

Interview with Zygmunt Bauman

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Zygmunt Bauman, who has died, aged 91, is best known for his analyses of globalization, power and inequality and for his notion of ‘liquid modernity’: the contemporary state in which solid social structures and institutions seem to have melted away. As Mark Davis and Tom Campbell note in their obituary of Bauman (2017), his work was particularly influential among progressive young activists and most recently he had analysed the refugee crisis and the rise of right-wing populism across Europe and the USA.

Bauman’s work has also been important for contemporary theorizing of intimacy and eroticism. His work in this area focused on the way that citizenship is being replaced by individualism and consumerism, describing a situation in his book *Liquid Love* (2003) where relationships have become ‘easy to enter and to exit’ (2003: xii) and human bonds have become ‘light and loose’ (p. xi). In his brilliant essay ‘On Postmodern Uses of Sex’ (1999) he analyses the ways in which eroticism has come to appear independent from reproduction and love, becoming ‘its only, and sufficient, reason and purpose’, and marked by both substance and ‘lightness and volatility’ (1999: 22). He described how postmodern subjects are encouraged to seek sensation and stimuli and to collect sexual experiences; to be endlessly interested and energetic in the pursuit of sex. But this pursuit is contradictory and impossible, requiring both total immersion and distance, and ‘the ultimate sexual experience remains forever a task ahead’, while ‘no actual sexual experience is truly satisfying, none makes further training, instruction, counsel, recipe, drug or gadget unnecessary’ (1999: 24).

In summer 2014, I interviewed Zygmunt Bauman at his home in Leeds, as part of a series of interviews for *Sexualities* with ground-breaking theorists of sexuality. He had told me that he was very hard of hearing and tired easily so I sent him my questions ahead of time and when I arrived it was clear that he had done a great deal of preparation in order to answer them. He was extremely gracious, serving me strawberries and cream and pouring tea. We stopped when he tired and he told me that he had spoken ‘more this hour than I had in the whole week’. He leaves behind him an amazing and inspiring body of work and a model of a passionate, articulate

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scholar, fully engaged with the social world and with important questions about human life.

A: In *Liquid Love* (2003) you suggest that human bonds are increasingly frail and impermanent. Do you still hold to that?

B: Today, in entering into binding relationships, people are very much concerned with the exit scenario. When two people meet to live together it's all that 'We will see how it goes. We will see how it goes'. That makes it frail. Because if you swear to each other, take the oaths of loyalty, even if you are encountering difficulties, well, two characters, two prerogatives meet. They have to meet and negotiate. Their pasts, their friends, their habits, their preferences and so on. It's always very dramatic stuff. There are difficulties. In the past, divorces were not yet so popular as now. Now, it's just matter of routine, no problem. If you want to divorce, okay, let's divorce. That's it. And most of the divorces take place in the first year after the marriage.

A: Why?

B: Because it just lost the romance. People didn't have time yet to negotiate, you know, togetherness. How to live together 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If you know the exit is so easy, then even the smallest disagreement will be easy to jump over, be kicked aside or forgotten. All trifling disagreements, trifling difficulties arise to the level of a principles disagreement. So that's hopeless.

Once upon a time, but not long ago – you don't remember because you are young – but I remember a time when you bought a gadget for yourself with the intention of keeping it for many years. If it broke, you could always repair it. You just worked on it and repaired it. Now when it breaks, you go to the shop and buy a new one. If the commodity I bought is not up to my expectations, or if I hear on TV, or on Facebook or on the internet or whatever, that each of you shops for better gadgets, then there's no reason why I should not exchange it. The easier the facility with which relations can be tied together and broken, that constitutes the fragility. But we are losing the skills necessary to really make our relationships stable. Love is not a found object. Love is something which needs to be made and re-made. The recipe is for very hard work until really death do us part. Forever. It's a life-long job, not something you can miraculously find or destroy, or just open a website and seek a date, and that's it.

People see essential discrepancies, a contradiction between our longing for easiness, comfort and convenience in life, and at the same time, our yearning for intimacy, for real love, deep love, relationship. There's a clash between the two. But the idea of progress today, it's the idea of getting rid of troubles, making life easier, giving and having instant results. Like instant coffee, you just sprinkle some powder and pour some water, and you drink, that's it. So yes, my answer is that human bonds are increasingly frail and impermanent. And mind you, the research shows that this is the case. I'm not inventing. I'm not fantasizing about it. The hard facts – in America, which is, as always, in the avant garde of progress, 80% of marriages end in divorce, that is the first marriage and in the second and the third marriages the rate of divorce is even higher. The first divorce is difficult. Slightly.

