; revisited in Bauman, 2014), these books ought to be given greater consideration in assessments of his work.

[16] I'm grateful to Jordan McKenzie for bringing this piece by Habermas to my attention.