The second is easier. The third comes without any problem. It appears that 40% of American children are born in a household without a father. 40%. About 60% of American children at some point of their lives experience living without one of their parents.

There is the wish for a deep intimacy. Every moment of togetherness to be lived through as a moment of eternity, which can last forever. But, the morning after, people wake up – oh, that is a horror. Lasting forever? Without the capacity to throw it away if such a thing doesn't work properly? That is what makes people so uneven in a moment of happiness. It is precisely contradiction. On the one hand, safety. I always want the option of opting out. If it doesn't work, I'm not committed forever. I can start anew. There's always the chance of a second life, a second identity. So, that's one side. On the other side, it's a real, very deep, very satisfying, very gratifying experience of two identities coming together, complementing each other, giving each other happiness. Now, how to reconcile that? There's nothing that enables you to enjoy both things at the same time. As the English say, to have a cake...

A: And eat it.

B: You can't. So it's always, all the time, in the moment of full satisfaction they feel subtle anxiety that the other is in danger. You can't have it at the same time. I'm not condemning; I'm simply reminding us that whatever you select, you always give something and lose something. There's no other way. Unfortunately, you can't have it all. So people are vacillating, people are hesitating. People are on the seesaw between two equally powerful overwhelming needs in us.

A: Do you see any positive changes in human relationships and connections in recent years?

B: Well I don't know whether it's positive or not. There are substitute medicines. Substitutes, not resolving the difficulties, mostly sweeping them under the carpet. Removing them from sight. Creating a feeling that everything is okay. Forgetting that something is not very socially okay, but you simply are liberated from the pressure to think about it. Examples? Well, we mentioned Facebook. We mentioned Twitter. There's a great, great invention. You remember the Walkman?

A: Yes, yes.

B: You remember how the Walkman was introduced into the market? What was the slogan? The slogan was 'never again alone'. Never again alone. For the first time, we could go into the forest alone, walk on a meadow somewhere far away from people, no one beside you. And when someone was shouting to you, you just listened to it. Never in the history of humanity had there been something like that was. When they were alone, they were alone. Full stop. Now, when you're alone still you hear human beings somewhere talking to you, addressing you; even singing for you. Well, it was a premium gadget because you could hear but you couldn't talk.

A: You've argued that we are moving to a situation where we prize connections rather than relations and 'virtual relations'. You've talked about the way that technology allowed connections to become 'more frequent and more shallow, more intense

and more brief?. This was before the creation of Facebook in 2004 and Twitter in 2006. How do you think the developments in technology have impacted on our relations since you wrote *Liquid Love*?

Well, Facebook created something different. You can talk. You can address. You can converse with a human being, even if this other human being is hundreds of thousands of kilometers away. You can be sure that 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, there is always someone somewhere who is ready to receive and even respond to your message. When you send to Twitter, simultaneously to thousands of people, not just to one person, one friend, irreplaceable, but on the contrary, ultimately replaceable by hundreds of them, you just contact, report, or add it on Facebook. There are people who are proud to say they make 500 friends in one day. I didn't make 500 friends in my life and I have lived almost 90 years now. So there's a difference, you know.

It does not necessarily mean that they are no longer alone. Really, in real life, they are threatened by the social position which they earned through hard work, that it may disappear simply because the company which they dedicated their life to disappears. It may be eaten up by a bigger company. You may lose everything. So the fear of being abandoned, of being excluded, or being evicted is quite real. It's not imaginary. It's reality that you have to live all alone. Now the youngest enters adult life; a different kind of life. They have no future, no career or luck, no prospects. The fear of losing, of abandonment is quite real. It's not imaginary. But when you sit in front of your computer, you may forget about it. Because of the community. It's not a social bond, but it is a connection. But the disconnect with people is also a difficulty. According to the latest research, the average person spends seven and a half hours – half of the waking day – in front of a screen, not in front of other human beings, but in front of a screen. All sorts of screens; laptop, desktop, iPhone, iPod. We are never parted from screens. You carry screens with you, wherever you go. If you forget it, you feel like you forgot your trousers or skirt. So, the illusion is that we are not after all alone. But in the online world that we inhabit we just put our worries to rest. Yes, forget about it, because the pressure of being constantly attached to hundreds of people just stifles it for the time being.

A: You said that people have the illusion or impression of being connected. Do you think technology becomes a way of really relating, or are they just illusions? Is it an illusion of communication and connection?

B: Online and offline have different rules to work. And for example, people suffer. There's a big problem today – the big migration of great masses of people. Suddenly, the whole environment in which you live changes, its character changes; people with different languages, different habits, different ways of life. So because you would lose your learnt familiar expectations, which made your life at least seem safe and certain, you want your neighbours to be more or less familiar to you. You learn from their behaviour what to expect from them; what they are good for, what they are bad for. Suddenly, there are masses of strangers who are very difficult to read, so to speak. They are also living now in a multi-centred world, where one steady, stable binding or hierarchy, or values or preferences does not

exist any longer. You are exposed to contradictory views. One side praises, the other condemns. For every thesis, there's antithesis. The atmosphere is of big loss. Uncertainty, contingent on uncertainty. You don't know how to behave. And whenever you go out from your home, go for a stroll along the street, or when you come to your workplace, or the University or the school where you are studying, you are in this offline world exposed to precisely that, to this tremendous variety. The variety of messages, that falls eventually to you personally, to reconcile that, to find your way between contradictory signals. And to make choices and to build responsibilities from your choices.

Then you come to your online world. You are at rest. Finally you find a shelter from all this havoc, you know, chaos. On the internet, in the online world, unlike the offline world, you can avoid everything which creates your anxiety in the offline world. You can just bypass it. In addition to the views and ideas that you like, which are comforting to you and so on, there are views and intentions with which you hotly disagree; that actually make you uncomfortable that they exist. Online, you can eliminate them. If you come back to a website, which conveys ideas which create your unease, you just press 'delete', and you find another sector of online reality where there are only people who think like you, who applaud you, who reinforce your ideas. Only they are allowed to speak. You are in a comfort zone. You may believe in it but it's impossible. As I have told you, when you are coming back to the office, you see people of all colours, of all ideas sitting around, you have to engage in a dialogue with them. They negotiate. They quarrel... trying to reach some sort of agreement. All that is taken away. You put them aside when you are in the online world. Research shows that people who are online have hopes that the World Wide Web will expand our horizons. We have access to everything which happens everywhere, to all countries, to all issues, to all ideologies. Everything is within our reach. I don't have to strain myself to reach it. It's all there. Therefore the grounds for mutual suspicion, the fear of diversity would disappear. The result is actually the opposite. Because most users of the internet create what can be called echo chambers in which all the sounds you hear are echoes.

That's a very comfortable place. But, if you spend so much time in this online world, and come back to the offline world, you are doubly anxious. Living with differences requires strategy and is very often quite frightening. You can escape from the necessity of living with differences face-to-face. But when you return to other human beings, facing them, then you are in trouble because you have forgotten the skills of how to deal with it. So instead of uniting people, on the contrary, it stops you from listening to other voices. It's simply shuffling away the voice about being alone, and therefore you stop fighting against the sense of loneliness, because you have this illusion that comes from the internet that you are not alone.

Mark Zuckerberg, the owner of Facebook as you know, has made 50 billion on the stock exchange, on what? On our fear of loneliness. The success of Facebook is very simple. There's no secret in that. Mark Zuckerberg put his finger on the gold mine. And the gold mine was people's fear of being abandoned. Facebook is the way in which in spite of being lonely, we are connected.

That's one process there. The other process is commercialization. The fragility of human bonds that we have discussed already makes us feel guilty. However we treat it or depict it, we feel guilty. Parents divorce, their children belong neither here nor there. We love our children, right? We want the best. If we don't behave as we should, as our love should tell us, we have a guilty conscience. You can buy tranquillizers. You go to a shop, you buy a gift for your child. It's like a tranquillizer I think.

Come Christmas, you have a gift for your dear ones and you have one year of quiet conscience. Of course, it's not a replacement for being together, for sacrificing your own time, your own preferences, for reports about the ups and downs of experiences or of work, or who was bullying your child at school. And how difficult is the task which you both do, both do together. That is what you should do. You should just, you know, offer your own welfare in order to satisfy the needs of your beloved. But you can't do it. Life is not like that. It's different and disorganized. So what do you do? You want to replace them with tokens of your love. The more expensive they are, the more money you spend, the higher the moral value of it. This is another kind of substitute, endless, endless substitutes. It is mediating between you and your conscience. This is the service which is offered in the market. Again, the effect is ambiguous because they give us the tranquillity which we need very much. Cover up the real situation. On the other hand, they exacerbate our inability to do the real thing.

A: One of the most dramatic changes in western society in recent years concerns lesbian and gay equality. For example, just very recently it has become possible for same-sex couples to marry in the UK for the first time. How do you view and interpret these changes?

B: When I was a child, I understood that you married once and forever. No way out. You may be out, but you would be condemned till you died. There's no question about that. That was the idea of it. Now marriage, wedding, wedded couple, household is very much like a motel. You can come and you can go, and in this rendition, why not people of the same sex? They can even have children. You can adopt or things like that. So everything is possible. Why not, therefore, allow people to play family? That's a universal human right. And I think it's slowly being accepted. It's no longer a hot issue. More and more countries are accepting this possibility. Sooner or later, I think, in our cultural area anyway, it is quite, quite, probable that it will be universal, finally. Of course, there are Islamic countries where it is very, very unlikely. The standing of women is most important. You can't jump stages. Perhaps – who knows, I'm not a prophet – perhaps it will come even there, the idea of same-sex marriage, but there are many stages which are universal that should be passed and above all, the equality of women.

A: In 'On Postmodern Uses of Sex' (1998) you talked about the way that eroticism had become separated from sexual reproduction and love and associated with seeking pleasure and sensation, but that this led to huge anxiety rather than satisfaction. You talked in particular about 'the spectre of sex' haunting the relationships of adults with children. How do you think that this aspect of our culture in the UK has developed in recent years?

Oh, I have a little theory about that. You remember Michel Foucault? Michel Foucault wrote about this. There was a panic about masturbation. It posited that children are sexual subjects, not sexual objects, but sexual subjects. Of course the idea wasn't supported by the medical authorities – masturbation was tremendously harmful, created all sorts of psychological, psychiatric impacts, invited all sorts of illnesses – and the message was, if children are inclined to engage in these sorts of awful, very harmful practices, that the parents, the mother, the father should survey them constantly. The idea of the Panopticon. Watching. The door leading to the child's bedroom should be always open. Children should not lock themselves in the bathroom. Now, Michel Foucault had a question, what was the function of it? Well, the function of it was to increase parental power. That was the period of pathological family. It was a very good excuse to engage in this sort of pathological practice. To watch their every step, get full control over their life. Now the masturbation panic is over. Instead we have the panic of child abuse. Sexual child abuse. But who is the culprit? Who is the victim? It is now the sexuality of the adult, of the parent, which is seen as the problem. Children are just passive objects of their desire, of their lust. Well, they keep away from their children. Let them take care of themselves – let them lock tightly the doors to their rooms. Give them freedom to follow their instincts. Because if you want to interfere, that is because you would prefer them to follow our instincts.

The problem of their guilty conscience is because of the loosening of the family bonds. The reality for their children, because of the pressure of the deregulated labour market, is a fear of losing their jobs. They must be on call all the time. So there are many reasons for neglecting their children. Many causes. But you pay a price for that. The price is a guilty conscience. It is explained in a way to you that it's all because you have unhealthy, criminal desires to use your children. You wanted to kiss them. Who knows? Perhaps you are a potential rapist. You want to rape your child. So you have a very noble, very comforting explanation for keeping your distance from your child. There are some gains. There's no question; we are safer, we are more vigilant now. But on the other hand, hundreds of thousands of children and parents are suffering because most children are brought up in homes where the manifestation of love is eliminated, apart from repeating over again, over and over again, particularly in America, I love you. I love you too. I love you. I love you too. I love you. I love you too. But bodily expressions of love are prohibited. And children are brought up under this condition. We don't know the results yet so far. It's too short a period to be shown. But there is a suspicion, there's a possibility they may grow callous and insensitive.

Simply because this closeness, this proximity, has disappeared from their life, the atmosphere around young people is an atmosphere, not of proximity, but of distance. I very much recommend to you a dystopian novel by Michel Houellebecq called *The Possibility of an Island*. It's a fantasy. It presents the society of the future if it develops according to our present tendencies and nothing is done to change it. The vision is of solitary, separated units so to speak. Each living beyond the fence, beyond neighbours, communicating – oh, constantly communicating with each

other but only with electronics. I think it's very, very wise, very insightful. It's very treacherous ground. The results of it are not fully predictable. You can only guess what will happen. But we should think twice before deciding what are the gains and what are the losses.

But, well, I believe that I had a life full of love. I experienced real love. I was with my wife for 62 years. Ups and downs. We worked through very difficult tests but we survived. I repeat what I already mentioned. Love is not a recipe for a quiet life. It's not something you can find, or put in the corner, put in the wardrobe or on the table. It is something which you have to work at over and over again. But the products are very, very tasty.

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